



Article

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From Gerontocratic Rule to Political Adulthood: The Experiential Bias in Germany's Aging Electoral Democracy and the Limitations of a Vote 16 Policy

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Abstract: Rising life expectancies and low birth rates across the Western world have heralded a profound change in the way representative democracy operates. Whereas representative democracy was politics for the young made by the old in the past, it is turning into politics for the old made by the old in the 21st century. Following Yosuke Buchmeier and Gabriele Vogt's recent reflection on Japan's status as the democracy with the oldest electorate, this article considers the case of Germany's aging electoral democracy, using the 2021 federal election as its empirical foundation. Employing what Ian Shapiro labels a *problematizing redescription*, the paper demonstrates that a recharacterization of gerontocratic rule as political adulthood better explains the election outcome than a characterization of gerontocratic rule as such. In doing so, it draws up an original conception of *political adulthood* as the socially-accepted interpersonal, structural, and institutional discrimination of young and younger people in politics and distinguishes between two temporal phases as *disenfranchised* and *enfranchised* political adulthood. The two-stage idea of political adulthood gives voice to the structural injustice toward young people as political beings and facilitates a critical reflection on whether the policy of lowering the voting age to 16 would really be as desirable as many of its proponents believe it is. The unique contribution of this article is the formulation of a new social structure that diagnoses a distinctive experiential bias in democratic politics at a time in which the relationship between demography and democracy is coming to a head.

Keywords: representative democracy; gerontocracy; political adulthood; problematizing redescription; voting age of 16

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1 Introduction

Perhaps the greatest success of the interplay between democracy and capitalism is that people are living much longer nowadays than they used to 200 years ago. Historical estimates suggest that life expectancy approximated 34 years of age in Europe and 35 years of age in the Americas in 1800 (Roser, Ortiz-Ospina, and Ritchie 2019).¹ By the year of 2015 this number had more than doubled to 81 years in the United Kingdom and Germany, and to 79 years in the United States (Roser, Ortiz-Ospina, and Ritchie 2019). One does not go too far to claim that a more than twofold increase in life expectancy over two centuries should have repercussions on how we think about democracy. Yet, the academic discourse on the relationship between democracy and demography has not gained momentum. Empirical political scientists Achim Goerres and Peter Vanhuysse (2021) may count as two of a handful of authors who have devoted a whole book to the study of political demography thus far. In its introduction, they attest political demography the status of a “surprisingly marginal discipline” (Goerres and Vanhuysse 2021, p. 2; see Goldstone, Kauffman, and Toft 2012, for another contribution to this field).

Within political theory, discussions about the historical evolution of demography and democracy or its contemporary relationship have been scarce as well. In his lecture *Democracy for Young People*, the historian David Runciman (2018) tells a story in which democracy from the ancient period until today has been about preventing the young from the levers of political power, alongside the poor and the lesser educated. He traces this notion back to Plato’s *The Republic* and points out that the most convincing argument against democracy for Plato was the fear to be ruled by a volatile tyranny of young people. Because the young, the poor, and the lesser educated always used to be in a majority, the idea of an elected representative had to be invented in the 18th century to ward off the danger of yielding political power to the wrong people (Runciman 2018). However, according to Runciman (2018), one thing has changed in the meantime: Whereas there are still more poor and poorly-educated than rich and well-educated people in Western societies, they have fewer young than old people these days. Democracy used to be politics made for the young by the old, but now it is politics made for the old by the old. Conceiving this tidal change in the dynamics of democratic politics is crucial to studying the relationship between demography and democracy and serves as a starting point for this paper.

¹ All quantities within the text are expressed as whole numbers. This includes percentages insofar as they are not expressed as fractions, but as percentages.

That is because Germany is a country with fewer young people than ever before (Tagesschau 2022). It is therefore not surprising that Germany has a particularly aging population. Based on the Central Intelligence Agency (2020), Germany's median age stands at 48 years and constitutes the second highest of any territorial state after Japan. The median age is an essential objective indicator of elderly rule or – as I label it – ‘gerontocratic rule’ inasmuch as it lays bare the amount of power a particular generation exerts over other generations in a single democratic society. In this sense, gerontocratic rule is not only meant to encompass the multitude of rulers a particular generation enjoys in positions of power, but also the multitude of the ruled of a particular generation that can bring new rulers into power (cf. Bytheway 1995; Eisele 1979; Kondratowitz 2015; Magni-Berton and Panel 2021). Analogous to democratic rule which is rule of the people by the people, gerontocratic rule is rule of elderly people by elderly people. Gerontocratic rule is hence reflected both in the number of the elected of a certain generation or age and in the number of the electors of a certain generation or age. For instance, the ‘Baby Boomer Generation’ is the only generation in the Federal Republic of Germany that has had the privilege of being in the majority throughout their lifetime (Becker 2014). The number of electors from a generation evidently depends on the number of children that are born into a certain generation. Greater generational cohorts exert more power on political decision-making than smaller ones. The starker the numerical differences between generational cohorts, the graver the gap turns out to be. Because German life expectancy rose by around 14 % from 1963 to 2022 and its birth rate almost halved itself within the same period, the country faces a demographic gulf it has never seen before (UN DESA Population Division 2022a, b). The 21st century is the first-ever century in which the old outnumber the young electorally. This turn of eras sets a precedent in the history of German democracy and many other aging democracies around the world. Following Buchmeier and Vogt's recent examination of the inter-generational divide in Japanese politics (2024), this piece probes into Germany's aging democracy and uses the constellation and outcome of the 2021 German federal election as its empirical basis.²

2 All statistics displayed refer to the 2021 German federal election on September 26, 2021. Because of a traffic incident in Berlin on that day which prevented some citizens from gaining access to their polling stations, the German Constitutional Court ruled in December 2023 that the election had to be rerun in some electoral districts of Berlin. This partial election rerun took place on February 11, 2024. Since my article is concerned with the 2021 election, the minor 2024 rerun adds little value to my analysis and therefore does not feature in it. Nevertheless, I hasten to add that neither of the bigger parties gained or lost more than 0.1 % overall. For an overview of the final result including the 2024 partial rerun, please see (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2024).

In doing so, the paper proceeds in four steps. First, it lays out the methodological framework that comprises a problem-driven approach to the study of politics. Second, using what Ian Shapiro (2002) terms a problematizing redescription, this article initially describes the phenomenon of gerontocratic rule by analyzing the results of the 2021 election, before it redescribes the problem of gerontocratic rule as one of political adultism, drawing on election data and footage from the three ‘TV truels’ in the run-up to the election. The logic behind this two-stage process is to show that a reproblematicization of gerontocratic rule as political adultism provides a fuller picture of the underlying causal mechanisms of the election outcome than a description of gerontocratic rule as such. In a final step, the paper engages with a plausible policy implication of the analysis and argues that a lowering of the voting age to 16 is grist to the mill of those, tinkering with the symptoms rather than the source of the problem, by doing little if anything to dissolve the political-adultist dynamics we are seeing in German politics and society today.

The purpose of this writing is threefold. For one thing, it seeks to elucidate how a first look at election statistics can draw people toward policy conclusions that they might otherwise step back from if they had given the same statistics a close second look. For another thing, the paper intends to bridge the seemingly insurmountable divide between political scientists and political theorists by showcasing that it is possible to pursue avenues of research that are rooted in an empirical state of affairs and receptive toward studying quantitative data, while avoiding the trap of perpetuating that state of affairs. Lastly, the objective of this piece is to inspire researchers in statistics, political science, and other neighboring disciplines to go beyond existing work on ‘gray power’ and entertain a novel research agenda around political adultism that explores its relationship with more or less aging societies and polities.

2 The Methodology of a Problem-Driven Approach to Political Inquiry

The present research is motivated by a problem-driven approach to the study of politics. Shapiro, Masoud, and Smith point out that “[t]hose who advocate ‘problem-driven’ work claim that it is most important to start with a substantive question thrown up in the political world and then seek out appropriate methods

to answer it” (2004, p. 1). This approach stands in contrast to a methods-oriented enterprise in which the focus on developing more rigorous methods may regulate the type and scope of questions that can be raised under that framework. Whereas problem-driven research has been criticized for lacking scientific stringency, method-driven research has been questioned for failing to appeal to the broader practical and intellectual circles around it (Shapiro 2016; Shapiro, Smith, and Masoud 2004). It would go beyond the scope of this writing to adjudicate between the merits of both approaches, but it is important to note that this piece is situated in the problem-driven tradition of political research.

Yet, people might question what it actually means to start with a problem rather than a certain theory or method. In my case, it implies that the inspiration for this research is drawn from a real-life event. This event is the 2021 German federal election. Thus, the starting point is not a hypothesized gap in the scientific literature, but the event itself that puzzled me and led me to write this paper. At the time of the election, significant parts of the general public and news media had settled on the notion that the primary reason why Olaf Scholz’s Social Democratic Party (SPD) won the election is because Scholz had not committed any campaign blunders as opposed to the Greens’ frontrunner Annalena Baerbock and the Christian Union’s (CDU/CSU) leading candidate Armin Laschet (see Kuzmany 2021, for a comparable journalistic analysis of the election). While I do not seek to dispute this widely accepted view, I believe that it falls short because it neither sufficiently scratches the surface nor successfully captures the underlying dynamics of the election outcome.

At first, the paper avails itself of the 2021 election results to describe the problem of gerontocratic rule in German politics. Even though a characterization of gerontocratic rule on the basis of a nationwide election outcome might not come across as unusual in 21st century Germany, the scientific literature is devoid of contributions that have characterized an election outcome in this light. Following Shapiro, the task of a problematizing redescription is to “show that the accepted way of characterizing a piece of political reality fails to capture an important feature of what stands in need of explanation or justification [and to] then offer a recharacterization that speaks to the inadequacies in the prior account” (2002, p. 615). The description of gerontocratic rule as such may therefore already present an alternative view to the accepted depiction of a well-performing Scholz vis-à-vis a weakly-performing Baerbock and Laschet in the run-up to the election. On this reading, the description of gerontocratic rule can be understood as a competing account for the election result that might better scratch its surface than the description of a ‘performance gap’ among the three frontrunners.

Yet, this renewed description lacks a particular element that may not be constitutive of a proper problematizing redescription, but can elevate its prolificacy and impact. I am referring to the element of surprise. To understand what I mean by this, it is helpful to turn to Daniel Campos's distinction between *habitual* and *creative* abduction. Habitual abduction implies that "the inquirer already knows a general rule or law, and the reasoning consists in grasping that the known general rule, when applied to the facts under investigation, provides an explanation for those facts" (Campos 2011, p. 425). Creative abduction, by contrast, implies that "[t]he inquirer is confronted with puzzling facts, but she does not know of a general rule, law, or nature that may readily explain them. She must conceive the explanation itself" (Campos 2011, p. 425). While the description of gerontocratic rule in my paper may be accounted for by the median voter theorem, the redescription of gerontocratic rule as political adultism does not have a known theory or rule that I know of it can resort to. Habitual abduction functions in a way that it strengthens existing theories by applying them to concrete cases (Campos 2011). The distinctiveness of creative abduction lies in its ability to spawn novel conceptions in the subject area in which it is deployed (Campos 2011). Although both forms of abduction feature in this article, the latter one demarcates the original contribution of it.

Problematizing redescriptions have become more popular in the study of politics since Shapiro first argued the case for them in 2002. They have been applied to the repeal of the estate tax in the United States (Graetz and Shapiro 2005), to the use of the correlation coefficient in political methodology (Wittenberg 2013), to human-animal governance in Canada (Janara 2015), to ethnography in political theory (Longo and Zacka 2019), and to historical cases of collective trauma in international relations (Lerner 2022), for example. This research extends that tradition and applies a problematizing redescription to the outcome of the 2021 German federal election. In doing so, it is committed to what Sil and Katzenstein (2010) have labeled analytical eclecticism. That is, it strives to address a problem of considerable scope (i.e. gerontocratic rule), look for middle-range theoretical arguments that can inform political practice and policy issues (i.e. voting age of 16), and tell a causal story that unearths the underlying causal structure of the problem (i.e. political adultism) in an interdisciplinary fashion. The argument presented *cannot* and *does not* seek to generate certainty about the phenomenon under study, nor to make predictions about how it will unfold in a comparable scenario in the future. Instead, my contribution tries to provide a novel perspective that pulls other researchers up short and invites them to think about the problem of gerontocratic rule in an unprecedented way which might not only shift their views on a Vote 16 policy, but could also inspire them to pursue new lines of research in political demography.

3 A Description of Gerontocratic Rule

Ahead of the 2021 election, the federal election commissioner provided a statistical estimation of the number of eligible voters per age by decade. This overview brought to light the stark imbalance between younger and older voters in 21st century Germany in which people aged 60 and older represented more than 38 % of eligible voters, while those aged between 18 and 29 made up only 14 % of the anticipated electorate (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2021). Thus, the share of older voters was scheduled to be almost three times as high as the share of voters younger than 30. Assuming the purview of youngness were extended and included all tricenarians, voters aged 40 and younger would still comprise fewer than 29 % of the anticipated electorate (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2021). German democracy operates at a level in which voters under 40 years of age fail to constitute a third of the overall electorate. More strikingly, people aged 70 and older already made up more than 21 % of eligible voters and formed the largest age group by decade of all (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2021).

It follows that a party's deference to the sentiment and needs of senior citizens throughout an election campaign be a *sine qua non* for it to have a realistic prospect of gaining the chancellery. A campaign strategy different from this is a recipe for failure in a personalized representative system in which votes are aggregated proportionally and overhang seats are there to ensure the balance between personal and proportionate representation. Ultimately, democracy is a numbers game and the more votes a party secures in a system of proportional representation, the more likely that party is to govern afterwards. If socio-demographic groups were thought to be homogeneous (which they often are not), it would suffice for any political party to tailor its campaign to the preferences of those groups that are suspected of earning it the most votes. While this exercise used to be more challenging in earlier times by virtue of a more demographically-balanced electorate and a starker identity-related gap between the elected and the electors, it appears more doable nowadays insofar as no German party can win an election without making significant inroads into the territory of voters aged 60 and older (see Runciman 2018, for how we have become more like them). From a standpoint of electoral competition, the fact that soon-to-be, early, and late pensioners make up the most influential voting bloc in any German election these days is problematic because it reduces competition among parties and candidates and simplifies election campaign strategies. In this case, it is relatively immaterial whether an older voter is just 60 years and a regular pensioner between 65 and 67 years old. As the 2021 election data will show, the voting patterns of older and retired voters are remarkably similar and lop-sided compared with other demographics. It is therefore not implausible to suggest that older and retired

citizens form a more cohesive group than other socio-demographic groups, such as non-older voters, workers, employees, the self-employed, or civil servants.

3.1 The Young versus the Old at the 2021 German Federal Election

A useful way to embark on a description of gerontocratic rule in this election is to compare the voting preferences of the young and the old for the three biggest parties with the overall result. These were the SPD, the CDU/CSU, and the Greens. I shall refer to the age groups of 18–24-year-olds and 25–34-year-olds as *the young* and to the age group of 60 and older as *the old* or *the elderly*. Among 18–24-year-olds, the Greens came in first with 24 %, ahead of the SPD's 16 % and the CDU/CSU's 11 % (see Figure 1).

Among 25–34-year-olds, a similar pattern emerged, with the Greens' winning at 23 %, ahead of the SPD's 17 % and the CDU/CSU's 14 %. Although the Greens comfortably topped the SPD and CDU/CSU in both of these age groups, their overall result stood at 15 %. This is in contrast to the SPD's 26 % and the CDU/CSU's 24 % in the final tally. Thus, if only the young had voted in this election, Germany would in all likelihood have got its first Green chancellor.

Among voters aged 60 and older, the SPD won a narrow victory over the CDU/CSU at 33 %, whereas the Greens could only secure 9 % of the *elderly vote*. The grand coalition parties could almost amass a two-thirds majority among the

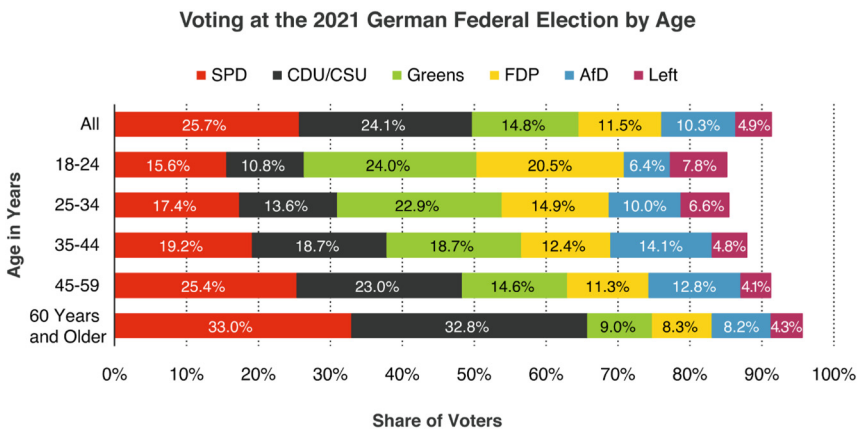


Figure 1: Voting at the 2021 German federal election by different age groups. Source: Author's figure based on Der Bundeswahlleiter (2022b, p. 17).

old, while the Greens could not surpass the single-digit percentage range in this sizeable age group. An interesting parallel arises between the official election statistics for elderly voters and the exit poll result for pensioners. Among the latter, the SPD likewise achieved a close win at 35 %, just one percentage point ahead of the CDU/CSU's 34 %, but again in great distance to the Greens who fared only marginally better than with older voters by gaining 10 % of the *pensioner vote* (see Figure 2).

The striking similarities between the elderly and pensioner vote substantiate the notion that these two groups are largely interchangeable. Given the significant overlap between older voters and both retiring and retired voters, this seems rather uncontroversial. What is more interesting is the lack of electoral competition among pensioners compared with other socio-demographic groups. As displayed in Figure 2, no other group had a result as skewed toward the SPD and CDU/CSU as pensioners. This is somewhat ironic because it implies that the group which is supposed to be most electorally competitive by virtue of Germany's gerontocratic makeup is the one which was least electorally competitive due to its overwhelming preference for the SPD and CDU/CSU. Figures 1 and 2 highlight the difficulties for all other parties to make headway in attracting older and retired voters. Consequently, there is not only a theoretical problem when one more homogeneous social group radically outnumbers other less homogenous demographic groups, but also an actual one if this group is substantially less responsive to all parties other than the two major ones in a multi-party system.

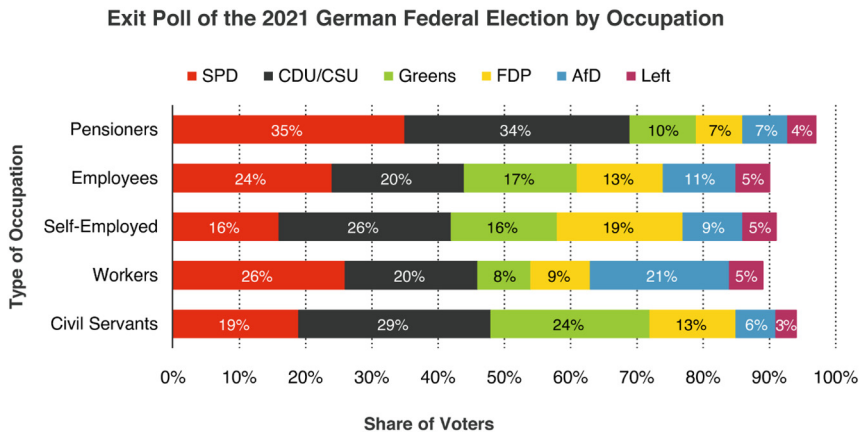


Figure 2: Exit poll of the 2021 German federal election by type of occupation. Source: Author's figure based on Infratest dimap (2021, p. 90).

3.2 The Demographic Bias toward the Elderly

The phenomenon of gerontocratic rule in Germany becomes more pronounced when comparing the turnout trajectories for the different age groups. Altogether, turnout among age groups ranged from 71% among first-time voters to 80% among 50–59-year-olds, before it fell to 75% among 70-year-olds and older (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022b). Voter participation dropped among the elderly and the 40–49-year-olds compared with 2017, while it increased for all other age groups (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022a). Moreover, voter turnout among 21–29-year-olds grew by 4%, thereby making for the biggest increase in voter participation of all ages in 2021 (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022a). Differences in participation thus shrank among age groups, but were not eliminated. However, even if the participation of all age groups converged on each other in the future, this would not change the radical skewness of the distribution of available votes toward the elderly which is scheduled to get more severe over time. In fact, elderly people can afford to have fewer of their oldest members voting, whereas young people can only marginally compensate for this with a higher turnout. This *demographiocratic* dilemma sums up the problem of gerontocratic rule in contemporary Germany. Even if young people were to vote at a somewhat higher rate than their elderly counterparts, their superior participation would have little influence on the final outcome. This is because the turnout ceiling for young people is not high enough to make up significant electoral ground on elderly people. In this day and age, younger voters are no longer capable of balancing the demographic deficit toward older voters by means of a greater turnout, thereby possibly contributing to their low levels of political self-efficacy (see Börsch-Supan 2022; see also Runciman 2018, for a similar line of thought regarding the United Kingdom, Italy, and Japan). Their disillusionment may reside in the fact that they as a collective get sanctioned at the ballot box when they do not vote, albeit failing to get sufficient reward when they do vote.

3.3 Explaining the SPD's Election Victory

The most likely explanation why the SPD were victorious in this election is because they edged out the CDU/CSU among elderly voters. The most likely explanation why the CDU/CSU came in a close second is because they narrowly lost the elderly vote against the SPD and were unable to challenge them in all other age groups. The most likely explanation why the Greens were in a distant third place is because they could only surpass the CDU/CSU among 18–34-year-olds and tie them among 35–44-year-olds, while overwhelmingly losing the elderly vote to them by 24 percentage points. No other socio-demographic factor seems to do as well as age at

illuminating the 2021 election result. Considering age as a determining factor uncovers an opposing trend between the grand coalition parties and the Greens. Whereas both the SPD's and the CDU/CSU's vote share gradually increases with each ascending age group, the Greens' vote share gradually decreases with each ascending age group (see Figure 1). Compared with 2017, the CDU/CSU could further afford to lose 14 % among 18–24-year-olds and 13 % among 25–34-year-olds, while dropping just 7 % among the elderly, thereby safeguarding their position as the second biggest party in Germany's parliament (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022b). The SPD similarly lost 3 % among 18–24-year-olds compared with 2017, albeit gaining support in all other age groups (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022b). The most influential electoral shift happened at the level of the elderly. While the CDU/CSU lost seven percentage points among 60-year-olds and older, the SPD could garner nine percentage points among them (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022b). Since the CDU/CSU hemorrhaged most of their votes to the SPD in 2021, it is highly likely that the bulk of these losses were inflicted by older voters who moved from the CDU/CSU in 2017 to the SPD in 2021 (Infratest dimap 2021). The voter migration from 2017 to 2021 therefore lends further credibility to the view that the SPD's victory arose precisely because of their electoral triumph among the elderly.

Accordingly, the question emerges how the Social Democrats were able to persuade a large number of older voters to move away from the Christian Union and vote for the SPD instead. The most plausible account of this is the SPD's pension policy and the way in which they appealed to older voters by displaying Scholz as a "chancellor for stable pensions" (SPD 2021). Moreover, Scholz deliberately distanced himself and his party from the CDU/CSU on this matter whom he reproached for failing to include the guarantee of stable and safe pensions in their election manifesto (SPD 2021). The consistency with which he presented the SPD and himself as a guarantor of a stable and safe pension level became particularly evident when he reiterated his claims both in the election arena and in each of the three TV truels, a three-way TV debate format between chancellor candidates Baerbock, Scholz, and Laschet (Galileo 2021, 0:10:15–0:11:08 & 1:33:20–1:33:43; Ntv Nachrichten 2021, 1:51:00–1:52:10; Tagesschau 2021a, 0:22:37–0:28:12; Tagesschau 2021b, 1:34:02–1:35:27). It seems that Scholz's promise of safe and stable pensions not only proved to be popular among the elderly, but also set him apart from the CDU/CSU frontrunner Laschet who criticized his promise as untrustworthy (Tagesschau 2021b, 1:15:25–1:19:41).

At the surface level, the election outcome may be best explained by the median voter theorem (Black 1948; Downs 1957). The median voter theorem suggests that parties and candidates will be selected on the basis of how close their party and election manifesto are to the median voter of a democratic polity. The fact that multi-party systems tend to be more receptive to the median voter and hence more redistributive than two-party systems implies that the theory should do particularly

well in the German context of proportional representation (Atkinson, Rainwater, and Smeeding 1995; Powell 2000; see Shapiro 2020). If the median age in a polity is comparatively high, this has ramifications for the median voter age. More precisely, the median voter age is likely to be much higher than the median age in any country because there are minimum voting ages, prohibiting children and youth to have their say and cast a vote. It follows that Germany's median voter age at this election was considerably higher than Germany's nationwide median age of 48 years in 2020. The SPD benefitted from this insofar as their election manifesto was found to have the greatest accordance with voters aged 50 and older (Galileo 2021, 0:00:00–0:00:57). However, given Joseph Schumpeter's insight (2006) that political parties and commercial enterprises would be more strategic actors than individual voters and consumers, it is probably more accurate to say that the SPD deliberately appealed to older voters in their competitive struggle for winning the election and gaining the chancellorship. When devising their election programs and campaigns, parties do well to be mindful of the electorate's age distribution in order to allow themselves to win as many votes as possible. Whereas the Greens' manifesto had its highest agreement with younger voters and the CDU/CSU's pension policy did little to assure older voters, Scholz and his SPD were the proverbial laughing third in this election (see Galileo 2021, 0:00:00–0:00:57).

4 A Problematizing Redescription of Gerontocratic Rule as Political Adulthood

A holistic account of the 2021 election outcome not only needs to provide a plausible account of the obvious patterns in the data, but also has to speak to the hidden ones that might necessitate a different descriptive cut. Whoever has closely followed the election campaign and probed into the election statistics will find an anomaly in them which cannot be explained by a description of gerontocratic rule, but warrants a problematizing redescription instead. This anomaly refers to the voting statistics for the age group of 35–44-year-olds. It is the age group to which the Greens' frontrunner Annalena Baerbock belonged at the time of the campaign and the election. Insofar as her age of 40 was at the heart of this age group, she was descriptively representative of it. The 35–44-year-olds form an age group that is largely characterized by parenthood of primary- and secondary-school children. If families choose to have children, it is this period in which parenthood either becomes a reality or find itself in a critical phase. In this sense, the 35–44-year-olds might be called the primary *parental* age group. Baerbock appeared to be aware of her positioning in this age group and structured her campaign in such a way that it

should resonate with other parental voters. For example, in her elevator pitches of the first and third TV truel, she created the image of a Germany in which daycare centers for children would be the finest places in the country and children and families would finally move to the fore of German politics (Galileo 2021, 0:12:07–0:12:52 & 1:34:00–1:34:16; Ntv Nachrichten 2021, 1:49:59–1:50:59). Moreover, in her closing statement of the second TV truel, she went a step further and tasked Germany's contemporary challenges with *her* generation, thereby implying that the baton of political power should be passed on from the previous generation to hers (Tagesschau 2021b, 1:32:58–1:34:02). The generational difference between Baerbock as a member of Generation X and Laschet and Scholz as members of the Baby Boomer Generation was a rhetorical tool that she deliberately deployed to distinguish herself from the other two frontrunners in public.

It is therefore surprising that Annalena Baerbock's Greens were unable to win a relative majority in Baerbock's age group and came in joint second with the CDU/CSU at less than 19 %, trailing behind Scholz's SPD, which reached more than 19 % (see Figure 1). The fact that Baerbock drew her credibility from publicly addressing the dual burden of reconciling parenthood with day-to-day work in politics and regularly peppered her interviews with anecdotes about the complex parenting experience during the Covid-19 pandemic makes it all the more astounding that she could not attract a relative majority of voters in her own age group (see Rosales and Scherkamp 2021, for an authentic profile of Annalena Baerbock). After all, she also stood in stark contrast to Scholz and Laschet who did not have to go through the experience of raising children within a pandemic and made no effort to incorporate memories from their family life into their broader campaign. Yet, although Baerbock thematized the burden of parenthood in a pandemic and made it easy for others in her age group to identify both personally and politically with her, she could not prevail among these voters. This finding is puzzling and thus requires some creative abduction to get hold of it.

4.1 What Is Adulthood?

The concept that I draw on to elucidate this paradox is adulthood. While this may at first seem odd given Baerbock's status as a legal adult, the rationale behind it will become clearer once I turn to my conception of 'political adulthood'. The first academic use of adulthood can be credited with the developmental psychologist Jack Flasher (1978) who conceptualizes it as the power differential between adults and children. According to him, adulthood is associated with a set of biological, legal, and socioeconomic advantages over childhood and youth that could predispose adults to inhibit the developing autonomy of the child and adolescent. More recent

contributions began to explore the structural and systemic dimension of adultism. For instance, Lombardo and Polonko point out that “[s]imilar to sexism, racism and classism, adultism refers to a system of structured inequality or oppression that permeates relationships between children and adults” (2010, p. 94). Michael Cummings thinks along similar lines when he conceives of adultism as “a prejudicial marginalization of children by adults comparable to that of women by men – sexism – and of nonwhites by whites – racism” (2022, p. 29). Going one step further, John Wall (2022) calls for a childist perspective against the adultist foundations and biases of modern democracies and urges them to reconsider their relationship with the very young. What these approaches to adultism have in common is that they draw the dividing line between legal adults that enjoy certain privileges and legal children that cannot enjoy them. But what if the social structure of adultism does not vanish once a person becomes a legal adult?

The centerpiece of this research is to start thinking beyond conceptions of adultism that loosely separate legal children from legal adults. In my view, it is implausible to suggest that a 17-year-old is always a victim of adultism, whereas an 18-year-old is necessarily a perpetrator of it. Using legal adulthood as a demarcation criterion for adultism seems overly simplistic. While adultism in its full dimension is a social structure akin to sexism and racism, the transition from being a victim of adultism to becoming its perpetrator is more gradual, interchangeable, and fluent than in sexism and racism. That is, an 18-year-old may suffer from adultist discrimination while being among her 40-year-old father and her 65-year-old grandmother. However, an 18-year-old might herself engage in adultism while being among her 10-year-old sister and her 16-year-old brother. In sexism and racism, it is far less common that a female victim of sexist discrimination perpetrated by a man acts as a perpetrator of sexism toward men or that a black or nonwhite victim of racist discrimination perpetrated by a white acts as a perpetrator of racism toward whites. Sexism and racism are more static forms of discrimination. Even if views of gender fluidity and racial ambiguity are not disregarded, it remains the case that adultist discrimination is less clear-cut and more transitional than sexist and racist discrimination. Indeed, adultism is a relative form of discrimination and the degree that an individual suffers from depends on whom she or he is compared to and who are the people and institutions that compare. In this vein, adultism is a source of injustice that can befall not only children and youth, but also adults themselves.

4.2 Theorizing Age and Experience

If one accepts that being discriminated against on grounds of adultism is not a matter of being a legal child at 17 vis-à-vis a legal adult at 18, then a renewed understanding

of adulthood throws the extent to which age and experience are coupled with each other into sharp relief. Although this relationship remains understudied at large, some theorists and scientists have begun to think about it. For example, Stockemer and Sundström (2022) write that age barriers have a longstanding tradition, dating back to minimum ages of candidacy in the *Lex Villia Annalis* in ancient Rome more than 2000 years ago. Yet, even in countries with no codified age barriers beyond legal adulthood, political experience is a determining factor in whether people are selected as candidates in the first place (Magni-Berton and Panel 2021). The structural bias of electoral politics against young people is also something that Runciman takes up in his audio lecture. He questions whether people have a general preference for experience or electoral politics are harder to get into as a young person (Runciman 2018). I argue that the former goes far in explaining the latter. That is, the fact that parties, parliaments, and governments suffer from an underrepresentation of young and younger people in most countries around the world has to do with a social structure that discriminates against young people on the basis of experience. In this vein, age and experience are inextricably intertwined with each other. However, age is associated with a definite number, such as being aged 25 or 40. Experience in the sense of life experience is a more fluid and gradual concept that tells a story of how much life a person has lived without assigning an explicit number to it. Contrary to the concept of age, the concept of life experience does not have this lure of quantification attached to it.

On top of that, there is the notion of political experience, involving a history of running for and holding public offices and an engagement in politics more broadly. Political experience differs from life experience insofar as someone can have much life experience without having any political experience. The 45th President of the United States serves as an example of a person who was elected to the Office of the President with a lot of life experience, but little to no political experience. Conversely, it is not possible for someone to have more political experience than life experience. Life experience and political experience tend to coincide with each other over time. The more life experience someone has, the more likely it is for someone to have more political experience as well. While there will always be outliers of individuals who have a lot of political experience at a younger age compared with the political rookie at an older age, the conventional story is that the probability of finding a younger person with substantive political experience is significantly lower than the probability of finding an older person with substantive political experience. That is why the concept of (life) experience acts as the common denominator of age and political experience. It is this prevalent social preconception with (life) experience in the domain of politics that I seek to expose as discriminatory against young and younger people.

4.3 A First Conception of Political Adulthood

Adulthood exists in all public and private realms, such as schools, families, sports clubs, courts, businesses, parties, and governments. Since its manifestation may vary across different contexts and my focus is on the political context, I shall label my conception political adulthood. Political adulthood is the socially-accepted interpersonal, structural, and institutional discrimination of young and younger people in politics and on political matters that decreases with their enfranchisement and increasing (life) experience and comes to an end once becoming recognized as political adults by the polity they appertain to. There are two phases of political adulthood. The first one is termed *disenfranchised* political adulthood and refers to the way in which the young as a disenfranchised group face a high degree of interpersonal, structural, and institutional discrimination in politics and on political matters by virtue of them being disenfranchised by the polity they belong to. Individuals under 18 or 16 years generally fall in this category. It is their political agency that the society calls into question by denying them the right to express a political preference for the future direction of the polity. The second phase is termed *enfranchised* political adulthood and relates to the way in which younger people as an enfranchised group face interpersonal, structural, and institutional barriers in politics and on political matters due to the fact that they are not yet recognized as political adults in spite of their enfranchisement. The latter part requires some elaboration. According to my understanding, a political adult is someone who is credited with the political agency to vote for his or her representatives and rulers *and* be voted for in order to represent and rule over others. That is, to attain the status of a political adult, it is not sufficient when a society thinks that a person has the political agency to vote. For someone to be recognized as a political adult, it is imperative that a society also deems this person worthy of being voted for in order to represent and rule over members of that society. In Plato's imagination, political adulthood does not come to fruition prior to the age of 50, a time by which individuals reach philosophical maturity so as to serve as philosopher rulers in the ideal kingdom (Plato et al. 2007). Even though the age qualification of 50 might only evoke a weary smile in contemporary ordinary citizens, it is noteworthy that this number roughly corresponds to the appointment age of French ministers in the reigning Fifth Republic (Grossman and François 2013). The attribution of political adulthood to an individual has little to do with the attribution of legal adulthood to her or him. Just because somebody has become a legal adult at the age of 18 in most countries around the world, it does not make this person a political adult in the eyes of the respective societies. Although the age marker of 50 does not seem irrelevant to this conversation, it would be implausible to suggest a single cut-off age that turns a legal adult into a political adult. What is clear is that the younger and less experienced a person is, the less likely he or she is to be perceived as a political adult.

4.4 The Political Adulthood toward Baerbock

The power of imagination on the part of same-aged and older voters that Baerbock could shoulder the most powerful political office in Germany is precisely what she was missing during her election bid for the chancellery. Most voters as old or older than Baerbock had difficulties visualizing how a politically young woman without considerable experience could possibly head a government of a country of Germany's size. On the contrary, voters who were younger than Baerbock at the time were unlikely to start from that premise. From their perspective, Baerbock was not only older, but also had more experience than they themselves. To these voters, her age and level of experience was not an impediment to voting for her because they themselves had less of it. In Baerbock's case, the comparison was drawn between her as a younger and less experienced politician of Generation X and Laschet and Scholz as more experienced politicians of the Baby Boomer Generation. While Baerbock had no ministerial experience at the time, Laschet and Scholz had already been heading regional governments for various years. Older German voters who tend to be less open to new experiences and more suspicious of political experiments were able to envision how Laschet and Scholz would govern Germany (see Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer 2006, for how openness to experience declines over the life course). With Baerbock, this was different. They did not have any relevant experience to resort to and seemed to come to the conclusion that a successful bid of hers for the chancellery would be too unpredictable. This line of reasoning is consistent with previous survey-experimental research which found that older people hold older candidates in much higher regard than younger ones (Dobbs 2020; Piliavin 1987). Given that voters were found to show a strong preference for similar-aged candidates in a simulated mayoral election study, one might think that voters as old as Baerbock would come in droves to vote for her (cf. Sigelman and Sigelman 1982). However, the reality could not be further from the truth. In fact, voters as old as Baerbock appeared to have a similar outlook on her as voters older than her. One explanation for this is that the majority of these voters used their own age and level of experience as a reference point and derived that if they themselves were not poised to fill Germany's most important political office at that age, how could an age mate of them plausibly believe that he or she would manage to discharge it dutifully. Most of her contemporaries seemed to think that she was overestimating herself with the task to become Germany's next chancellor. Their assessment of her as a leading candidate was then rounded off by her blunders on the campaign trail. Yet, the point that it is worth making is that Baerbock would have unlikely become chancellor even if she had not committed these blunders. Despite the fact that she had led a few polls in the immediate aftermath of her candidate announcement,

Baerbock's ever-present problem was that the closer the time of election day was approaching, the greater the chances were that people took stock of her age and level of experience and compared it with that of the other contenders in the race. After all, it is a well-established finding in observational and experimental political research that voters prefer candidates with greater experience, most of whom are older politicians (Coffé and Theiss-Morse 2016; Hobolt and Høyland 2011; Kirkland and Coppock 2018). This premium on experience becomes even more glaring in Germany than in other countries because it has a median voter age significantly higher than Baerbock's age, making the vast number of older voters particularly skeptical of voting for her in comparison with her older and more experienced competitors for the chancellorship (cf. Dobbs 2020; Piliavin 1987). Thus, there was from the outset little possibility for her to escape the political adulthood that she subsequently encountered (see ARD 2021, for a TV interview with Baerbock shortly after her candidacy announcement in which she already faced frequent questions about her lack of relevant experience).

During the campaign, her relative youth and lack of experience were not the sole source of discrimination that she was exposed to. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the political adulthood interacted with her gender and produced a multiplying detrimental effect. Upon scrutinizing the surveys that polling agencies carried out with viewers of the three TV truels shortly after, it becomes apparent that Baerbock was rated as the least competent candidate of the triad after every single one of them (see Figure 3).

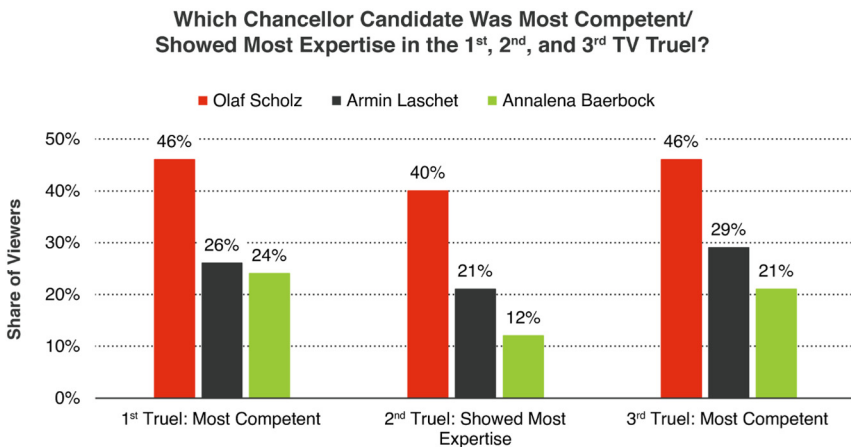


Figure 3: Competence/Expertise ratings of the three chancellor candidates after each of the three TV debates by share of viewers. Source: Author's figure based on Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (2021), RTL (2021), Sat. 1 and Forsa (2021).

For the first truel, only 24 % of viewers found Baerbock to be most competent. This number dropped to 21 % in the third debate. For the second TV truel, the survey question was slightly rephrased to focus on expertise instead of competence. Therein, merely 12 % of viewers deemed Baerbock as having demonstrated the greatest expertise of the three candidates. Although expertise and competence are not entirely synonymous, the overlap of the two is sufficiently substantive that they were chosen to be combined in a single figure. One could therefore assume that Baerbock actually was the least competent of the three candidates. While Wagschal et al. (2021) rightly point out that Baerbock misspoke a few times and made some errors in the second debate, these slips do not seem to be significant enough to make for her exceedingly low competence ratings across all three TV debates. For instance, when it comes to the candidates' arguments, fact checkers of the Bavarian Public Service Broadcasting found that all of them occasionally skewed the truth to their advantage (Lückoff et al. 2021). In fact, one journalistic analysis ascertained that Baerbock made considerably more factually correct statements over the three TV truels than Scholz and Laschet, being either fully or partially correct in 74 % of the selected cases vis-à-vis Scholz's 55 % and Laschet's 38 % (Fisbeck 2021). It is therefore more plausible that viewers associated Baerbock's higher-pitched voice with lower competence and penalized her accordingly (cf. Klofstad et al. 2015). Furthermore, the fact that older faces tend to be regarded as more competent than younger faces probably came back to haunt her in these debates (Poutvaara, Jordahl, and Berggren 2009). Interestingly, Poutvaara, Jordahl, and Berggren (2009) also found that a correlate of youth – babyfacedness – corresponds to negative ratings of competence. Given that politicians' perceived competence and apparent age are predictive of actual votes, Baerbock evidently suffered from the fact that she was compared to Scholz and Laschet a young woman, aspiring to the most powerful political office in Germany (cf. Olivola and Todorov 2010).

The question remains whether it was her age or gender, producing the more pervasive structure of the two. I think there is some indication that the underlying causal structure of political adulthood weighed stronger than the underlying sexist structure in preventing Baerbock from gaining the chancellorship. In other words, it was sexist discrimination, building on political-adultist discrimination, and not vice versa that decided Baerbock's fate in the 2021 election. To substantiate this claim, it is worth turning to the 2017 election and examine how viewers compared Angela Merkel's competence and argumentation with Martin Schulz's during their TV duel. The SPD politician Schulz was President of the European Parliament at the time and sought to challenge Merkel for the German chancellorship. Following their one and only TV debate, 64 % of its viewers found Merkel to be more competent than Schulz, whereas just 20 % thought the opposite. Albeit being a closer contest, a relative majority of viewers also ascribed better argumentation to Merkel than to Schulz (see Figure 4).

Which Chancellor Candidate Was More Competent and Had a Better Argument in the TV Duel?

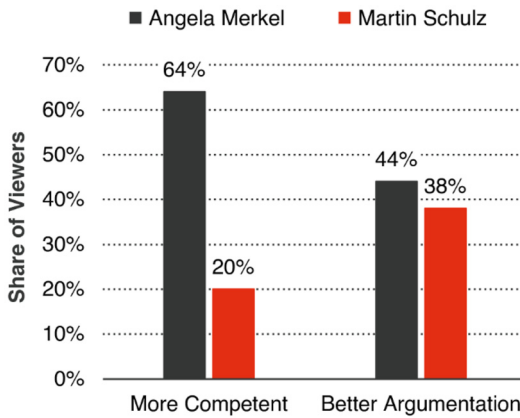


Figure 4: Competence/Argumentation ratings of the two chancellor candidates after the TV debate by share of viewers. Source: Author's figure based on ARD and Infratest dimap (2017).

These findings provide an indication that it is not gender per se which hinders women from reaching the most powerful political office in Germany. Quite the contrary, once a woman has been credited with political adulthood, she might even outperform potential male counterparts on measures of competence and argumentation. The fact that Merkel had been recognized as a political adult for many years does not mean that Schulz had not. After all, he was already an experienced and older politician in 2017. Instead, it is more plausible that Merkel and Schulz were both considered political adults, but Merkel was the more familiar face of the two, thereby putting her at an advantage in this two-way contest. A comparison of Schulz's and Baerbock's situation is difficult since he ran against an incumbent, while she ran against two candidates who had never been chancellor before. Yet, the gender comparison between Merkel and Baerbock is useful insofar as it showcases how political adulthood can come to an end once a woman has managed to pass the invisible barrier of reaching a high political office and accumulated sufficient experience in it. Getting reelected as an experienced woman leader in one's 50s or 60s is not necessarily easy, but doable. Getting first elected as a woman leader without substantial experience is a Mount Everest to climb.

This fate becomes obvious when considering the 2023 heads' of government median age based on 187 of the 193 UN member states overall and by gender. The former stood at 62 years, with most world leaders being in their 50s and 60s (Silver 2023). The latter amounted to 57 years for women and 62 years for men. The reason

why the median age for men leaders better approximated the median age for leaders of both genders is that only 13 of 193 governments were led by women in 2023 (Silver 2023). This in and of itself is strong evidence of how difficult it is for women of all ages to obtain the most powerful political offices in a country. Notwithstanding, there were only three men leaders and one woman leader younger than 40 in early 2023 (Silver 2023). Hence, the ratio of leaders aged 40 and younger to all leaders was significantly lower than the ratio of women leaders of all ages to all leaders. While more men than women were elected as heads of governments in their thirties, there are only few such people in general. In most countries, the leading politician is substantively older than the population's median age member (Silver 2023). This goes to show how deep the social structure of political adulthood runs. A lack in experience resembles a knock-out criterion for a politician, striving for a high political office in any country.

Taken together, I conclude that the political adulthood Baerbock encountered was a greater obstacle to her aspiration for the chancellery than the gender discrimination that accompanied it. Both same-aged and older voters did not ascribe the status of political adulthood to Baerbock. In their eyes, Baerbock was a legal adult with political rights, but a far cry from a political adult. The concept of political adulthood can therefore provide a plausible explanation for the conundrum that voters of Baerbock's age did not prefer Baerbock's Greens over Scholz's SPD and Laschet's CDU/CSU despite the strategic focus of her campaign on the material concerns of these voters.

5 From Gerontocratic Rule and Political Adulthood to Voting from 16?

The 2021 federal election laid bare the increasing gerontocratization of the German electorate and an underlying structure of political adulthood that left little room for a younger politician's quest for political rule. If an aging society, such as Germany's, were to acknowledge that the irreversible process of demographic aging tends to coincide with greater career prospects in politics for older people, then a discussion about what ought to change in order for younger people to have greater electoral success in Western politics could begin. Thus far, this conversation mainly centers on a mildly lower age requirement for becoming an elector, but stops short of thinking the relationship between the electors and the elected in lockstep. My novel concept of political adulthood and its two phases is an attempt to broaden our concept of youth and unveil the continuing interpersonal, structural, and institutional difficulties for young people that do not draw to a close once a political being turns 18 years. Indeed, they remain part and parcel of a younger person's political reality for many years in legal adulthood.

One popular proposal in Germany and other Western countries that purports to address the ever-waning political representation of young people is the policy of lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. The current traffic light coalition of the SPD, the Greens, and the Free Democrats (FDP) pledged in their coalition agreement to advocate for an amendment to Germany's constitution that would lower the national voting age from 18 to 16 (SPD, Bündnis 90/Grüne, and FDP 2021). Because a two-thirds majority in the German Bundestag is needed for such an amendment and the oppositional CDU/CSU made no move to support it, these efforts stalled. On the contrary, the three governing parties were able to lower the voting age to 16 for the upcoming European elections since it merely required a simple majority (Deutscher Bundestag 2022). Irrespective of the existing *mélange* of different voting ages at the regional, national, and European level, the substantive question whether a Vote 16 policy is worth pursuing deserves closer attention (see Leininger et al. 2023, for a study on the negative side effects of temporary disenfranchisement in Germany).

As a matter of principle, I opine that 16–17-year-olds should be allowed to vote at all possible levels since voting is a fundamental democratic right that ought to be as developmentally inclusive as possible and could only be questioned on grounds of capacity (Shapiro 1999). Because the criterion of developmental inclusion carries heavy weight and there is little indication to suggest that 16–17-year-olds lack the capacity to vote, it is without doubt that they should have the opportunity to exercise this basic political right (see Chan and Clayton 2006, for an opposing view; see Douglas 2016; Hart and Atkins 2011; Kurz 2023, for advocacies of lowering the voting age to 16; see Oosterhoff, Wray-Lake, and Hart 2022, for a review of past research on the voting capacity of 16-year-olds). However, I would challenge the dominant notion that this should come in the form of a Vote 16 policy.

There are at least three reasons that should make proponents of a wider franchise reconsider the desirability of such a policy. The first is that a voting age of 16 would do little to confront the growing gerontocratization of the German electorate and counter the young's lack of political representation in German politics. According to the SPD Federal Parliamentary Group (2022), more than one million individuals would become enfranchised as a result. That is little more than a drop in the ocean, considering that there were only nine million eligible voters younger than 30 and 24 million eligible voters aged 60 and older at the 2021 election (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022a). Hence, the demographic rebalancing effect of a Vote 16 policy would be minuscule at best.

The second reason is linked to the first and should give Vote 16 advocates further pause for thought. One important feature of a good policy is its orientation toward proximate goals (Shapiro 2019, 0:50:41–0:52:04). That is, when pushing toward a policy, one needs to think ahead and ponder where this policy could leave the polity in the future. Given that it was more than 50 years ago under Willy Brandt when the

voting age was last lowered from 21 to 18, going all in on lowering the voting age to 16 at present would likely make it more difficult to achieve a voting age of 12 or lower in the medium- to long-term future. This, however, would be problematic insofar as the aging of Germany's electorate will get worse before it gets better. Moreover, the propensity of older voters to vote for older candidates is likely to become more salient the older the electorate gets. It might therefore be more promising to wait for the worsening impact of Germany's gerontocratization in the coming years and then pursue a more radical policy to counter it. Knowing that the two youngest age groups overwhelmingly voted for the youngest chancellor candidate in 2021 should provide sufficient ground for assuming that the more youth are able to vote, the greater the chances of younger adult politicians to succeed.

By contrast, what could happen if a national Vote 16 policy were passed now is a longstanding political gridlock analogous to the status of Medicare in the United States. Since the United States started to provide general health insurance for older citizens at first, these citizens had little interest in its extension to the general public later on (Shapiro 2019, 0:57:27–1:00:09). That is because medical provisions resemble a divisible good which made older people fear that introducing "Medicare for All" would destabilize the whole system and deteriorate their existing medical care. The elderly do not have a vested interest in Medicare for All. Similarly, if 16–17-year-olds became enfranchised now by a national Vote 16 policy, the vast majority of them would likely lose their interest in joining any youth suffrage movement, subsequently advocating for 10-year-olds to receive the right to vote. The former's voice, however, is vital to the collective effort that the franchise be lowered further than to 16 only. The primary reason for this is that older citizens in Germany have little interest in dividing up voting power and thereby losing electoral influence, rendering it anything but a surprise that the older a person is, the less likely he or she is to support voting at 16 (see Der Spiegel 2021). It follows that the pursuit of a new voting age is likely to be at best a once-in-a-generation opportunity because opposing parties, such as the CDU/CSU, are unlikely to agree twice to an amendment of Germany's constitution. More worryingly, one can expect them to exploit their consent to any such constitutional change politically and use their onetime approval to shut down resurgent debates rhetorically with catchphrases along the lines of "Jetzt ist auch mal genug" (i.e. "Now is enough"). Hence, there is reasonable cause for concern that a Vote 16 policy might foreclose all subsequent conversations on a further lowering for the foreseeable future.

The third reason against a Vote 16 policy is a substantive one. Neither the SPD (2022) nor the Greens (2022) have managed to offer a conclusive argument in favor of a voting age at 16. I have already rebutted the Greens' line of reasoning that it would confront Germany's demographic change. Besides, the Green Party points out that the measure would pay heed to the young's political interest and activities in schools

and other civic organizations (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Bundestagsfraktion 2022). Although this thought is not flawed per se, Wahlström et al. (2019) found that 11–13-year-olds played a prominent role in Fridays for Future protests in Germany. Forging a link between political activity and voting from 16 does not take sufficient account of the reality that many young people are politically engaged far earlier. The SPD (2022) does a similar disservice to many under 16-year-olds by disregarding their presence at those protests before invoking such political acts as justification for a Vote 16 policy. In fact, the most plausible justification for voting at 16 stems from the FDP. They hold that there are 16–17-year-olds who are paying taxes and making social security contributions (FDP 2020). The FDP parliamentarian Konstantin Kuhle (2022) goes even further by arguing that if the voting age of 18 were to stay, this would exclude first-time voters at the ages of 19, 20, and 21, many of whom have completed their apprenticeship or Bachelor's degree and been taxpayers for a number of years. His party also suggests that the law would facilitate full contractual capability at 16 for those who have a job at that age (FDP 2020). The basic thrust of the FDP's reasoning is that 16–17-year-olds should be allowed to vote because they are just like adults. Albeit being well-justified and seemingly persuasive, this notion is deeply troublesome since it does not confront an adultist logic, but instead entrenches it. The Vote 16 policy as such seems better suited to bringing 16–17-year-olds closer to the status of legal adulthood than to countering the disenfranchised political adultism that they suffer from. All in all, there is ample reason to be alarmed that a Vote 16 policy would do more harm than good in the long run.

6 Conclusion and Research Outlook

This article has rested on a view of science that science moves forward by creating novel knowledge rather than by making existing knowledge more certain (cf. Wendt and Shapiro 2022). In this spirit, it sought to put on view that an abundance of statistical data can compound the search for plausible explanations of actual events, such as election outcomes. The more data are available, the more difficult it becomes to disentangle which of them are more relevant to the phenomenon at hand. It is inevitable that there will be competing descriptions of the same event and that the quality of a descriptive cut hinges on if other researchers find it plausible and whether they learned something from it that they did not know before and may use as a source of inspiration for future research. In this case, I have shown that a first look at the 2021 German federal election results in terms of growing gerontocratic rule is not sufficient. What is needed is a close second look

that unmasks the underlying political-adultist dynamics that cannot only explain why Scholz's SPD won the election, but also why Baerbock's Greens lost it. The novel concept of political adulthood opens up an avenue for quantitative and qualitative social scientists to devise measurable constructs of *disenfranchised* and *enfranchised* political adulthood for large-n studies and in-depth focus group discussions. An interesting follow-up research question may be whether more aging societies also tend to be more political adultist. Moreover, it would be fruitful to explore if approximate age corridors as to when politicians become considered political adults could be determined for particular polities. This paper can only serve as a first step in this direction. Much work remains to be done in political demography and beyond to refine conceptions of political adulthood or come up with different ones.

Another impetus of this piece was to bridge the ontological and methodological divide between political scientists and political theorists. The way by which it aimed to achieve that was to start with a real-world problem instead of a certain theoretical or methodical outlook. In doing so, it becomes possible to think empirical and theoretical questions together without falling into the trap of reproducing the social and political conditions of our time. Such an approach retains the empirical grounding of political science *and* allows for critical reappraisals of current policy proposals, such as a lowering of the voting age to 16. On the basis of this, I found that the Vote 16 policy would neither counter the increasing gerontocratization of the German electorate nor challenge the underlying political-adultist structures in German society. Quite the contrary, it would move 16–17-year-olds closer to becoming legal adults and pour water on the mills of the prevailing view that the voting age be tied to the status of legal adulthood. Moreover, it risks losing 16–17-year-olds as a vital voice in the future struggle for a more radical enfranchisement that could meaningfully counteract political adulthood and worsening gerontocratic rule. While there is a long road ahead, the concept of political adulthood gives voice to the interpersonal, structural, and institutional discrimination that young and younger people encounter as political beings and allows them to grow aware of the structural injustice they are suffering from. Once the knowledge of their underprivileged position has gained traction, the inconceivable may turn conceivable and I might no longer be one of a few, saying: If the 20th century was the century of the emancipation of women, then the 21st century ought to be the century of the emancipation of youth. Although today it seems that the wish is father to this thought, I shall draw hope from Emil J. Gumbel who wrote so elegantly in his book *Statistics of Extremes* in French: “Il est impossible que l'improbable n'arrive jamais.” (Gumbel 1960, p. 201) – “It is impossible that the improbable will never happen.”

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