Review: Scott Davidson: Going Grey: the Mediation of Politics in an Ageing Society

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Scott Davidson: Going Grey:
The Mediation of Politics in an Ageing Society

Reviewed by Petter Haakenstad Godli

The backdrop to Scott Davidson's book *Going Grey: The Mediation of Politics in an Ageing Society* is the rise of the "Grey Vote" in the electoral markets in Western democracies. Davidson, a PhD and lecturer in Media and Public Relations at the University of Leicester, writes from a UK-perspective. However, the same changes are evident in numerous Western countries, such as for instance the US, Germany and Austria. Hence, his contribution should be seen as highly relevant in a wide international context. The book has an introduction, twelve chapters (both theoretically and empirically based), as well as a list of references and an index.

The rapid ageing of the population and the substantial demographic changes as a result of the ageing process are the main topics of the book. The so-called "baby-boomer" generations, born in the 1950s and 1960s, reach retirement age from 2015 and onwards. Together with decreasing birth rates and increased life expectancy, they substantially alter the age composition of the electoral markets. We live longer, and the share of the population defined as old is increasing, accelerating by the decade. As Davidson writes, "it is reasonable to assume this long-term trend that started in the nineteenth century will continue long into the twenty-first century" (11-12). Statistics show that, in the UK, the share of the population aged 65 years or older was 13% in 1971, while projections show that this will rise to 22% by 2031 and 26% by 2061.

Davidson defines the Grey Vote as voters aged 55 years or older. At first sight, this might seem as a broad definition (he does label this himself as the "wider Grey Vote"), given the fact that the normal retirement age is well over 60. However, Davidson argues that "to fully evaluate the age effect on democratic processes there is a persuasive argument that the definition of the 'grey vote' should be widened to include segments of the electorate who are close to the retirement and, indeed, perhaps to all men and women aged over 55" (84). Davidson justifies his
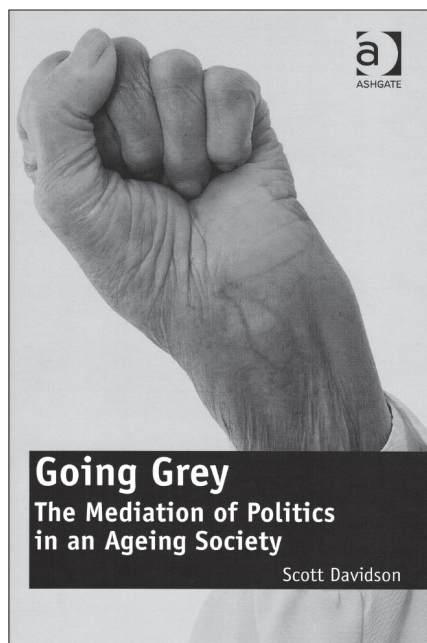
definition by emphasising that people in their 50s have already started to experience manifestations of age discrimination in the society (e.g. in the labour markets), that they have to start consider retirement and "old issues", and lastly the fact that new emerging family structures are likely to include people in their 50s with old parents, and hence they have direct contact with ageing issues.

Through a case study of the general elections in the UK in 2005 and 2010 (and partly 1997), Davidson wishes to investigate closely the ageing process in the UK, and how it has been framed and dealt with by two of the main sets of actors in UK election campaigns: (1) the major political parties and (2) the mass media. How do the major political parties and their strategic political communications relate to ageing issues and the fact that the electorate is older at each election? How do the mass media (including newspapers, magazines and television) frame ageing issues and their influence on society? As he argues throughout the book, demographic changes relating to these aspects have been neglected by researchers, even though the ageing process is hardly an unexpected phenomenon. The author early on states the strong connection between

these two sets of actors. In order to adapt to rapid social change and changing electoral markets, the parties have applied typical media tools, such as opinion polls and environmental analysis, to map and attract potential voters. Hence, not only are the mass media and the way they frame societal and political questions of great importance to how the major parties are dealing with these questions, they also adapt the methods traditionally used by the media. This is what he perceives as "the mediation of politics", as the title suggests.

After outlining the main aims of the book, Davidson gives a short quantitative description of the ongoing ageing process in the UK. It is common knowledge that the older voting group is acquiring increased electoral power. However, Davidson states that older voters cannot be seen as one homogenous voting group. Where others have framed the Grey Vote more negatively (for instance contributions such as Willetts (2010) and Howker/Malik (2010)), depicting them as one homogenous group voting on the basis of self-interest (the "senior power model"), Davidson seems to perceive the Grey Vote in a substantially more positive way. This is evident throughout the book.

Trying to explain the position of old people in society, and how they have been/are being looked upon can largely be divided into three (or two) theories. *Disengagement theories* can be shallowly summarised as theories saying that old people should disengage and withdraw from society (especially from the labour markets) and "get ready for death". *Structural theories* focus on how old people through social narratives and notions are being socially constructed as a problem – they are being forced into a position of structural dependency because they are receiving public money, and hence they are, first and foremost, a financial burden. Lastly, *third age theories or active ageing theories*, in contrast to the two other branches of ageing theories, perceive later life as an opportunity to create new identities and a meaningful and active third life as pensioners. Davidson

argues that the media have usually framed ageing and old people using one of the two first theories, that is, negatively. However, as old people are becoming more numerous, considered to be more heterogeneous and also more resource-powerful, the media might be expected (especially since 1990) to frame ageing issues in a more positive light, drawing on third age and active age theories. In chapter four, Davidson claims that, in politics, ageing has traditionally been presented as socially divisive (Turner 1989, Irwin 1996), in terms of framing ageing as a problem creating generational conflict: the interests of young people are sacrificed at the expense of the old generation (e.g. spending public money on state pensions instead of education and family policy). What Davidson labels "*the gerontocracy narrative*" and "*the time bomb narrative*" depict such a development and envisage generational conflict, especially revolving around older people seen as a financial burden because of their heavy use of public welfare services and because they are less productive in the labour market, but still taking up jobs. These negative views are met by more positive-oriented theories claiming that modern societies are more prosperous than ever before and welfare cuts are not the only way to solve the challenges of an ageing population. In fact, the negative-oriented theories are criticised for focusing on solely welfare cuts as a strategy for less public spending and a smaller state, in policies heavily influenced by economic liberalism and conservatism from the US. Also here, it is clear that Davidson positions himself on the "positive side" and not in the tradition of the gerontocratic narratives that present age as politically divisive.

In the two following chapters, Davidson focuses on how the ageing process in general, and older people in particular, are being framed negatively. Chapter five investigates how ageing as a subject is presented, and how older people are depicted. Two key concepts which are introduced here are especially important: *ageism* and (negative) *stereotyping*. Ageism can be described as "systematic discrimination against, and (negative) stereotyping of older people, solely on the basis of their (old) age" (27), while stereotyping happens when attributes (often negative) that may apply to certain members of a group are exaggerated and then applied to the group as a whole. Davidson's point is that old people are often being stereotyped negatively – in popular culture, in health

and social services, on the labour market, in the media and in political rhetoric – in a way that creates ageist attitudes on a more general basis. Chapter six delves into how the media create ageist attitudes. Although older people consume more media services than young people, and are getting more numerous by the year, they are often portrayed negatively. One of the main reasons is because advertisers pay more for young viewers; hence the media try to distance themselves from older audiences to attract a younger audience. Even though the three main studies Davidson refers to (Midwinter 1991, Groombridge 1999 and Bergström 2001) show that ageing issues have been given greater prominence, at least through the time period 1991–2001, ageing as an issue is largely ignored, and when it is treated, it is largely depicted through negative stereotyping, contributing to ageist attitudes. It is clear that, from Davidson's point of view, the media in UK in general have taken a position where they frame ageing negatively rather than positively: "There appears to be a broad consensus [in research literature] that older people, although the biggest consumers of media, and particularly news media, are underrepresented in the media and where they are not ignored, they are often portrayed using negative stereotypes" (35).

The next chapters investigate how the ageing processes are influencing how politics is made and marketed. One of the most important questions is: does age actually influence voting behaviour? If age does not matter, demographic changes and their effect on voting results are not particularly interesting. However, studies like Wilkoszewski (2009) argue that age does matter for social preferences, showing that the preferences between younger and older voters statistically deviate from each other in several social policy areas. Different theories have sought to explain the link between age and voting preferences. Davidson separates between structural based theories, dealignment theories and rational choice theories. *Structural based theories* claim that structural background variables – such as sex, social background, ethnicity etc. – determine how we vote. Age is just one variable, and cannot explain everything. These structural or class based theories are becoming weaker, because we know that class voting is in decline and social mobility is steadily increasing. *Dealignment theories* fit better into the emerging electoral trends with higher

volatility and less stable voter preferences. However, the dealignment theories also claimed that these trends were relevant only when investigating young voters. This claim has later been rejected, on the grounds that older voters are not less heterogeneous or more stable than younger voters. Davidson supports this rejection. Lastly, *rational choice theories*, also inspired by economic liberalism, claim that all voters vote according to their wallet and economic preferences, and if older voters gathered together as a homogenous voting group voting solely on the basis of economic self-interest, they would have a massive impact on voting results. However, Davidson again states that these theories are almost useless when they are not combined with other theories, because, as he repeats, voters actually do not vote only according to their economic self-interest. He also makes a distinction between position issues and valence issues: *position issues* are issues where voters strongly disagree on how policy outcome should look (e.g. tax rates), and *valence issues* are issues where voters mostly agree on how policy outcome should look (e.g. effective health care services). To sum up, Davidson suggests that the Grey Vote is a heterogeneous voting group, and their voting behaviour cannot be explained simply by age, structural based theories or rational theories. However, the Grey Vote still has a huge political power, especially related to valence issues – because large parts of the Grey Vote might shift their party preference according to how the parties treat valence issues important to older voters. Such an impact has already been evident in elections in countries such as Austria and Scotland (51-52).

Chapter eight further investigates the relationship between age and political preference through the classic sociological separation between generational effects and cohort effects. *Generational effects* are differences in voting results between generations that entered the electorate at different times – highlighting that one generation might differ from another due to special happenings, trends, societal changes etc., while *cohort* (or *life cycle*) *effects* are differences in voting results between groups of voters finding themselves in different stages of life (student, parenthood, pensioner). Davidson does acknowledge that age has *some* influence: when you entered the electoral market as well as what life stage you are at when casting your vote might affect political preferences. Hence, although the rejection of

pure rational choice theories and structural theories solely focusing on economic self-interest and/or age as a background variable seems to be central to Davidson, he gives a certain amount of credit to sociological theories drawing on age to explain political preferences.

Chapter nine puts focus on the development of political marketing in relation to ageing processes. Davidson highlights that, even though political parties are still not fully exchangeable with businesses (and likewise voters with consumers), political parties have adapted marketing concepts. The most important concept presented here is the *segmentation of the electorate*. Segmentation means that the electorate is split up into different groups according to preferences and various characteristics in order to target specific groups when marketing politics. Davidson argues that one of the most evident changes over recent years is that the parties are no longer segmenting older voters only on the basis of age. Evidently, the parties have realised that older voters are becoming an increasingly important voting group, but perhaps more importantly that they are not a stable and heterogeneous voting group. Hence, when targeting older voters they cannot simply target them as "old voters"; rather, they have to be segmented just like any other voting group. What Davidson seems to suggest is that political actors, especially the parties, have adjusted themselves to the ageing process and the alterations in – and the new compounding of – the electoral markets to a larger degree than the mass media, among others, through careful segmentation of older voters.

Chapter ten introduces the more empirical part of the book. What he does in this chapter is investigate how the Westminster constituencies (on the basis of the 2010 election) will be ageing in coming years. The general aim is to show how fast and profound the ageing of the electorate is. Davidson shows through projections that the voting group aged 55+ will make up 44% of the electorate in 2015 and 48% in 2025, almost a pure majority, compared to 42% in 2005. Also, he shows how, in 2005, 268 of the constituencies were what he labels "pure grey majorities" (meaning that over 50% of the votes cast were those of voters aged 55+); this number increased to 319 in 2010, and will further increase to 367 in 2015 and 478 in 2025 (see figure 12.2, 105). In other words, already in 2010 a majority of the 632 UK constituencies were "pure grey majori-

ties". In short, the UK electorate is ageing, and the process is accelerating by the decade. Chapter eleven conducts an empirical case study of one of the few cases where ageing and demographic changes were put high on the agenda in public view and delves into how the media treat ageing issues from an empirical point of view. The case study in question is the BBC programme from 2004 *If … The Generations Fall Out*, describing the UK in 2024 and the challenges created by the ageing process; it took the form of a drama-documentary played out by cliché characters (pensioners, young students etc.). Davidson's general findings, which fit well into the theoretical framework outlined above, were: the programme (and its depiction of ageing issues) was ageist, focusing mainly on the negative rather than positive consequences of ageing; the contributing experts (from various disciplines and backgrounds, such as science, journalism and interest organisations) – who tended to show slightly ageist views through negative stereotyping and hence gave support to "negative theories", such as disengagement theories and structural based theories – were given more time to promote their views than those who highlighted the positive consequences of ageing, and hence gave more support to "positive theories" such as third age and active ageing theories. Also, reviews of the programme tended to be negative, almost mocking the ageing issues that were its main subject. Although putting ageing issues on the agenda, the mass media still seem to frame ageing issues in a negative light.

Chapter twelve focuses on how the political parties – and their strategies and political communication – adapt to the ageing processes. Party documents and speeches from the general elections in 2005 and 2010 are analysed through critical discourse analysis in order to uncover narratives and rhetoric. Investigating the three largest parties (Conservatives, Labour and LibDems), Davidson finds that ageing issues tend to be less important with time as other issues prevail, especially towards the end of the campaigns. Also, they do not focus on the generational conflict. When studying four concrete discourses, he finds that the parties try not to frame old voters as "elderly", and when they do they try to not relate this to dependency (in order to not alienate older voters). Also, in the second discourse, when using the term "pensioner", focus is placed on economics – "vote for us and you will be better off economically when you retire."

Still, the promises are often *conditional*, for instance linked to participation in the labour market (Conservatives and Labour) or even to citizenship (LibDems). Davidson identifies this as "the contributory principle" discourse. Lastly, the parties, generally speaking, always frame ageing issues in a more positive light than media actors do. Demographic changes are never depicted as a problem, merely a challenge. The notion of a generational conflict, as often presented by the media, is always rejected by political actors, who put more focus on intergenerational solidarity and the contribution that older citizens make to families and the civil sector. Hence, in what he identifies as the "active ageing and public burden" discourse, active ageing is emphasised at the expense of old citizens being a public burden. Even when the media put pressure on politicians to acknowledge the negative consequences of ageing processes, they prefer to introduce their own, more positive-orientated framing. As Davidson notes, this pinpoints a strong disharmony in how the media and the political parties perceive the ageing process: "Media narratives are not in harmony with the apparently evolving political discourses analysed in this research" (149).

The last chapter is basically a chapter which sums up the main findings. One obvious reason for the disharmony between how the mass media and political actors frame ageing issues might be the fact that politicians are dependent upon votes, while the media are dependent upon advertising. Hence the parties have to attract the Grey Vote as an increasingly important voting group while the media distance themselves from older media consumers because advertisers pay more for younger viewers/listeners etc. He claims that even though ageing issues are becoming more relevant, they are still widely ignored, and when not, normally negatively stereotyped. In addition, he argues that since the media are still not picking up the positive-orientated "third age and active ageing" theories in the same way as the political parties are, the media have not kept up with the pace of ageing theories, but are still too driven by the negative-orientated theories influenced by liberal and conservative doctrines. This can be understood as a clear criticism of how the media are framing ageing issues, but also as a criticism and rejection of the negative "gerontocracy" and "time bomb" narratives at the foundation of this framing. Davidson emphasises the possibilities rather than the problems connected to

societal ageing, hence being more in line with how political actors frame ageing issues. Interestingly, at the very end, he writes: "elites of both worlds [also within politics] have been slow to adapt, hampered in their response by residual ageist assumptions and fear that in their respective markets that associating with 'the elderly' will terminally damage their brand" (174). Knowing that parties have to balance numerous considerations in their campaigning, perhaps the most relevant here being the balance of appealing to both young and old voting groups without repelling any one of them ("age-neutral campaigning"), it seems as if Davidson still wants the parties to do even more to adapt to the changing electoral markets and to attract the Grey Vote. Evidently, he does not perceive the rise of Grey Vote as a problem, merely as an inevitable development which the parties have to face in their strategies to remain electorally powerful. This stands as a vast contrast to other recent contributions, such as Willetts (2010) and Howker/Malik (2010), who portray the rise of the Grey Vote and growing power of the baby-boomer generations at the expense of the young and future generations as a profound problem – because the last group(s) are economically and politically marginalised. According to these latter contributions, political decision-makers should not pander to older voters; rather, they should take active measures to avoid the marginalisation of young voters and future generations and seek to establish more intergenerational justice. What seems to be evident is that subjects such as societal ageing and demographic changes – with reference to media framing, the marketing of politics and policy-making – have gained increased

importance in the literature during recent years, giving these issues the attention they deserve. However, the positions taken by media and political actors stand in strong contrast to each other – and new contributions in the coming years will and should continue to discuss and investigate how media and political actors, in theory and practice, relate to ageing issues.

In investigating issues that until now have not been studied together in such a context, Davidson makes a valuable contribution to the field of demographic changes and ageing in relation to the development of the media attitudes, political strategy and communication, and particularly the interplay between media and politics. This book undoubtedly lays the foundation for future studies. However, I have three criticisms. First, even though the language flows well in most parts of the book, I find it occasionally to be unnecessarily complicated and technical, particularly in the chapters outlining the theories of ageing, age as a political issue, and ageist stereotyping and discrimination. Secondly, Davidson has a tendency to repeat himself. Of course, keeping a narrative thread and consequently making sure that we are not lost in what the book is aiming to do or trying to explain is always a good thing. However, sometimes I find the repetition unnecessary, for instance when he outlines basically the same argument or gives the same explanation over and over again. Two examples are his justification for defining the Grey Vote as all voters aged 55+ instead of all voters aged 65+, and, especially, his reference to the disharmony between how the media in general have framed ageing issues and how the political parties have done it; this is, in various ways, repeated nu-

merous times in the last three chapters. Thirdly and lastly – and this is really an aesthetic criticism – the publishers, and perhaps Davidson himself, should have made the text easier on the eye. Except for chapter ten, which provides the background numbers and quantifies the Grey Vote, the book does not include many tables, figures or illustrations. Obviously, there is no point in including tables, figures or illustrations only for their own sake, but pages filled with text can be tiresome to read. At the very least, the text should have been split into more paragraphs in order to make it more comfortable for the reader.

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Claudio López-Guerra: Democracy and Disenfranchisement

Reviewed by Madeleine Pitkin

Even though the topic of enfranchisement might not be considered a defining feature of the contemporary period, debates about whether certain groups of people – such as prisoners or teenagers – should be given the vote are currently taking place all over the

world. In 2011, a voting trial allowed sixteen and seventeen year olds from certain selected municipalities to vote in the local elections in Norway, and the United Kingdom continues to resist pressure from the European Court of Human Rights to allow its prisoners to vote.

Claudio López-Guerra finds that most of these debates take for granted that suffrage is a fundamental individual entitlement. In his seven-chapter-long book, the author first contests this largely accepted notion and presents a system in which most of a population would be randomly excluded as a