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The “Grey Battleground” at the Next British General Election: *Quantifying the Inexorable Rise of the Grey Vote.*

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“Latham pitches for grey vote”. The Australian 30/9/04.
www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au

Abstract

Population ageing is transforming the age structure of the electorate in Britain. The pace of the age-shift in electoral politics is being accelerated by the widening gap in turnout rates between younger and older age groups. However, there is a dearth of research that translates these changes into electoral demography, which would then allow consideration of the campaigning implications. This paper presents results from demographic modelling that applies and projects ahead to 2009 the demographic changes to parliamentary seats. The age breakdown of turnout is projected based on two different assumptions. Firstly, that the age gap in turnout remains constant at 2005 levels, and secondly, that current trends continue and the age gap widens. Results show that older voters are likely to represent a majority of votes cast in a significant number of seats in future elections. The paper also discusses the party campaigns for the grey vote in 2005, and the apparent emergence, by the next election, of a new “grey battleground” between the Labour and Conservative parties.

Background

Demographic changes are transforming the age structure of our society, Britain will soon possess an age profile never seen before in its history. According to the 2001 Census, for the first time ever, there are more people aged over 60 than there are children aged under 16. The age profile of the country is ageing, and as it does so does the electoral register. From the headline numbers the impact is apparent, the retired already account for roughly one fifth of eligible voters in the UK. Yet, it is only when the higher propensity for older voters to vote is taken into account that it becomes fully apparent the scale of the age shift in British electoral politics.

The growing ranks of the retired have been apparent for some years and the changing age profile is seemingly bound to influence the conduct of politics, however, it has been the recent, and dramatic, drops in turnout amongst younger age groups which has served to both accelerate and exaggerate the impact of population ageing. Data from the British Election Study (Clarke et al.2004) suggests the stark differences in voter turnout between age groups was not a factor until after the 1992 general election. Younger age groups in the 1970s showed lower turnout rates, but in subsequent elections their turnout increased bringing them into line with the wider electorate. But, this trend seems to have been broken in the 1990s, with voters that joined the electorate in this period holding onto their lower propensities to vote, and are considerably more susceptible to forces that are working to suppress electoral turnout.

A natural assumption to make might have been that the historically low turnout rates for first-time voters in 2001 would increase in 2005 in line with the increase in overall turnout, yet it appears turnout rates for voters aged 18-24 dropped further in 2005, and turnout in the 25-34 age band stood still (Phelps 2005). This raises the prospect that these cohorts will always have participation rates below those of previous generations. Locking in, and accelerating, the age transition of the electoral market.

These trends in turnout rates, and other measures of civic participation, demonstrate how age can be a vitally important variable in understanding and predicting voter behaviour. The geographical distribution of the changing age profile, of course, holds a particular resonance for the UK's First Past the Post voting system, and its non-proportional outcomes. However, there is a research gap in translating the age shift in society into electoral demographics. This paper is an attempt to partially fill that gap.

Method

The data used in this paper is based upon research conducted by the author which utilises statistics on electoral behaviour and population changes to estimate the age breakdown of turnout across constituencies and regions for current and future elections.

Projections of population change are applied to parliamentary constituencies. Current turnout rates for different age groups were then applied to the electorates for possible general election dates in the future. This paper focuses on analysis of 2005 and projections for 2009.

The base data for the model is the 2001 Census population figures for Westminster constituencies. It utilises sub-national future population projections produced by the Office for National Statistics, (and the General Register Office for Scotland, the Statistical Directorate of the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) to estimate the future age profile of the electorate for each region and constituency. The model currently runs on the 2005 parliamentary boundaries.

In the UK there is no official data for turnout by age. One widely accepted estimate for turnout by age is the one produced by MORI (2005) through their Aggregate Analysis of the election. These figures have been used by the Electoral Commission. Based on these estimates the model uses these turnout rates for the 2005 election, and for the first turnout scenario i.e. age differences in turnout remain the same as 2005:

Scenario One: The Age Gap Remains Constant at 2005 Levels. Estimated Turnout by Age in the 2005 General Election.

18-24	37%
25-34	49%
35-44	61%
45-54	65%
55-64	71%
65+	75%

The model also tests a second turnout scenario to see how the results might change if the age gap in turnout rates were to continue as a trend, and widen further. For this scenario it is assumed that middle and older age groups retain their propensities to vote, but the younger age groups drop further. The percentage turnout rates in this scenario are as follows:

Scenario Two: The Age Gap in Turnout Widens Further Post-2005.

18-24	32%	(-5%)
25-34	44%	(-5%)
35-44	56%	(-5%)
45-54	65%	(unchanged)
55-64	71%	(unchanged)
65+	75%	(unchanged)

The size of the eligible electorate is made through the simple calculation and inclusion of all people aged 18 or over. The estimates for the 2005 general election are also based on the 2001 data. For data on the size of future electorates i.e from 2009 onwards – at national level GAD and the General Register Office for Scotland projections are used.

For Westminster constituencies in England post-2005, the baseline Census data is modified according to the sub-national population projections produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). As the ONS only produces these projections by local authority units, the percentage change in each age band was calculated and applied to the geographically corresponding constituencies. Where a constituency boundary overlapped with more than one local authority, the percentage change in each age band was weighted according to the proportion each constituency was co-terminus with each local authority. For constituencies in Wales projections produced by the Statistical Directorate of the National Assembly for Wales were used.

For constituency projections, the model runs on the 2005 parliamentary boundaries. The Boundary Commission recommendations for changes in the future have not at this stage be incorporated into the model. Looking beyond the period in question, the overall population of the country is growing, so the size of the average population per seat rises to higher levels. It may be the case that at some point in the future parliament will respond to the increasing size of the electorate, these future changes cannot be second guessed, but it is a methodological issue worth noting.

The projections as they stand have not taken into account differing rates of electoral registration, by age or by type of constituency. The Electoral Commission (2005) has produced data on the extent of non-registration in Britain. This work estimates 16% of people aged 18-24 are not on the electoral register, in contrast, only 2% of people aged over 65, were not on the register. It is clear that if the electoral registration rates were to be incorporated into the projections – a serious consideration for future work - the age gap in the results would widen further.

The Grey Vote in 2005

Aside from the result, the dominant story of the 2005 campaign was the near repetition of the historically low turnout of the previous election in 2001 (59.4%). The 2005 campaign only saw a marginal improvement with turnout rising to 61.3%. Common to both the 2001 and 2005 elections has been the wide differences in turnout rates between younger and older voters. These differences have been long established, but at much smaller margins, until the mid-1990s where a widening age gap in participation rates began to be identified.

By using MORI’s aggregate analysis of elections polls (Table One), it can be seen that in the 2005 election the gap in turnout between the youngest and oldest age groups widened further:

Table One. UK General Election 2005: Mori Final Aggregate Analysis. (MORI 2005)
Turnout Base: “Absolutely certain to vote” (n=10,986)

Age	Turnout 2005	Change Since 2001
All	61%	+2%
18–24	37%	–2%
25–34	49%	+3%
35–44	61%	+2%
45–54	65%	0
55–64	71%	+2%
65+	75%	+5%

As already described in the method section of this paper, this aggregate analysis of turnout by age was used as the basis for estimating the age profile of turnout at national, regional and constituency levels. Using these figures of turnout by age, the dataset estimates (Table Two) that the age breakdown of turnout at the last general election, for the British mainland, was as follows.

Table Two: The estimated breakdown of turnout at the 2005 General Election by Age Group for Britain (Not Including NI)

18–24	6.6%
25–34	14.7%
35–44	19.3%
45–54	18.2%
55–64	15.9%
65+	25.3%

In 2005 “Pensioners”, for the first time, accounted, for more than one than every 4 votes cast in the last general election. There are now more votes cast by voters aged over 65 than there are cast by voters aged under 35. In terms of pure weight of numbers, pensioners are now the most significant age group in the British electorate.

Much of the analysis in this paper refers to the *Grey Vote*. The definition used in this report for the Grey Vote is all voters aged 55 and over. The justification for the focus on this category is that work on age and voter behaviour often focuses on the post-state-retirement electorate, entirely justified and understandable considering the profound social and economic implications of retirement. However, ageing, and ageing issues do not begin to effect voters the day after retirement. They are, arguably, of life-long concern, however, in the final decade approaching state retirement age these issues become increasingly pertinent to the concerns and standard of living for voters. For voters aged over 55, ageing issues such as retirement income, age discrimination, the quality of health services, long-term care (particularly for their older parents and relatives) become increasingly important. They themselves may not accept an “old”

identity, but others will allocate one to them – and perhaps the age-related taunting of Liberal Democrat leader, Menzies Campbell, and even the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, are topical examples.

The “pensioner” vote now accounts for more than a quarter of turnout, the Grey Vote accounts for a hefty 41.2% of the 2005 turnout in Britain. Furthermore, as will be seen later in this paper, in a growing number of constituencies the Grey Vote now accounts for the majority votes cast on polling day.

The data for parliamentary constituencies shows wide local and regional variations within the national picture. Table Three shows the 40 seats with the highest proportion of turnout comprised of voters aged 65 and over. While the pensioner vote at the national level is just over 25% in some southern coastal constituencies in 2005 it had risen to over 40%. Indeed, in 18 seats over a third of votes cast came from the over 65s.

The post-2005 electoral geography shows the Conservative Party performing well amongst the “oldest” constituencies. However, it worth noting that, prior to 2005 half of the 11th to 40th “oldest” seats were held by other parties.

Table Three: The 40 Constituencies in Britain with the highest estimated proportion of turnout at the 2005 General Election comprised of voters aged 65 and over.

Constituency	2005 Status	65+ Vote	Region
1 Christchurch	Conservative Hold	41.5	South West
2 East Devon	Conservative Hold	40.6	South West
3 Harwich	Conservative gain from Labour	40.4	East
4 Worthing West	Conservative Hold	40.1	South East
5 Bexhill & Battle	Conservative Hold	39.9	South East
6 New Forest West	Conservative Hold	39.2	South East
7 Eastbourne	Conservative Hold	37.4	South East
8 North Norfolk	Lib Dem Hold	36.1	East
9 Bognor Regis & Littlehampton	Conservative Hold	35.9	South East
10 West Dorset	Conservative Hold	35.8	South West
11 Lewes	Lib Dem Hold	35.3	South East
12 North Thanet	Conservative Hold	34.6	South East
13 Chichester	Conservative Hold	34.4	South East
14 Clwyd West	Conservative gain from Labour	33.8	Wales
15 Totnes	Conservative Hold	33.7	South West
16 Suffolk Coastal	Conservative Hold	33.6	East
17 Torbay	Lib Dem Hold	33.6	South West
18 Blackpool North & Fleetwood	Labour Hold	33.4	North West
19 Poole	Conservative Hold	33.2	South West
20 Isle of Wight	Conservative Hold	33.1	South East
21 Teignbridge	Lib Dem Hold	33.0	South West
22 Southport	Lib Dem Hold	32.8	North West
23 Bournemouth West	Conservative Hold	32.8	South West
24 Louth & Horncastle	Conservative Hold	32.6	East Midlands
25 Meirionnydd Nant Conwy	PC Hold	31.9	Wales

26 North West Norfolk	Conservative Hold	31.9	East
27 Fylde	Conservative Hold	31.8	North West
28 East Worthing & Shoreham	Conservative Hold	31.7	South East
29 South Thanet	Labour Hold	31.7	South East
30 Vale of Clwyd	Labour Hold	31.4	Wales
31 Waveney	Labour Hold	31.4	East
32 Ryedale	Conservative Hold	31.2	Yorks and Humber
33 Westmorland & Lonsdale	Lib Dem gain from Conservative	31.2	North West
34 Brecon & Radnorshire	Lib Dem Hold	31.2	Wales
35 Truro & St. Austell	Lib Dem Hold	31.1	South West
36 Conwy	Labour Hold	31.1	Wales
37 West Worcestershire	Conservative Hold	31.0	West Midlands
38 Scarborough & Whitby	Conservative gain from Labour	30.9	Yorks and Humber
39 North Dorset	Conservative Hold	30.9	South West
40 South Dorset	Labour Hold	30.8	South West

When parliamentary constituencies were ranked by the proportion of votes cast by people aged over 55 – the Grey Vote – the list was similar to the ranking by voters aged 65+. However, it is intriguing to note (Table Four) that in 2005 it was estimated that in 24 seats over half the turnout come from the Grey Vote. These “*Grey Majority*” seats provide an intriguing new phenomenon, where the numerical status of older voters extends beyond their already significant status to comprise a physical majority of votes in the ballot box on polling day. The results also showed that 405 seats had a Grey Vote of 40% or more. At the other end of the age scale there were 55 seats, predominantly from the major urban conurbations, with less than a third of turnout coming from the Grey Vote

Table Four: The 24 Constituencies in Britain with the highest estimated proportion of turnout at the 2005 General Election comprised of voters aged 55 and over.

Constituency	Grey Vote in 2005
1 Christchurch	59.3
2 East Devon	58.5
3 Harwich	57.9
4 Bexhill & Battle	57.1
5 New Forest West	56.8
6 North Norfolk	55.2
7 Worthing West	55.2
8 West Dorset	53.7
9 Eastbourne	52.6
10 Louth & Horncastle	52.4
11 Lewes	52.4
12 Totnes	52.4
13 Bognor Regis & Littlehampton	52.2
14 Chichester	51.7
15 Isle of Wight	51.6
16 Clwyd West	51.6

17 Meirionnydd Nant Conwy	51.5
18 North Thanet	50.9
19 Torbay	50.9
20 Blackpool North & Fleetwood	50.8
21 Suffolk Coastal	50.7
22 Teignbridge	50.5
23 Ryedale	50.1
24 North West Norfolk	50.1

The Campaign in 2005

The data shows a further *greying* of the electorate at the 2005 election, but in what ways had these changes in the electoral *market* affected the conduct of the campaign?

In the period leading up to the campaign commentators across the national print media were already convinced of the electoral significance of the grey vote. Jean Eaglesham (2005) of the Financial Times was forecasting “*Between now and the election pensioners will be wooed by politicians of all hues as never before*”. Was this to be the UK’s first “grey election”, or was there a danger that the commentariat were racing ahead of reality on the ground?

From the outset, the opposition parties made clear attempts to position themselves carefully on the key ageing issues. Early on in the campaign the Conservative Party leader, Michael Howard, delivered a keynote speech on “pensioner” issues in Northampton. This was quickly followed by Conservative adverts in Sunday newspapers which featured hand written statements by Michael Howard under the headline “*I Believe That Britain’s Pensioners Deserve Better*”, with a carefully targeted swipe at the *young Britain* New Labour re-branding the advert stated “*The older generations may have been air-brushed out of Mr Blair’s Britain, but I will stand up for them.*”

The speech and press adverts were co-ordinated with a subsequent release of the Conservative’s “older people manifesto”. The policy content of the manifesto included a pledge to reinstate the link between the state pension and earnings – reversing a totemic Conservative policy from the 1980s. The party also offered to introduce a 50% cut in Council Tax bills for pensioner households and in doing so attempted to capitalise on the bad feeling that was apparent among many older voters on fixed incomes that were rising at a slower rate than the Council Tax.

The Liberal Democrats launched their “*Mini-Manifesto for Older People*” on March 10 which also offered Council Tax inducements, free personal care, and increases in the value of the state pension, although only people aged over 75 would receive significant increases.

Labour’s electoral appeal adjustments was based upon policy positions put in place well before the campaign, or that had been neutralised and put on the “to do” list for the next parliamentary term. Labour had attempted to address the problems of the first parliamentary term by allocating significant additional resources into means tested

mechanisms, such as the Pension Credit, for delivering retirement income. Other difficult issues, such as the decision on compulsory occupational pension savings, and reforms to address gender inequalities within the UK pension system had been farmed out into policy reviews. A damaging strike by public sector unions on the issue of retirement ages, planned to start during the campaign, was averted by some delicate negotiations.

The Budget in March 2005 was used to directly respond to the campaigning initiatives launched by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats on the issue of Council Tax. Clearly feeling the issue may be damaging the Government electorally amongst older votes - amongst a series of “good news” announcements from Chancellor Gordon Brown - was the inclusion of a one-off £200 council tax refund for pensioners.

The election of 2005 showed intriguing qualitative shifts in the way ageing issues were deployed by protagonists within the campaign. The main opposition made several attempts to set the agenda by running on ageing issues. Following the launch of their older people manifesto, the Conservatives returned to ageing issues at the beginning of April by issuing press statements claiming Labour would be forced to solve the “pensions crisis” by increasing direct taxes. They then again returned to the subject of pensions and specifically targeted Gordon Brown’s record on pensions policy, this was followed up the following day with two different press conferences on pensions. The Liberal Democrats attempted to use the issue of long-term care by highlighting their role in the Executive of the Scottish Parliament, in the introduction of free personal care. They also used the last Friday of the campaign to promote policies on a citizens pension, free long term care and the replacement of Council Tax with a local income tax.

In Labour’s own publications, such as their older people manifesto “*new opportunities for later life*” they stressed the importance of the economy in providing security in retirement. On the occasion where Labour proactively pushed ageing issues, they were typically framed as issues of general concern, or in the context of reforms which would benefit voters not segmented on the basis of being older. The best example of this, is where Labour’s news managers briefed on pension reforms, such as discussions on making it easier to qualify for a full state pension, as an issue of primary concern to younger women, resulting in headlines such as “*Blair’s pension offer to mothers*” (Winnett 2005). This still links ageing issues to voters and their life stages, but in a way that avoids portraying pensions as solely as pensioner issue.

In terms of the final result, analysis (Table Five) suggests Labour’s vote share amongst voters aged 65+ has fallen from 41% in 1997 to 35% in 2005, a considerable decline, but also in line with Labour’s fall in national vote share from 44% to 36%. While the Conservative Party appear to have bounced back from polling 36% of voters aged 65+ in 1997 to winning 41% of the vote in 2005. However, the Liberal Democrats, despite having increased their national vote share from 17% in 1997 to 23% in 2005, appear to have only improved their standing amongst voters 65+ by 1% to 18%. In terms of voter churn, on the basis of these figures, Labour’s vote share has been more vulnerable to the Liberal Democrats amongst younger voters, but with the Conservatives doing better at Labour’s expense with older voters. However, it should also be noted that Labour now appears to gain votes more evenly across all age groups.

Table Five UK General Election 2005: Mori Final Aggregate Analysis. (MORI 2005)
Turnout Base: "Absolutely certain to vote" (n=10,986)

Age	Vote 2005				Change Since 2001			Turnout 2005
	Con	Lab	LD	Other	Con	Lab	LD	
All	33%	36%	23%	8%	0	-6	+4	61%
18-24	28%	38%	26%	8%	+1	-3	+2	37%
25-34	25%	38%	27%	10%	+1	-13	+8	49%
35-44	27%	41%	23%	9%	-1	-4	+4	61%
45-54	31%	35%	25%	9%	-1	-6	+5	65%
55-64	39%	31%	22%	8%	0	-6	+5	71%
65+	41%	35%	18%	6%	1	-4	+1	75%

Election campaigning targeted at older voters was clearly an important strand of the overall campaign in 2005, and would appear to be higher profile than previous campaigns. However, in many ways, the perception of Grey Power is far ahead of the reality. The parties tend to "hit and run" on ageing issues, rather than place them at the heart of their branding. So, what about next time around, will the continued ageing of the electorate necessitate a shift in campaign strategies?

Election 2009: The First "Grey" Election?

As would be expected, demographic data shows a further ageing of the electorate in the period from 2005 to - a highly possible date for the next general election - 2009. The increase in the proportion of older voters is slightly offset by a larger than normal intake of first time voters. But, none the less, another significant ageing of the electorate is taking place.

If the trend for a widening gap in turnout were arrested, and the age-turnout differential remained constant in 2009 at 2005 levels, the data estimates a small incremental increase in the size of the "pensioner" vote (+0.4%). But, for the Grey Vote, all voters aged over 55 there is a much larger 2.2% increase. This is partially explained by a section of baby boomers approaching their imminent retirement. (Table Six)

In terms of net numbers, the data estimates, if voters aged over 55 maintain the 2005 turnout rate, there will be an *additional* 1.3 million votes cast by Grey Voters in a 2009 election in comparison to 2005. Over ½ a million of these votes will be "new pensioners".

If 2009 were to see a further widening of the age gap in turnout, as outlined in the method section, then the greying of the electorate becomes strikingly more pronounced, with an estimated 3.9% increase in the size of the Grey Vote. (Table Six)

Table Six: Estimated age breakdown of turnout in a 2009 general election. First scenario assumes turnout rates by age group remain unchanged from 2005. The second scenario assumes the age gap will widen further.

Britain (Not Inc NI)	2009 Turnout % Age Gap Remains Constant (Change from 2005)	2009 Turnout % Age Gap Widens Scenario (Change from 2005)
Total 18-24	7.1 (+0.5%)	6.4 (-0.2%)
Total 25-34	12.7 (-2.0%)	11.8 (-2.9%)
Total 35-44	18.5 (-0.8%)	17.7 (-1.6%)
Total 45-54	18.3 (-0.1%)	19.1 (+0.9%)
Total 55-64	17.7 (+1.8%)	18.4 (+2.5%)
Total 65+	25.7 (+0.4%)	26.7 (+1.4%)
Total 55+	43.4 (+2.2%)	45.1% (+3.9%)

In the section on the 2005 election it was noted that 24 seats were estimated to have passed the landmark of having over 50% of the turnout made up of Grey Voters. If the age gap were to merely remain constant at 2005 levels, there will be a step change with 79 seats in a 2009 election having at least half the votes cast coming from Grey Voters. However, if current trends continue and the age gap widens, then the change is truly dramatic, from 24 seats in 2005, in 2009 there be 126 Grey Majority seats - where the Grey Vote will account for more than half of the votes cast. appendix

Appendix One shows that the very “oldest” seats are currently more likely to be represented by the Conservative Party. However, Table Seven shows the rapid age transformation of constituencies in regions away from the south coasts of England. Half of the ten seats with the largest projected rises in the size of the Grey Vote are currently Conservative held. It is also worth noting some of the seats that are ageing the quickest are located in North East or the Midlands.

Table Seven: The 10 seats estimated to have the fastest growing Grey Votes in the period 2005-2009.

Constituency	2005 Status	Rise in Grey Vote from 2005 to 2009. Age Gap Constant.	Rise in Grey Vote from 2005 to 2009. Age Gap Widens
Castle Point	Conservative Hold	6.8	8.4
Redditch South	Labour Hold	6.7	8.3
Staffordshire	Conservative Hold	6.8	8.3
Tamworth	Labour Hold	6.4	8.1
Blyth Valley	Labour Hold	6.4	8.0
Wyre Forest	Others Hold	6.2	7.9
Berwick Upon Tweed	Lib Dem Hold	6.3	7.7
Torridge & West Devon	Conservative gain from Lib Dem	6.1	7.5
Maldon & East			
Chelmsford	Conservative Hold	5.9	7.4
Hexham	Conservative Hold	6.0	7.3

The Labour-Conservative Grey Battleground

The Conservatives made little progress amongst the Grey Vote in 2005. Their vote share remained unchanged amongst the baby boomers (55-64 age group), and they only managed to increase vote share by 1% amongst voters aged 65+. The Liberal Democrats added 4% to their national vote share, but only improved by 1% amongst voters aged 65+. (Table Five)

However, one consequence of the 2005 election is that Labour, while it performed relatively well, or relatively less badly, with the pensioner vote, in that their vote share fell by a smaller degree than their average national loss, there are now a number of marginal seats where Labour would be vulnerable to further swings against them from Grey Voters. There are 27 seats which look of particular strategic interest in this regard. All of them were Labour gains in the landslide of 1997, and in all of them, it is the Conservatives who are challenging in second place.

Firstly, there are 12 ultra marginal seats i.e. majorities from 2005 of less than 5%, where the estimated Grey Vote under the scenario of the age gap widening, will be higher than 46% of turnout (Table Eight). In this scenario four seats are very close to having half of turnout comprised of Grey Voters, and in two, it is estimated there will be a Grey Majority:

Table Eight: Labour Held Seats from the 2005 General Election with Majorities of less than 5%, with estimated Grey Votes of over 46% under scenario where age gap in turnout widens. All gained by Labour in 1997. All with Conservatives in second place.

Ultra Marginal Majorities of Les than 5% and with over 46% GV	Grey Vote. Age Gap Widens.	Region	Swing in 2005
		West	4.3% Lab to Con
Stourbridge	46.2	Midlands	3.6% Lab to Con
Broxtowe	46.3	Midlands	6.7% Lab to Con
City of Chester	47.5	North West	3.8% Lab to Con
Wansdyke	47.6	South West	1.9% Lab to Con
South Ribble	47.9	North West	3.9% Lab to Con
High Peak	48.1	Midlands	3.7% Lab to Con
Wirral West	49.2	North West	3.4% Lab to Con
Stafford	49.2	Midlands	4.3% Lab to Con
Stroud	49.3	South West	2.9% Lab to Con
Hastings & Rye	49.8	South East	1.5% Lab to Con
South Thanet	53.1	South East	1.7% Con to Lab
South Dorset	54.3	South West	

There are also 10 Labour seats that are fairly marginal, majority between 5 and 10%, but have considerable estimated Grey Votes of 48% or over in 2009. These are

Gedling	48.2
Cleethorpes	49.1
Tynemouth	49.5
Brigg & Goole	50.7
Staffordshire Moorlands	50.7
Conwy	50.9
Dumfries and Galloway	51.1
Carmarthen West & South Pembrokeshire	51.2
Wirral South	52.2
Great Yarmouth	53.7

Finally, there are five Labour held seats: Dover; Morecambe & Lunesdale; Vale of Clwyd; Blackpool North & Fleetwood; and Waveney which although fairly safe with majorities between 10 and 15%, all have estimated Grey Votes in 2009 of over 50%, and as such will be more vulnerable to significant swings amongst this age group.

The data reveals variations in the changing age profile of the regions (Table Nine). In 2009, all regions with the exception of London are estimated to have a larger Grey Vote than the national figure. The South West, with a projected Grey Vote of 48.2%, stands out as the earliest to experience the transition to the kind of age structure which is likely to be the norm in much of the country in elections in 10 to 15 years time.

Indeed, under Scenario Two the Grey Vote in the South West is estimated to rise to 49.9% of votes cast in 2009, within a hair's breadth of attaining status of having the majority votes cast by older voters – a *Grey Majority*.

Table Nine: The estimated proportion of turnout by indicated age groups, by region in the 2005 election and an election in 2009 assuming the age gap in turnout remains constant, and if they age gap widens further.

	2005 Turnout %	2009 Turnout %	2009 Turnout % (Age Gap Widens)
Scotland			
Total 65+	24.9	26.0	27.0
Total 55+	41.0	44.1	45.7
Wales			
Total 65+	27.3	28.0	29.0
Total 55+	44.2	47.0	48.6
North East			
Total 65+	26.0	26.7	27.7
Total 55+	42.1	45.3	46.9
North West			
Total 65+	25.5	25.9	26.9
Total 55+	41.8	43.9	45.6
Yorkshire & Humber			
Total 65+	25.6	26.0	27.0
Total 55+	41.7	43.9	45.6
East Midlands			

Total 65+	25.4	26.2	27.2
Total 55+	41.8	44.7	46.4
West Midlands			
Total 65+	25.5	26.4	27.4
Total 55+	42.1	44.2	45.9
East			
Total 65+	25.9	26.9	27.9
Total 55+	42.1	45.1	46.8
London			
Total 65+	20.4	18.7	19.7
Total 50+	33.6	32.5	34.2
South East			
Total 65+	25.7	26.3	27.3
Total 55+	41.7	44.2	45.8
South West			
Total 65+	28.6	29.3	30.3
Total 55+	45.4	48.2	49.9

Conclusion - Implications for Campaigning

The process of population ageing in Britain is transformative in nature. The next general election will take place in the middle of the age transformation of the electoral “market”. Prior to the transition older people, in many ways, were an politically excluded sub-section of the electorate. Post-transition older people will represent a majority of voters in the vast majority of parliamentary constituencies.

So far, only a minority of seats have the age structure that will be typical of most seats in the future. The age profile of seats such as Torbay and Scarborough in 2005, by 2025, will be replicated in seats in places such as Bury, Wolverhampton, Huddersfield and Stoke-on-Trent. In 2025 Labour heartland seats in coalfield communities such as Easington, will have electorates “older” than Torbay is today (Author’s calculation).

However, profound as these changes are, there is a relative lack of research and discussion of the political geography of the age transformation and how this will alter the electoral calibrations between the competing parties. The initial wave of seats to experience a majority of older voters have tended to have in common their location in the coastal areas of southern England and a tendency to send Conservative MPs to Westminster. In recent elections the “oldest” seats have tended to be, with some notable exceptions such as Harwich, Conservative-Liberal Democrat battlegrounds. When the next general election comes around this model of electoral demographics estimates we will see the birth of a new “grey battleground” between the Labour Party and the Conservatives. There is a collection of seats held by Labour in 2005, which were first won in the landslide of 1997, that have, or will be close to having, a majority of votes cast by Grey Voters, where the Conservatives are the nearest challengers. If the Labour Party and the Conservative Party continue to remain the two main parties, in terms of winning elections and forming governments, further consideration is needed of the importance of the emerging “grey battleground” between them.

Another cluster of emerging grey seats to come from the data are to be found in Scotland and Wales. Both these countries are predicted to age at a faster rate than

England. Many of these Celtic grey seats, such as Angus, Banff and Buchan and Meirionnydd Nant Conwy, have strong PC/SNP votes

It is clear, and not surprising, to note that if the age gap in turnout widens then the proportion of turnout comprised of older voters is higher. Yet, in terms of long term trends, a widening age gap does not change the final outcome – the age transformation – it simply accelerates the process. However, it is important to note that the impact of the further growth of the Grey Vote in 2009 is partially offset by a large increase in the number of eligible first-time voters– an additional 700,000 potential young voters in England and Wales.

The changing age structure is pushing the parties towards a more sophisticated use of age in segmenting the electorate in search for competitive advantages over their opponents. But, adopting this approach is not a guarantee of electoral success, and political strategists are faced with the challenge of executing a research strategy that robustly defines target consumers, and the elements of the policies and values they offer, that matter to them, as well as evolving the use of language which resonates with target voters. (Sparrow & Turner 2001)

Age, as we know from differences in civic participation rates is clearly an important determinant of political behaviour, but, it is an increasingly unsatisfactory variable in understanding the needs or values of any given voter. Someone in their 70s could be working full time and be fit and healthy, another person in their early 50s could be living with a long term chronic condition and forced out of the labour market. Only when age is combined with other social-economic variables can it be an effective component in electoral strategies. Demographic, psychographic and life cycle variables can be, and have been, combined in a multitude of ways in marketing research and strategy. A good example is the Mosaic tool for segmentation that has been used by the Labour Party, it classifies all consumers in the UK into 61 types aggregated into 11 groups. Older types include classifications such as “Low Income Elderly” and “Small Town Seniors”.

Within marketing there has also been the growing use of combining variables to develop the concept of “generations”, such as the baby boomers or generations X or Y - each believed to possess unique ideas about the lifestyles to which it aspires. However, for any political strategist there is a bottom line to this whole process – will any given sub-group actually respond to alterations in policy and tailored communications? The ultimate measure for judging the response will be changes in voting behaviour. It is within this rationale that historically a lower campaigning priority has been given to older voters, despite the apparent growth in this “sector” of the political market. However, in the election of 2005 the main British parties strove, with varying degrees of sophistication and success, to benefit from the demographic age shift in the UK electorate.

When asked in surveys, older voters consistently rate issues such as the NHS and pensions as the most important in deciding how to vote. However, there is only limited evidence in the recent past that the vote switching that has taken place has been directly attributable to these issues. However, if we are to accept that there is at least *some* responsiveness, then by sheer weight of additional numbers, these issues will become increasingly important in influencing electoral outcomes. But, if any issue, current or as

yet unforeseen, become valence issues – with widespread agreement amongst Grey Voters that they are important, but divergence of opinions of which party/ies are best placed to manage these issues – then they are likely to be key determinants in sorting out the electoral winners and losers.

The demographics have changed. If quantitative changes follow in parties' campaign strategies, their branding, and the policy product they offer, and if responsiveness to these changes can be measured, then, election 2009, may well prove to be the first true grey election.

Ends

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Appendix One: The 126 parliamentary constituencies which will be estimated to have a majority of votes cast at a 2009 general election by voters aged 55+, under the scenario that the age gap in turnout widens further.

Constituency	2005 Result	Region	Grey Vote 2009 Age Gap Remains Constant	Grey Vote 2009 Age Gap Widens
East Devon	Conservative Hold	South West	61.9	63.3
Christchurch	Conservative Hold	South West	61.4	62.7
Harwich	Labour	East	60.7	62.2
New Forest West	Conservative Hold	South East	60.7	62.0
Bexhill & Battle	Conservative Hold	South East	60.0	61.3
North Norfolk	Lib Dem Hold	East	59.8	61.2
West Dorset	Conservative Hold	South West	58.1	59.5
Totnes	Conservative Hold	South West	57.8	59.1
Louth & Horncastle	Conservative Hold	East	57.3	58.7
Worthing West	Conservative Hold	Midlands	57.3	58.7
Suffolk Coastal	Conservative Hold	South East	55.7	57.3
Torrington & West Devon	Conservative gain from Lib Dem	East	55.6	57.1
Westmorland & Lonsdale	Lib Dem gain from Conservative	South West	55.4	56.8
Lewes	Lib Dem Hold	North West	55.2	56.7
Bognor Regis & Littlehampton	Conservative Hold	South East	55.1	56.6
North East Fife	Lib Dem Hold	Scotland	54.7	56.4
Chichester	Conservative Hold	South East	54.4	56.1
Teignbridge	Lib Dem Hold	South East	54.6	56.1
Ryedale	Conservative Hold	South West	54.5	56.0
Ludlow	Conservative gain from Lib Dem	Yorks and Humber	54.2	55.7
North West Norfolk	Lib Dem	West	54.1	55.6
Norfolk	Conservative Hold	Midlands	54.1	55.6
Eastbourne	Conservative Hold	East	54.1	55.6
Berwick Upon Tweed	Conservative Hold	South East	53.8	55.5
Boston & Skegness	Lib Dem Hold	North East	53.8	55.2
Isle of Wight	Conservative Hold	East	53.8	55.2
Scarborough & Whitby	Conservative gain from Labour	Midlands	53.6	55.2
Leominster	Conservative Hold	South East	53.6	55.2
Torbay	Lib Dem Hold	South East	53.6	55.2
East Yorkshire	Conservative Hold	Yorks and Humber	53.6	55.1
Poole	Conservative Hold	West	53.6	55.1
Clwyd West	Conservative gain from Labour	Midlands	53.6	55.1
Meirionnydd	Labour	South West	53.4	55.1
Nant Conwy	Conservative Hold	Yorks and Humber	53.4	55.1
West	PC Hold	South West	53.4	55.1
	Conservative Hold	Yorks and Humber	53.5	55.0
	Conservative Hold	South West	53.4	55.0
	Conservative gain from Labour	South West	53.4	55.0
	Labour	South West	53.4	55.0
	Labour	Wales	53.4	54.9
	PC Hold	Wales	53.2	54.8
	Conservative Hold	West	53.1	54.7

Worcestershire		Midlands		
St.Ives	Lib Dem Hold	South West	53.2	54.7
Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath	Labour Hold	Scotland	53.1	54.7
Waveney	Labour Hold	East	52.9	54.5
North Devon	Lib Dem Hold	South West	53.0	54.5
North Dorset	Conservative Hold	South West	52.9	54.5
South Dorset	Labour Hold	South West	52.7	54.3
Hexham	Conservative Hold	North East	52.9	54.2
North Cornwall	Lib Dem Hold	South West	52.4	54.1
North Thanet	Conservative Hold	South East	52.4	54.0
South East Cornwall	Lib Dem Hold	South West	52.6	54.0
Bridgwater	Conservative Hold	South West	52.3	53.9
Truro & St. Austell	Lib Dem Hold	South West	52.3	53.9
Great Yarmouth	Labour Hold	East	52.1	53.7
Arundel & South Downs	Conservative Hold	South East	52.2	53.7
Castle Point	Conservative Hold	East	52.0	53.6
South Suffolk	Conservative Hold	East	51.8	53.4
South West Norfolk	Conservative Hold	East	51.6	53.2
Wells	Conservative Hold	South West	51.8	53.2
Southport	Lib Dem Hold	North West	51.6	53.1
Skipton & Ripon	Conservative Hold	Yorks and Humber	51.6	53.1
South Holland & the Deepings	Conservative Hold	East		
Mid Norfolk	Conservative Hold	Midlands	51.5	53.1
South Thanet	Labour Hold	East	51.6	53.1
Blackpool North & Fleetwood	Labour Hold	South East	51.5	53.1
South Norfolk	Conservative Hold	North West	51.3	52.9
Weston-Super- Mare	Conservative gain from Lib Dem	East	51.3	52.8
Yeovil	Lib Dem Hold	South West	51.2	52.8
Gainsborough	Conservative Hold	South West	51.0	52.7
West Derbyshire	Conservative Hold	East		
South Staffordshire	Conservative Hold	Midlands	51.0	52.5
Havant	Conservative Hold	East		
Falmouth & Camborne	Lib Dem gain from Labour	Midlands	50.8	52.3
Wirral South	Labour Hold	South East	50.7	52.3
Hereford	Lib Dem Hold	South West	50.6	52.3
Wyre Forest	Others Hold	North West	50.7	52.2
Brecon & Radnorshire	Lib Dem Hold	West		
Folkestone & Hythe	Conservative Hold	Midlands	50.6	52.2
Morecambe & Lunesdale	Labour Hold	West		
Vale of Clwyd	Labour Hold	Midlands	50.5	52.2
		Wales	50.8	52.2
		South East	50.4	52.1
		North West	50.3	51.9
		Wales	50.4	51.9

Penrith	Conservative Hold	North West	50.3	51.8
Workington	Labour Hold	North West	50.1	51.7
Wealden	Conservative Hold	South East	50.2	51.7
Fylde	Conservative Hold	North West	50.0	51.6
Haltemprice & Howden	Conservative Hold	Yorks and Humber	50.0	51.6
Carmarthen East & Dinefwr	PC Hold	Wales	50.2	51.6
Tatton	Conservative Hold	North West	50.0	51.5
Stratford-on-Avon	Conservative Hold	West Midlands	49.9	51.5
Caernarfon	PC Hold	Wales	49.8	51.4
Aldridge-Brownhills	Conservative Hold	West Midlands	49.6	51.3
Ynys Mon	Labour Hold	Wales	49.7	51.3
Sleaford & North Hykeham	Conservative Hold	East Midlands	49.6	51.2
Dover	Labour Hold	South East	49.6	51.2
East Hampshire	Conservative Hold	South East	49.7	51.2
Carmarthen West & South				
Pembrokeshire	Labour Hold	Wales	49.6	51.2
Na h-Eileanan Iar	SNP gain from Labour	Scotland	49.6	51.2
Barrow & Furness	Labour Hold	North West	49.5	51.1
Maldon & East Chelmsford	Conservative Hold	East	49.6	51.1
Cotswold	Conservative Hold	South West	49.5	51.1
Forest of Dean	Labour gain from Conservative	South West	49.5	51.1
Dumfries and Galloway	Labour Win	Scotland	49.6	51.1
Stone	Conservative Hold	West Midlands	49.6	51.0
Woodspring	Conservative Hold	South West	49.4	51.0
Redcar	Labour Hold	North East	49.3	50.9
North Essex	Conservative Hold	East	49.3	50.9
South West Devon	Conservative Hold	South West	49.3	50.9
Conwy	Labour Hold	Wales	49.2	50.9
North Shropshire	Conservative Hold	West Midlands	49.2	50.8
Taunton	Lib Dem gain from Conservative	South West	49.2	50.8
Cheadle	Lib Dem Hold	North West	49.2	50.7
Brigg & Goole	Labour Hold	Yorks and Humber	49.3	50.7
Solihull	Lib Dem gain from Conservative	West Midlands	49.1	50.7
Staffordshire Moorlands	Labour Hold	West Midlands	49.1	50.7
Monmouth	Conservative gain from Labour	Wales	49.2	50.7
Mid		West		
Worcestershire	Conservative Hold	Midlands	49.1	50.6
Central Suffolk & North Ipswich	Conservative Hold	East	49.1	50.6
East Worthing &	Conservative Hold	South East	49.0	50.6

Shoreham				
Wansbeck	Labour Hold	North East	48.8	50.5
Crosby	Labour Hold	North West	49.0	50.5
Vale of York	Conservative Hold	Yorks and Humber	48.8	50.5
Preseli	Conservative gain from			
Pembrokeshire	Labour	Wales	48.9	50.5
Hazel Grove	Lib Dem Hold	North West	48.7	50.3
North West				
Durham	Labour Hold	North East	48.7	50.2
Beverley & Holderness	Conservative Hold	Yorks and Humber	48.7	50.2
Harrogate & Knaresborough	Lib Dem Hold	Yorks and Humber	48.5	50.2
New Forest East	Conservative Hold	South East	48.6	50.2
Gower	Labour Hold	Wales	48.6	50.2
Grantham & Stamford	Conservative Hold	East Midlands	48.5	50.1
Newark	Conservative Hold	Midlands	48.5	50.1
Mole Valley	Conservative Hold	South East	48.6	50.1
Llanelli	Labour Hold	Wales	48.5	50.1
Bishop Auckland	Labour Hold	North East	48.5	50.0
North East				
Cambridgeshire	Conservative Hold	East	48.3	50.0
Somerton & Frome	Lib Dem Hold	South West	48.5	50.0