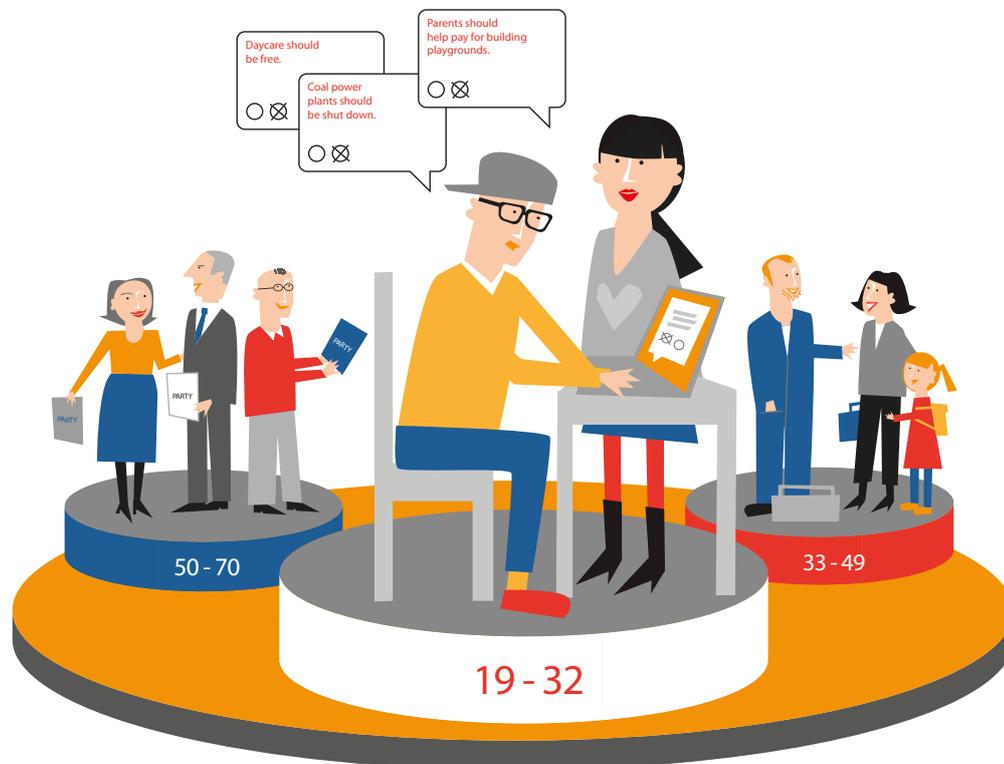


# EINWURF

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## Generation Wahl-O-Mat – How viable is our democracy over the long term?

### Authors



**Christina Tillmann**  
christina.tillmann  
@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81335



**Rose Beaugrand**  
rose.beaugrand  
@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81514

Younger people today make political decisions based more on pragmatic concerns and their own short-term needs than older people do. However, instead of to age, this “future orientation” can be attributed to the influences of each generation’s political socialization: Having guiding principles and political ideologies has made today’s older individuals more future-oriented, while younger people – as members of “Generation Wahl-O-Mat” – tend to be more present-oriented. Given ongoing demographic changes, what does this mean for the future viability of Germany’s democracy?

## Sources

All of the figures cited in this text as well as the system of classifying the generations can be found in detail in the recent study of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the rheingold institute, which was completed with the assistance of the IfD Allensbach opinion and market research institute: Vehrkamp, Grünewald, Tillmann and Beaugrand. Generation Wahl-O-Mat – 5 Befunde zur Zukunftsfähigkeit der Demokratie im demographischen Wandel. Gütersloh, 2014.

The “Wahl-O-Mat” (“Vote-O-Mat”) is an interactive, online voting-advice application designed by the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. It basically works by having users state their political preferences on a number of issues, comparing these answers with the stances that political parties have adopted in their party programs, and then showing users which parties they are most in agreement with. It has been used ca. 43 million times since its introduction in 2002. For more information, visit: [www.bpb.de/politik/wahlen/wahl-o-mat/](http://www.bpb.de/politik/wahlen/wahl-o-mat/) Wahl-O-Mat is a registered and protected trademark of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Since time immemorial, there have been suspicions that democracy is not sufficiently viable over the long term. According to this thinking, several aspects of democracy – for example, that it is divided into brief legislative periods, that it favors incumbents, that it encourages electoral promises, and that politicians often do anything to secure the most votes possible – frequently lead people to focus on the present at the expense of the future. These shortcomings of democracy have been dramatically intensified by demographic changes. For example, during the 2013 elections for Germany’s federal parliament, the Bundestag, for the first time ever, over half of all eligible voters were 50 or older. The debates about retirement at 63 (“Rente mit 63”) and retroactive pensions for former stay-at-home mothers (“Mütterrente”) during the election campaign suggest that, already today, politicians are trying to increasingly orient themselves precisely to the interests of these older voters. Indeed, one has the impression that we already live in a “pensioners’ democracy,” one in which older citizens have the most say and the interests of younger citizens are pushed into the background.

But is that really the case? How different are the temporal horizons of the various generations, and what determines the degree to which the population is focused on policies concerning the present or the future? How and how much does one’s age or the generation one belongs to influence the long-term stability of one’s political preferences? How does having children affect the one’s horizon for political planning? And, lastly, does the so-called “pensioners’ democracy” really make politics more geared toward the present? New findings – drawn from qualitative and quantitative research – are available on these questions. And they cause many of the assumptions in the debate regarding the so-called “pensioners’ democracy” to be seen in a whole new light.

## Crisis Prompt a Withdrawal into the Present

These days, instead of hoping for a better future or being optimistic that things will change, many people want nothing more than a “permanent present,” so to speak. This withdrawal into the present, into the here and now, can be observed across the entire generational spectrum.

One of the factors that has contributed to this situation is the series of crises experienced in recent memory, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks, the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima, the global economic and financial crises, and the crisis in the euro zone. Many view the high youth-unemployment rates in the so-called “crisis countries” of Europe as portending a bleaker future. As they see it, given these circumstances, preserving the status quo – i.e., establishing something akin to a permanent present, in which everything forever remains just – seems like the best one can still hope for. As a result, there is a growing focus on the here and now as well as a simultaneous contraction of the temporal horizon used for planning purposes.

A second factor watch as politicians navigate freely without any guiding vision for the future, as political parties abandon their traditional positions in favor of holding onto power. Indeed, in all policy fields, one can hardly discern any coherent stances

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“A political stance is like an ideology, how one is oriented. What one views as good and as bad. To think in a specific direction, no matter what.”  
(Woman, 46, no children)

Quotation from the interviews of the “Generation Wahl-O-Mat” study

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or strategies as politicians pursue a “supermarket logic” with which they can offer something to everyone. And, for their part, citizens have been adapting themselves to this short-term planning horizon.

And a third factor is that citizens feel that political realities are extremely complicated. In their view, experts are the only ones capable of prioritizing different options and making decisions. As a result of this feeling of being asked to do too much, voters crave simplification and reductionism, a retreat to the

tangibility and immediacy of the present, with the result that the temporal horizon for policy planning becomes closer and closer.

## Sound political guiding principles require a future-oriented approach

However, people who do display a comparatively long-term, forward-looking stance – or what we will call a “future orientation” – share in common the clear guiding principle of a political worldview or ideology: The stronger the anchoring in a political ideology, the stronger the future orientation. Indeed, an anchoring to an ideology functions as a framework of reference and orientation that, in turn, serves as a basis for making political decisions as well as for ordering and regulating one’s individual interests and needs. This can even mean that someone decides to vote against their own current interests when they agree in large part with the fundamental guiding principles of a party. Thus, political guiding principles appear to guide action and engender a future-oriented approach.

Still, things are different with people who don’t have fixed political guiding principles to serve as an orientation framework: They behave more pragmatically, and their decisions are based more on their individual preferences in each concrete situation – in other words, they act in a more ad hoc, improvisational manner and with a rather short-term planning and temporal horizon. In such cases, voters’ political decisions are determined by their own needs and everyday challenges. This kind of decision-making process can lead to a situation in which voters support a “retirement at 63” proposal, for example, because they would like to benefit from such a policy themselves at some point down the road. They realize (and tacitly accept) the downsides that come with their decision, namely, that younger generations – and perhaps even their own children or grandchildren – will one day have to pay the costs incurred by it. But this realization ultimately has no bearing on their decision.



Video only available  
in German

## About Stephan Grünewald

Stephan Grünewald is a cofounder and managing partner of the rheingold institute. The graduate in psychology and trained therapist is also the author of "Deutschland auf der Couch" (Germany on the Couch) and "Die erschöpfte Gesellschaft" (The Exhausted Society). Among other things, his current work concentrates on cultural and trend research, with a particular focus on attitudes toward life among today's youth. EINWURF spoke with him about Generation Wahl-O-Mat and trends in voter behavior.



Can one identify a pattern regarding how ideological anchoring, guiding principles and the future orientation associated with them are distributed within the populace? If one follows the public debate, one could posit several traits – such as people's age (i.e., the generation they belong to) or perhaps whether they have children – as possible explanations. However, recent findings show that even though these two factors do exert an influence, the impact is different than what one would intuitively expect: Younger people make decisions that are more short-term in nature and geared toward

the present than older people, and people with children are not more future-oriented in their decision-making than people without children. But why is this the case?

## Generation Wahl-O-Mat:

### The Younger Are More Present-Oriented in Their Decision-making

Instead of age, political socialization and the ideological character of one's own generation explain the degree to which an individual is present- or future-oriented in their decision-making. Guiding principles and ideological character engender a future orientation, while ideological neutrality and the absence of guiding principles foster a rather pragmatic orientation toward the present. Today's younger generation (19- to 32-year-olds) grew up without polarizing political debates that would have required or encouraged its members to embrace their own ideological stance. Without these polarizing lines of conflict, younger voters haven't been forced to pinpoint where they stand on the map of political ideologies. The individual or situational needs of the present, in particular, have replaced comprehensive political explanations (e.g., capitalism or communism) from which one can derive an orientation and political stances as the yardstick used to assess separate policy fields. Voting-advice tools like the "Wahl-O-Mat" (see sidebar on p.2) help citizens get an overview of the diverse stances (or "offers") of the various political parties. And it reveals that that this generation is primarily focused on the short-term present.

In contrast, the majority of individuals belonging to the older generation (50- to 70-year-olds) have clear guiding political principles and also derive their political preferences and decisions from this framework of orientation. Indeed, issues such as the Cold War or the student protests of the late 1960s (the so-called "68 movement") occupied such a prominent place in their everyday life that it developed into a political worldview. These worldviews frequently guide or at least influence the decision-making of the older generation much more than individual or situational, immediate needs. As a result, the political preferences and decisions of this group are more strongly oriented toward the future.

The middle generation (33- to 49-year-olds) oscillates between the two other generations: Although they have inherited from their parents the belief that a political worldview is something good, they have nevertheless failed to develop one themselves. Thus, in terms of actual action, they are more like the younger generation and weigh matters in a pragmatic manner depending on their situational needs. What's more, since they are acutely aware of this conflict

between what they believe and what they actually do, they often display a feeling of being torn.

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"I'm up to my ears with work right now, as we just finished renovating the house and celebrating the kids' birthdays. I have to admit: This pushes other, long-term thoughts to the backburner." (Woman, 47, 2 children)

Quotation from an interview in the "Generation Wahl-O-Mat" study

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The linking of a future orientation and political socialization suggests that the issue is about a generational effect rather than an age effect. The stronger orientation toward the present that is specific to their generation will persist as a defining characteristic, and it will become more important and dominant within the overall population as a result of demographic changes.

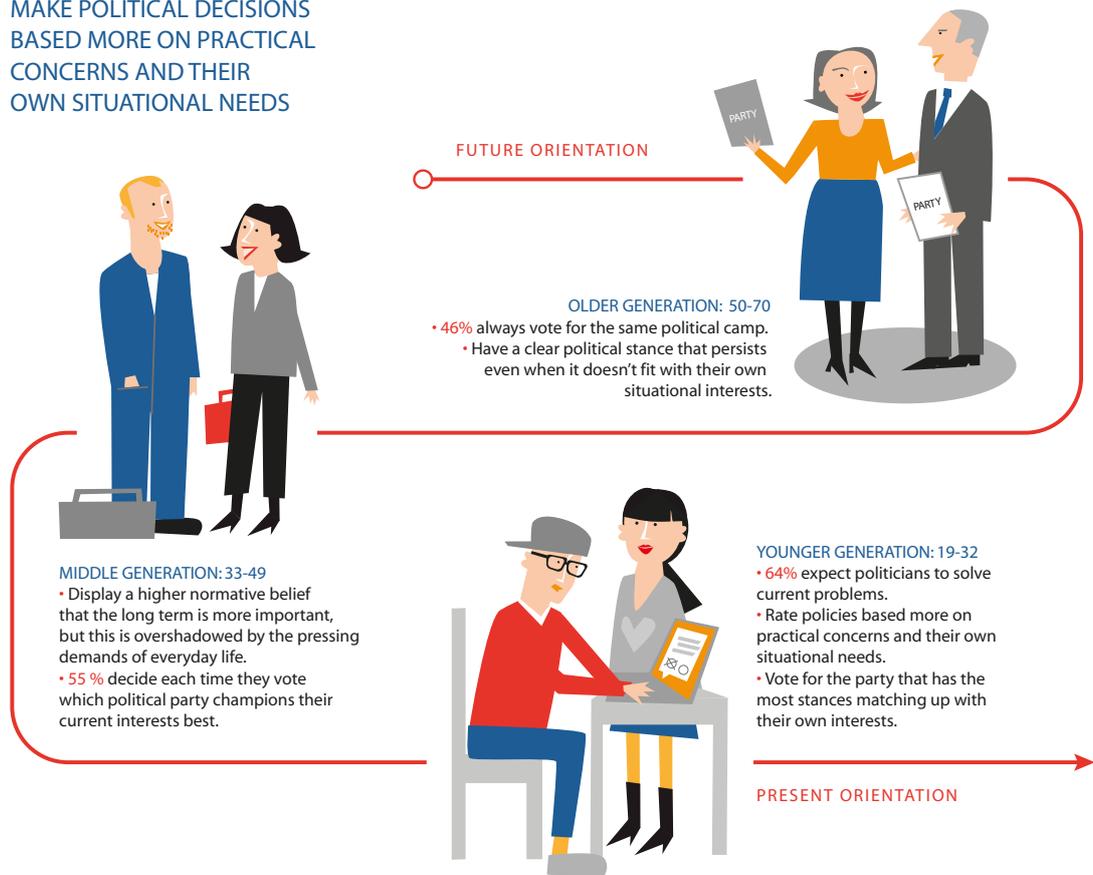
## People with Children Are More Present-Oriented

So, in addition to the generation one belongs to, what influence does having children exert on the temporal horizon of their parents' political planning? People with children frequently claim to have a stronger orientation toward the future, as one of their key concerns is securing the future of their children. Indeed, having children marks a major turning point in the lives of most parents, and providing for one's children and their future takes center stage.

In reality, however, the immediate, everyday demands of raising children and running a family frequently take precedence over longer-term perspectives. As a result, during the child-rearing phase of people's lives, their decision-making is much more situational and grounded in the present than that of people without children. Pressing needs determine what's on the agenda and push efforts to secure the future to the backburner. Likewise, it is only once the children have grown older and the immediate demands of everyday life have eased somewhat that a less stressful present once again allows parents to reassume an orientation more geared toward the longer-term challenges of the future.

In a nutshell, this means: Although having children strengthens one's belief that political decisions should be geared toward fostering long-term viability and securing the future, this belief can only be maintained with difficulty given the challenges of everyday life. In fact, instead of maintaining this belief, people even tend to act in a way that is more pragmatic and oriented toward the short term.

YOUNGER PEOPLE  
MAKE POLITICAL DECISIONS  
BASED MORE ON PRACTICAL  
CONCERNS AND THEIR  
OWN SITUATIONAL NEEDS



This finding throws new light on discussions about youth's suffrage or, more specifically, about allowing parents to cast a vote on behalf of their underage children. Allowing children to vote is frequently discussed as a possible way to introduce a more long-term orientation and intergenerational fairness into politics. However, given that parents of younger children tend to make decisions that are more pragmatic and focused on the short term than people without children, there is the danger that extending the right to vote to children would even further strengthen the orientation toward the present.

## The Desire to Secure the Long-Term Future

A great desire for policies that provide for long-term stability and security by being more geared toward the future can be found across all generations – despite or precisely because of the present orientation of their own actions. Indeed, for many people, the retreat into the present apparently makes them have an even worse conscience about neglecting the future.

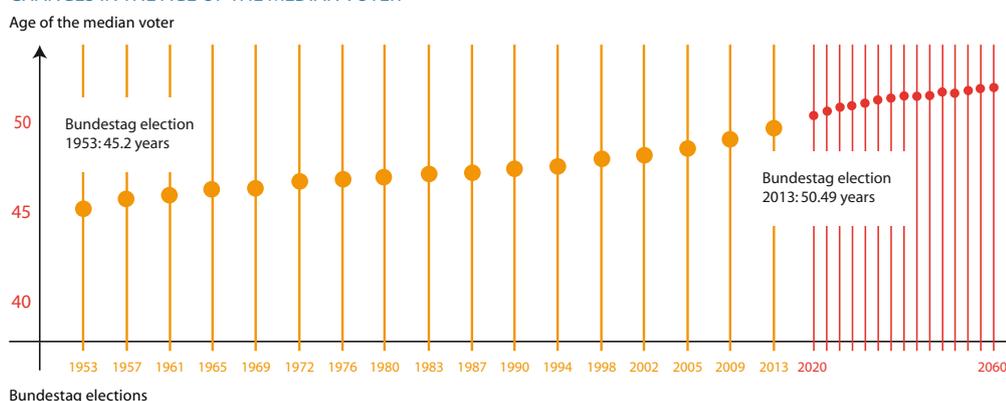
In effect, citizens expect politicians – and not themselves – to be the ones to act in a more future-oriented manner and to strive to resolve long-term problems. According to polls, 54 percent of the population holds this belief and feels uneasy when they

sense that politicians are only reacting to present circumstances and performing short-term crisis management instead of working to secure their future ability to confront long-term problems and challenges. For this reason, many people would like to see policies that are more strongly tied to long-term perspectives. In addition, there are calls for the establishment of institutions (e.g., commissions or boards of experts) in the hope that they can do two things: minimize short-term interests geared toward the present and, second, promote a long-term orientation of political decision-making that extends beyond the limited temporal horizon of a single legislative period.

## A multifaceted overall picture of future viability given ongoing demographic change

These findings draw a multifaceted overall picture of the future viability of our democracy in the face of ongoing demographic changes. On the one hand, it appears that many of the prevalent opinions and fears about a looming pensioners' democracy are exaggerated. In reality, owing to their stronger ideological character, today's older people are frequently more future-oriented than younger people, who make decisions in a more pragmatic and situation-determined way in accordance with their short-term present interests because they don't have fixed guiding principles. As a result, the fact that older voters predominate today means that the future orientation of the overall electorate is larger – for now.

### CHANGES IN THE AGE OF THE MEDIAN VOTER



On the other hand, it also appears that the genuine challenge of demographic change to the future viability of our democracy actually lies in the more distant future, when those belonging to today's younger and middle generations have

become pensioners and make up the electoral majorities of the day after tomorrow, so to speak. Only then will the pensioners' democracy actually be characterized by generations that, as a result of their political socialization, act and make decisions in a more present-oriented manner than their parents and grandparents do today. Furthermore – despite the fact that, or precisely because, many people are withdrawing into the present – across all generations, there is also a longing for a secure future as well as the expectation that politicians will work toward making this a reality.

## Further Reading:

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## Does our democracy need an "Odysseus strategy"?

Given these considerations, the following questions arise: How can we keep politicians from catering to a present orientation and thereby neglecting to work toward securing the future in a lasting way? How can politicians take into account the desires of many for a secure future even if their political actions are more geared toward the present?

The image of an "Odysseus strategy" comes to mind: According to Greek legend, Odysseus bound himself to the mast of his ship so that he wouldn't be tempted to steer his ship toward the alluring song of the Sirens – no matter how much he wanted to. Politicians could use a similar strategy so as to not yield to the "temptations" of the short term. Likewise, in a strategy reminiscent of the tale of Odysseus, establishing regulations or setting up institutions aimed at providing for more intergenerational justice is one possible way to "bind" politicians to the principle objective of a future orientation.

The Kyoto Protocol is an example of an attempt to establish this kind of voluntary commitment: By obliging themselves to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases so as to protect and preserve the natural environment for coming generations, states have placed self-imposed limits on the range of economic-policy actions they can take. However, since there are no set penalties for violating these voluntary commitments, their effectiveness is severely limited. In Germany, politicians have already tried to "fetter" themselves with a range of measures, ranging from mandating sustainability impact assessments to setting up the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development of the German Bundestag. Even so, additional steps would be necessary to improve these kinds of self-imposed "fetters" on politicians. However, these steps should only be taken if there is broad-based consensus about doing so. Indeed, we must ask ourselves whether we, as citizens and voters, are prepared to strip our democratically legitimized actors and the prevailing present orientation of the power to make certain decisions in order to ensure that there is more of a future orientation. Given the importance of securing the future viability of our democracy in the face of demographic change, it's worth our while to debate this question!

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Bertelsmann Stiftung · Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256  
D-33311 Gütersloh · [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

Prof. Dr. Robert Vehrkamp  
[robert.vehrkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:robert.vehrkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)  
Tel. +49 5241 81 81526

Editors: Christina Tillmann, Dr. Dominik Hierlemann

Editorial assistance and inquiries:  
[gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:gaelle.beckmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)  
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