We are at a key point in the influence of different generations on our society. In his book *The Pinch*, David Willetts highlights how we’re at a point of “generational equipoise”, where the median person is around 40 years old and can expect to live to 80. But we are also at a point of generational balance, with four sizeable and culturally quite distinct cohorts co-existing, as the chart opposite shows.

It’s easy to miss this when we discuss our national demographic profile, because we tend to focus on how the population is ageing. That is undoubtedly true – but it’s also vital to understand that our current old are still dying out, and they have very different values and attitudes to our future old. Changes in our generational profile are driving significant shifts in the national balance of opinion, and raise important questions about future consensus on a wide range of political and social policy issues.

Of course, there are many arguments about generational definitions and cut-off points. In particular, some suggest that the boomer generation should only be counted as 1945 to 1955, and others distinguish between early and late boomers. More generally, any generational analysis will be imperfect, and commonality will be clearer in the middle of the range, and fuzzier at the edges. But as we’ll see, the survey data does seem to support that there are often important differences between these four groups.

Ipsos MORI is starting a major programme of work focusing on these generational differences, and the implications they have for public policy and politics. Before looking at a few initial examples of this analysis, it’s useful to have in mind that there are three quite distinct drivers of change in overall opinion among a population over time:

- **Period effects:** where everyone changes because of external events or a general cultural shift that affects all
- **Lifecycle effects:** where an individual’s views change as they grow older or go through different lifestages
- **Cohort or generational effects:** where opinions are set by the formative experiences of a generation, and aggregate opinion changes over time because the composition of the population changes (sometimes called generational replacement)

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**Proportion of UK adult population from each generational grouping.**
In practice, it is incredibly difficult to unpick these competing explanations, and often each will be present to some extent. Data sources that allow us to look at consistent questions over a long enough time period are also rare, particularly ones that cover a broad range of social issues.

However, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey run by the National Centre for Social Research, does now provide a long time-series, with many questions available at regular intervals since the mid-1980s – a full generational range of over 25 years. While the BSA is a repeated cross-sectional survey, not a longitudinal study that follows the same individuals, it is still possible to simulate cohorts simply by looking at those born in our defined periods in each individual study and plotting those as a measure of that defined generation. We will get more volatility with this type of approach, just because of sample variation – but the patterns are still clear.

This is easier to see in the graphical examples that follow.
The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes.

% Disagree  % Agree

We'll start with views of welfare — and specifically whether government should increase benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes. The overall trend is very clearly against this, as we can see in the chart opposite. Agreement has halved and disagreement has nearly doubled between 1987 and 2010.

But it is how this varies among cohorts that is vital to understand. This is shown in the chart overleaf, where each generation is a separate line. So, for example, the “pre-war” line represents everyone aged 43+ in 1987, everyone 44+ in 1988 and so on until it represents just those aged 66+ in 2010.

There are a number of fascinating insights and finer points to take from this, but three major trends stand out.

Firstly, over the period, all generations show a downward trend in their support for more welfare spending. There is a clear period effect, where the general mood has shifted. There are many possible explanations for this, but they are likely to include a perceived increase in the generosity of welfare benefits, a similar shift in mood against the tax burden falling on people or changes in views of how deserving or otherwise benefit recipients are.

But second, the chart shows that generations mostly stay different from each other — there is hardly any crossing of the lines, and the gaps remain fairly consistent (although there are various interesting points where they do come together). This suggests that attitudes to welfare do have a very important generational aspect: the context you grew up in is really important to relative views of redistribution.
And thirdly, building on this point, there is a clear, consistent generational rank order: the pre-war generation are the most supportive of further redistribution, followed by baby boomers, then generation X then generation Y. The very practical point here for policymakers is that the younger generation seem to have a different view of welfare, even after allowing for the general shift in attitudes across society.

We are exploring this further in a project for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, jointly with Demos, including conducting qualitative research with different cohorts to unpick reasons and explore hypotheses.

It clearly raises important questions about future support for the welfare state as the demographic balance changes. It also echoes Robert Putnam’s work in the US, which suggests that successive generations have lower levels of social trust. Putnam puts this down to changes in the contract between generations, and in particular, that less support is available for more recent generations. For Putnam, the decline in social trust in the US is almost entirely generational, and that has many knock-on effects for the relationship between citizens, and citizen and state.

As Willetts points out, our debate about welfare policy in the UK is easily muddled, because unlike most other countries we’ve lost sight of its contributory nature and confuse social security for the large majority with welfare for the poor. Older groups are net beneficiaries from welfare spending, and therefore widespread support across cohorts can only be maintained if younger generations believe that a similar contract will remain in place when they’re old. This seems likely to prove increasingly difficult, given that younger groups seem to have a much weaker perception of the contributory nature of welfare.

The government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes.
Our analysis of generational opinions doesn’t always show such clear-cut distinctions between each different cohort – and sometimes one generation stands out as distinct. But that can be equally important in understanding recent trends and the future for services.

For example, the chart opposite breaks down trends in satisfaction with the NHS between generations. The first point to note is that the generations do generally follow a similar trend – there are undulations in the 1980s and 1990s, and then a sustained increase in satisfaction across each generation as health service funding increased in the 2000s.

But the other point that clearly stands out is how different the pre-war generation is from the rest – they are significantly more satisfied than following generations at each point, at least since the late 1980s. This gap remains pretty consistent, which suggests that being old in itself is not the primary explanation (we would expect the gap to increase if that was the case, as more of the pre-war generation entered into this older group).

Instead it suggests the importance of growing up when the NHS was being founded and first delivered. This in turn could be due to pride in its institution, or memory of what it was like before it existed.

It has often been observed that the oldest age groups are happier with many aspects of public services*, and one possible explanation suggested is that people expect less as they move into this group. The trends seen here on the NHS suggests that this lifecycle effect may turn out to be less important and that it’s a cohort effect that drives this pattern; in the case of health services at least. This is important to understand; as the composition of the population changes, we may see one older population being replaced by one that is a lot less grateful.

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*Why are older people happier with the NHS?

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How satisfied or dissatisfied would you say you are with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays?
Engagement with formal politics is an area where generational differences are widely seen as important dividing lines, with a number of studies showing younger generations engaging less with traditional political parties. Previous analysis suggests that as well as a generational effect, lifecycle effects may be important too, as it takes some time for political affiliation to “crystallise” among young adults.¹

Looking at one aspect of this political identification – whether people see themselves as supporters of a particular political party – the overall trend is clear, as the chart opposite shows. There has been a general decline in commitment to a particular party – and the only surprise is perhaps that the fall is not steeper.

But the next chart overleaf explains why this might be the case, and is about the clearest illustration of the challenge facing political parties that we’ve seen.

The first key point here is that each generation is almost ruler flat (allowing for some short-term blips) and in strict generational order, which suggests a very strong cohort effect. There is little or no sign of a lifecycle effect - for example, of more recent generations settling down to follow a particular party and take the place of pre-war party supporters (the upswing among generation X and generation Y in 2010 will be worth following, although it is likely to be circumstantial, related to the general election).

The second key point is that it’s the significantly more solid party identification among the pre-war generation that is doing a lot to hold the average up. As this generation dies out therefore, a decline in party support looks inevitable – the generational tide is working against this type of political identification.

Do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?

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<td>2010</td>
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Source: British Social Attitudes

Who still believes in party politics?

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The importance of differences between generations is clearly not new. Karl Mannheim published his seminal work “The Problem of Generations” in 1928, which outlined how formative experiences are vitally important to setting views, and how the strength of links between contemporaries will grow as ties between generations within families weaken. This was something of a break from the orthodoxy, but looking at modern societies, it seems incredibly prescient.

More recently this generational perspective has taken a particular twist, with a surge in studies focusing on the likelihood of increases in intergenerational inequality and conflict - mostly driven by concern about the burden placed on future generations by the good fortune of baby boomers. It is also arguable that a generational focus is increasingly relevant due to the accelerating pace of change in many spheres of life (not least in technology and social media) bringing cohorts together and emphasising the distance between generations.

But in the focus on boomers, and how those following are facing a much tougher time, there’s been relatively little attempt to understand how values and opinions vary across the full range of generations. In particular, perhaps too little attention has been given to how distinct the pre-war generation are, how central they’ve been to stability in measured public opinion – and how much their influence on aggregate views is declining.

Coming Next...

These few examples illustrate the importance of taking a generational focus across a range of social issues. It’s not a new concern – but it seems set to grow in importance. We are continuing to expand the number and range of questions we’re examining with a generational frame – and will publish more on our Generations website as they’re available.

www.ipsos-mori-generations.com
4. To be published May 2013
6. See for example the Frontiers of Performance series of reports by Ipsos MORI on local council, health and housing services www.ipsos-mori.com
7. Park A (2000), ibid; Butler, D and Stokes, D (1969) Political Change in Britain

Note on generational charts: Each point represents at least 200 respondents in each cohort.
For more information

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