



TO BE UP FOR DISCUSSION

INTERGENERATIONAL EQUITY: STRENGTHENING THE RIGHTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN AN AGEING SOCIETY

Demographic change has been predicted since the 1970s and is now raising fundamental political questions about intergenerational equity. The Federal Youth Advisory Board (Bundesjugendkuratorium – BJK) is therefore calling for a fundamental socio-political discourse on how the rights and interests of the younger generation can be defined and positioned within the political system, and how the political participation of the younger generation in federal politics can be structurally guaranteed.

To date, the younger generation has not been given sufficient political weight in key policy areas. This can be illustrated in general terms and highlighted in three problem areas, underlining the need to structurally safeguard the rights and interests of the younger generation in order to achieve intergenerational equity.

PROBLEM AREA 1: GENERATIONAL IMBALANCE IN DEMOCRACY

In light of an ageing population, it is crucial to reconsider the potential and voices of younger generations in political decision-making processes. Already today, more than half of the electorate is aged 53 and over, and this median age will continue to rise. Meanwhile, the proportion of under-30s in the electorate is steadily declining and currently stands at 14 percent.

There is already an age-related imbalance in the democratic weighting of the generations, which will continue to grow. In the next ten years, as the baby boomer generation reaches retirement age, not only will a major gap in the labour market arise, but also an enormous shift in democratic power structures: the largest voter group

will then not only be relatively advanced in their life courses but also mainly no longer active on the labour market. This raises fundamental questions regarding the distribution of political resources and competing priorities, such as where should scarce resources be allocated and where should savings be made? But even more fundamentally: To what extent can democracy still be risk-tolerant, future-oriented, sustainable, dynamic and generationally equitable?

It is impossible to predict the specific consequences of the current demographic changes for political decision-making processes, intergenerational questions and democratic negotiation processes as a whole. This makes it all the more urgent to discuss this structural problem and to address today the discrepancy between the declining quantitative number of young people on the one hand and their increasing importance on the other.

PROBLEM AREA 2: GENERATIONAL IMBALANCE IN THE WELFARE STATE

The consequences of demographic change for the welfare state and public finances are firmly anchored in the public consciousness. However, hardly any robust strategies have been developed, let alone measures taken, to address both the fiscal problem and the generational challenges. An ageing population is not only associated with rising welfare state spending on pensions, healthcare and long-term care, but also with a systemic shortage of skilled workers in the health and care sectors, as well as in caregiving work in general, and requires significant expansion of the corresponding infrastructure (hospitals,

care facilities, etc.). In addition, the infrastructure for education as well as child and youth services – ultimately the institutional framework for growing up – requires urgent investment.

The education and vocational training system, for example, is in an unacceptable state, which together with demographic shifts will further exacerbate the skills shortage. Structural problems in educational and childcare institutions are evident in both qualitative and quantitative terms: for over ten years, all relevant studies have shown a downward trend in competence development – at every level of the school system and in all federal states. Accordingly, the number and proportion of school leavers without a school-leaving and/or vocational qualification has been high for several years. At the same time, it is still not possible to provide all children with places in early education and care centres and schools. Furthermore, there are justified doubts as to whether the nationwide implementation of the legal entitlement to extended-day provision for primary school pupils starting in 2026 can be successfully realised.

The earlier policy of consolidation and austerity was characterised by a significant lack of forward-looking investment in education, climate protection, sustainable mobility and energy policy, etc. At the same time, child poverty remains persistently high and it is already foreseeable that old-age poverty will become a growing social policy problem. As a result, those employed in a high-paced, intensified environment that demands a high level of commitment will have to help sustain the infrastructure for childcare and long-term care, stepping in to fill its gaps while also juggling the care of both children and older people – all while generating the revenue to cover rising public expenditures through their taxes and social security contributions.

These structural problems of the welfare state and public finances are already evident and will steadily and mutually reinforce each other over the coming decades. Looking at these findings together with those relating to Problem Area 1 – the (age-related) structural imbalances in democracy – it becomes clear that the scope for action and the window of opportunity will steadily shrink, the longer these structural problems remain unaddressed and unresolved.

PROBLEM AREA 3: GROWING UP AMID CONTRADICTIONS – THE YOUNG GENERATION AS SPECTATORS

It is clear that the lives of the younger generation in an ageing society are characterised by contradictions. On the one hand, direct relationships with members of older generations are in many ways more relaxed than in the past. Studies show that the majority of young people intend to raise their own children in much the same way as their parents raised them. On the other hand, the two structural problems outlined above mean that young people's interests, needs and perspectives are given little consideration. At an individual level, the scope and opportunities for life planning and developing a career continue to depend heavily on personal resources.

At the societal and political level, younger generations often find themselves relegated to the role of spectators, even though they are the ones most affected by current crises and the decisions on which their future depends. There is frequent talk of a right to a future, but what does this mean in concrete terms?

At the same time, young people are still too often viewed from a risk perspective, rather than being recognised for their importance in shaping future society. Political actors too rarely signal that they trust this young generation and are willing to provide them with the necessary infrastructure.

Moreover, social policy primarily formulates obligations for the younger generation, but hardly any rights. Consequently, divergent responses can be observed: different forms of political engagement and protest, active social involvement, but also political abstinence, disengagement or various tendencies towards radicalisation among the young generation.

A POLITICAL UPDATE OF "INTER-GENERATIONAL EQUITY"

A political update of "intergenerational equity" from the perspective of the younger generation appears to be necessary. The climate crisis in particular, but other crises as

well, clearly illustrates that the young and future generations will be confronted with political challenges that are not yet fully foreseeable but which require a new form of support, preparation and a new political position for the younger generation.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all political parties and civil society organisations called for and promised greater political consideration of the younger generation. To date, this promise has remained largely unfulfilled.

Furthermore, compared to other age groups, the younger generation is relatively small in terms of numbers, but significantly more heterogeneous in terms of ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as socio-cultural living conditions. Alongside the generational imbalances in democracy and the welfare state, generational differences in the post-migration society must also be considered.

Given the multiple crises, the major challenges facing the younger generations and an uncertain future, it is difficult to comprehend why the relevant infrastructure in the institutional framework for growing up – such as that for education and vocational training – is partly in a desolate condition, why political efforts to achieve equal opportunities are relatively modest and why the structures facilitating younger people's political participation are barely perceptible. When infrastructure is discussed in Germany, put bluntly, there is more talk about potholes in roads and cracks in motorway bridges than about the holes in the educational and social infrastructure for the younger generation.

Essentially, despite many responsibilities lying with the federal states, the question arises as to which position the younger generation takes in federal politics. What structural procedures can be put in place to ensure that the younger generation can rely on an indispensable minimum standard of education, as even the Federal Constitutional Court (BVerfG) has demanded?

It would also be worth discussing whether there should be legally binding basic rights for younger people, i.e. removed from the realm of political competition, comparable to the (albeit differently intended but still fitting) "minority protection". Age discrimination is rarely discussed in relation to young people (but mainly in regard

to older individuals, including by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency), and references to structural adultism are often simply dismissed.

A number of developments can be interpreted as minority protection for younger people, such as the demand to include children's rights in the Basic Law, the legal right to early childhood education and all-day care, but also several rulings by the Federal Constitutional Court, in particular on the right to education (including educational quality) and on the modification of the Climate Protection Act. In the grounds for its judgement the court clearly states that a delay in reducing emissions would impermissibly restrict the civil liberties of younger people.

A return to the central idea of an intergenerational social contract appears to be imperative – now, more than ever, to secure the rights of the younger generation. Over the next 30 years, it is this younger generation that will have to steer and stabilise democracy and society through uncertain and undoubtedly difficult times. Whether the right course has been and is being set should be critically examined.

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THE FEDERAL YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD

The Federal Youth Advisory Board (FYAB; in German: Bundesjugendkuratorium/BJK) is an expert panel commissioned by the Federal Government. It advises the Federal Government on fundamental issues of child and youth services and cross-cutting issues in child and youth policy.

FYAB is composed of up to 15 experts from the spheres of politics, administration, associations and research. Its members are appointed by the Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth for the duration of the current legislative period.

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