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# DOES THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS MATTER FOR SOCIAL SPENDING?

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# Does the Underrepresentation of Young People in Political Institutions Matter for Social Spending?

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## Abstract

Young people are underrepresented in most political institutions. While prior studies have investigated the causes behind the shortage of younger politicians in public office, there is a lack of research on the potential consequences for either substantive representation or policy outcomes. I theorize that the age of politicians affects how they allocate government spending on social welfare between age groups and over time. Using an original dataset of over 12,000 mayoral candidates in Japan (2006–2019) and a regression discontinuity design, I find that younger mayors increase their municipality’s spending on child welfare for younger families, especially through long-term investments in infrastructure, whereas older mayors expand short-term benefits for the elderly. These findings provide evidence for a link between the descriptive and substantive representation of different age groups and suggest that greater youth representation can affect the well-being of younger people.

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Young people are underrepresented in most political institutions. Over half of the world's voters are under 40 years old, compared to 15% of national legislators (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2018). In many advanced democracies such as Japan, this disparity is even greater. Less than 7% of members of the House of Representatives are under 40, compared to nearly a third of the voting-age population. Local politicians play a critical role in the provision of government services, yet they too tend to be older than most of their constituents. The average municipal assembly member begins their term at 59 and the average mayor at 62. Just 6% of assembly members and 2% of mayors are under 40.<sup>1</sup>

Although scholars have studied the *causes* of the age bias in political institutions (e.g., Lawless and Fox 2015; Stockemer and Sundström 2018), there is a lack of research on the potential *consequences* for either substantive representation or policy outcomes. This is surprising given that there are well-developed literatures on how other characteristics such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation influence elite behavior (e.g., Broockman 2013; Carnes and Lupu 2014; Lowande, Ritchie and Lauterbach 2019; Reynolds 2013). Moreover, the shortage of younger politicians across all levels of government is concerning for several reasons. There are many issues that disproportionately affect the young, from policies on education, unemployment, and childcare to those addressing longer-term challenges such as climate change, public debt, and social welfare reform. Without the greater presence of younger politicians in elected office, the policies implemented by mostly older politicians may be detrimental to both the short- and long-term interests of younger generations.

In this article, I examine how the age of mayors in Japan affects the welfare policies they enact in office. Intergenerational conflict over welfare is an especially salient issue in many advanced democracies that confront the challenges of declining birth rates and aging populations, as shrinking workforces struggle to support rising welfare costs for growing elderly populations. Japan, as the world's oldest country, is at the forefront of this demographic trend. It thus provides an ideal setting to analyze how politicians of different ages allocate

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<sup>1</sup>Based on data collected by the author from Japanese election websites and newspaper archives.



scarce resources between competing priorities for social welfare. On the one hand, spending on child welfare for younger families can increase fertility rates and female labor force participation, which addresses the labor shortage and long-term sustainability of the welfare system (Fukai 2017; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010). On the other hand, spending on elderly welfare can help governments keep up with the pressing financial and healthcare needs of an increasing number of senior citizens (Harper 2014; Muramatsu and Akiyama 2011).

I theorize that a politician's age can influence their welfare policies in two ways. First, I expect that age affects elite preferences for the redistribution of welfare between age groups. I anticipate that younger politicians will promote welfare policies that benefit younger families more than older politicians, who will instead favor policies that target the elderly. Second, I hypothesize that age shapes how politicians allocate welfare over time. I expect younger politicians with longer time horizons to be more willing to make long-term investments in welfare, whereas older politicians will emphasize short-term welfare spending.

I test these hypotheses using a regression discontinuity design (RDD) and an original dataset of Japanese mayoral elections matched with detailed municipal expenditures data. Younger and older mayors are not randomly distributed across municipalities, which differ in their welfare needs and preferences. By leveraging close elections between younger and older mayoral candidates, the advantage of my design is that I can estimate the causal effect of a younger (or older) candidate becoming mayor on welfare spending while holding constant the demographic composition, ideology, and socioeconomic characteristics of municipalities. Focusing on Japan offers further advantages because mayors have considerable discretion to implement their preferred welfare policies, and the municipal expenditures data allow me to identify spending targeted at different age groups and time periods. However, there is a lack of data on municipal elections. To fill in this gap, I use web scraping to assemble an original dataset of 12,191 mayoral candidates competing in 6,371 elections (2006–2019). I then supplement the findings from this new dataset with insights from interviews with 15 mayors and 20 municipal bureaucrats working inside social welfare departments.

I find a clear connection between a politician's age and their welfare policies. Younger mayors increase discretionary spending on child welfare for younger families by over 30% and double their municipality's prior investment in this area. In contrast, older mayors do not increase spending overall on elderly welfare but they do change the temporal dimension to these expenditures by decreasing long-term investment in favor of short-term benefits. Robustness checks further show that these results hold across alternative age cutoffs for younger and older mayors and are not driven by other candidate or municipality characteristics.

Overall, I provide evidence that the age of politicians matters for substantive representation and policy outcomes. While past studies on elite characteristics have tended to focus on how they influence redistribution *between groups* (Krcmaric, Nelson and Roberts 2020), my work shows that age is unique from other social identities as it also affects preferences for the allocation of welfare *over time*. Moreover, contrary to existing work on the age orientation of welfare programs, which emphasizes the role of electoral institutions (Lynch 2006; Estévez-Abe 2008), I find that even under the same majoritarian system the age of elected officials can make a substantial difference in spending that affects the public's well-being, especially individuals at the child-rearing life stage. Ultimately, my results show that the descriptive underrepresentation of young people in public office can harm their substantive representation, the degree to which their interests are reflected in welfare policies.

## **Age, Elite Behavior, and Welfare Policy**

In most countries, elected officials tend to be older than most of the constituents they represent. Recently, this common feature of political institutions has attracted significant scholarly attention. However, studies to date have focused almost exclusively on the causes of youth underrepresentation rather than the consequences. In doing so, scholars point mainly to supply-side explanations, from a lack of political ambition among young people (Lawless and Fox 2015; Shames 2017) to restrictive political institutions such as candidate-centered electoral systems and high minimum age requirements to run for office (Joshi 2013; Stockemer