

Author(s): Sears, David O. and Leonie Huddy
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Abstract

Sears and Huddy discuss the role played by group dynamics in determining the political attitudes of older Americans. They find that the 1985 Pilot Study results indicate that older people do not demonstrate interest group behavior. Most notably, there are no age-based differences in levels of support for increasing government spending on programs benefiting older people, or in candidate preference in the 1984 election. Sears and Huddy attempt to explain this phenomenon by exploring the nature of political cleavages among older people. Specifically, the authors examine divisions along two dimensions -- self-identification as "old" versus "not old," and the existence of identity as "workers" versus "retired" -- in the context of support for candidates and policies which advance the interests of the elderly. They find that self-identification as an older person has significant main and interactive effects on candidate and policy evaluations. Moreover, identification as an "older worker" is more politically consequential than self-identification as a "retired person." Sears and Huddy also find that status interests influence support for pro-elderly policies and candidates, both directly and in conjunction with personal identity. While the magnitude of political effects attributable to status interests is less than that accounted by economic considerations, concerns about the status of older people have substantial political consequences, independent of economic interests. This finding, Sears and Huddy conclude, provides support for the social identity theory of group dynamics.