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The Influence of Age on Citizens' Preferences for Age-Related Descriptive Representation

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Abstract

While in most countries the age of candidacy is 18, young people are strongly underrepresented in legislatures around the world. This results in a notable age gap between the average parliamentarian and the electorate. So far, the majority of studies focus on structural and party-level factors contributing to age disparities in descriptive underrepresentation. And even though young candidates are perceived as less experienced, recent research shows varying effects of candidates' age on voters' willingness to elect them. What is mostly lacking, however, is an individual-level perspective on age-centred representation. How does a political representative's age matter for citizens and do citizens' preferences regarding representation differ between age groups? We base our theoretical arguments on the literature on candidate characteristics and ingroup-outgroup behaviour. Empirically, we provide evidence based on original data collected in Germany—that age matters for citizens on all levels of government, but especially for young people (below 31 years). Furthermore, we observe strong and significant ingroup preferences for both young and elderly citizens (60 years and above). Yet, with regard to outgroup discrimination, we find a notable asymmetry: Young adults exhibit aversion to being represented by individuals over 60 years, whilst seniors do not significantly discriminate against young representatives. These preference patterns speak to recent findings that enhanced descriptive youth representation leads to an increase in turnout among young people by providing additional insights into the mechanisms behind this relationship.

Keywords

age groups; candidates; descriptive representation; Germany; ingroup-outgroup; representation preferences; representatives; youth

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1. Introduction

Worldwide, only 2.8 percent of parliamentarians are younger than 30 years old, and around 25 percent of single and lower chambers of parliament do not have a single MP aged 30 and under (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023, p. 7). The strong underrepresentation of young people in legislatures around the world presents both a democratic deficit as well as a deficit in generational equity (e.g., Bidadanure, 2015; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022b). The share of MPs over the age of 60, however, is much higher with around 20 percent worldwide (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022a). But although prominent examples, like the US Congress and the Japanese National Diet, feature a higher share of those over 60 than in the general population, in many political bodies seniors are, in fact, also often descriptively underrepresented.

So far, the majority of studies researching these disparities in descriptive age representation, especially youth's political underrepresentation, have focused on structural factors such as the electoral system or youth quotas (e.g., Belschner & Garcia De Paredes, 2021; Joshi, 2013; Krook & Nugent, 2018; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022b) and the supply side of politics, namely party-level explanations (Kurz & Ettensperger, 2023; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022b) and candidate selection procedures (Belschner, 2023; Deiss-Helbig, 2021). The demand side of politics has received far less attention, with a few recent experimental studies investigating voter evaluations of candidates' age (Eshima & Smith, 2022; McClean & Ono, 2024; Roberts & Wolak, 2023). The results are rather ambiguous, and the question of how important age actually is to citizens remains largely untouched as well as the question of how the relative importance and evaluation are influenced by individual-level characteristics.

In this article, we thus examine how important the age of political representatives is to citizens and how citizens' age-related preferences are influenced by their own age. Moreover, we investigate to what extent individuals prefer to be represented by a member of their own age group and whether they discriminate against members of other age groups (in-group and out-group behaviour).

Leveraging original survey data on citizens' preferences regarding age-centred representation in Germany, we demonstrate that age plays a significant role in citizens' representation preferences, especially for younger respondents. We observe strong and significant in-group favouritism for both young and elderly citizens (below 31 and above 60 years old, respectively). Interestingly, we find a notable asymmetry in out-group discrimination, as young adults exhibit a rather strong aversion to being represented by individuals over 60 years old while older demographics do not significantly discriminate against young representatives. These findings advance the growing literature on age-centred representation preferences by offering a foundation for future experimental studies, which will require more precise and detailed model specifications. The identified preference patterns also speak to recent findings that enhanced descriptive youth representation leads to an increase in turnout among young people (Angelucci et al., 2024; Castanho Silva, 2024; Pomante & Schraufnagel, 2015) by providing additional insights into the mechanisms behind this relationship. Therefore, our article contributes meaningfully to the understanding of intergenerational conflict in political behaviour.

2. Theoretical Considerations on Citizens' Age-Related Representation Preferences

In recent decades, political scientists have shown a growing interest in citizens' preferences regarding descriptive representation, often finding these preferences to be influenced by social identity. For example, Rosenthal (1995) demonstrated early on that women in the US prefer female politicians due to group interests and feminist attitudes. Experimental research from Sweden shows that citizens react positively to a representative if they share the same immigrant background (Agerberg, 2024). And, Vivyan et al. (2020) similarly argue that citizens in Germany and Britain evaluate politicians with working-class roots more positively based on class affinity. Although there is reason to believe that citizens may also value age as a category of descriptive representation and that age-centred preferences are influenced by belonging to specific age groups, age-centred preferences have so far not been the primary focus of research. We therefore begin by providing a concise overview of the existing literature on voter evaluations of candidate age. While the focus of this literature is somewhat different, we believe that some findings might also help in gaining an understanding of citizens' more general preference patterns that are not directly linked to vote choice.

The most comprehensive study, a meta-analysis of 16 conjoint experiments conducted in eight countries, reveals "that older hypothetical candidates are consistently less likely to be favoured by respondents—whether compared to the youngest alternative or the second-oldest alternative" (Eshima & Smith, 2022, p. 3). Their conjoint experiment in Japan showed that moving from 69 to 70 years leads to a significant penalty for the older candidate. The authors argue that this reflects a "mismatch between voters' preferences for younger politicians and the ostensible gerontocracy that governs much of the world" (Eshima & Smith, 2022, p. 3). This aligns with the findings of McClean and Ono (2024), who indicate that Japanese voters "strongly disliked older candidates but viewed younger and middle-aged candidates as equally favorable" (McClean & Ono, 2024, p. 1). The extent to which these findings are transferable to other contexts will be discussed later. Similarly, Sevi (2021, p. 1) tested whether a "leader is more popular among voters closer to them in age" and whether "such voters are more likely to vote for them," using cross-national data from 51 countries. While she found some support for both, the effect sizes are very small. Finally, Roberts and Wolak (2023) present results from a vignette experiment in the US, where they find no statistically significant penalty against either young (23 years) or old (77 years) candidates.

Results on voter evaluations of candidate age are thus quite ambiguous, ranging from findings that most voters do not use age as a heuristic cue (Dobbs, 2020) to voters preferring partisan candidates of their own age (Webster & Pierce, 2019), being biased against elderly candidates (Eshima & Smith, 2022; McClean & Ono, 2024) or null findings (Roberts & Wolak, 2023). While in political science, age is generally considered an important factor and is almost automatically included as a control variable in many works on political behaviour (Smets & Van Ham, 2013), it has seldomly featured conceptually or analytically on its own. The meta-analysis by Eshima and Smith (2022) is an important first step towards systematically examining how age influences voters' candidate perceptions. However, the question of how important age actually is to citizens remains largely unexplored.

Looking into studies that feature age as a control, it becomes apparent that the level of governance might matter as well. Contrary to the above-mentioned bias against elderly candidates, voters at the German local level seem less inclined to support both old and young candidates (Velimsky et al., 2024). Differences between government levels might also be due to citizens using age as a cue for (political) experience

(McClean & Ono, 2024). It is a well-established fact that political experience presents an electoral advantage for candidates (Lazarus, 2008; Put et al., 2021), "so much so that most research has considered political experience the 'ex ante indicator' of candidate quality" (Portmann, 2022, p. 2050). Therefore, the importance of a representative's age might differ between government levels. The local or regional level often serves as an entry point into politics, with many politicians starting their career in city councils or being state legislators before entering the national parliament as MPs. Experience, and therefore age, might matter less to citizens in legislatures on lower levels, which is why we include different levels in our analysis.

With regard to our hypotheses, we take a step back from the literature on candidate evaluation and focus on citizens' more general representation preferences using a social identity approach. We first expect the importance of a representative's age for citizens to differ between age groups. Age is linked to different stages in life, such as being in education or starting a family, and might play an important role in forming one's own identity, especially during times when people spend a lot of time with members of the same age group, such as at school or university. As age is a transient rather than static characteristic, it is more difficult to use for political mobilisation. However, despite its constant evolution, age remains immutable and beyond individual control and therefore holds potential for frustration, e.g., if someone is considered too old or too young to participate in certain events or to access specific places (adultism and ageism). In this sense, it is similar to other categories such as ethnicity, origin, gender, or sexual orientation, all of which are highly politicised. Research on women and minority descriptive representation has shown that members of these groups use identity markers as heuristic cues (Goodyear-Grant & Tolley, 2019; Martin, 2019; Stein et al., 2005). Descriptively underrepresented age groups, namely the young and the old, might be particularly sensitive about the age of politicians and perceive age as more important when evaluating a political representative.

For our analysis, we define a young representative as well as a young adult to be younger than 31 years. This threshold is in line with large parts of the literature on youth political representation (e.g., Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023; Stockemer & Sundström, 2022a) and is commonly associated with important lifecycle events such as getting married or becoming parents. We define an old representative and, accordingly, a senior citizen as someone aged 60 and older—a threshold that also features in the largest comparative age representation dataset (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022a), but—more importantly—corresponds to societal perceptions: When asked "At what age do you think people generally start being described as old?" the median answer in Germany has been 60 the last time this question featured in the European Social Survey (2023). Building upon the above-described theoretical considerations and these definitions, we put forward the following hypothesis:

> H1: Age is more important for young adults and seniors than for those in between.

Apart from the question of how important age is to citizens and how this differs between groups, we need to better understand how individuals evaluate a politician's age and whether age-based preference patterns differ from other influential characteristics such as gender or class. To analyse potential ingroup–outgroup dynamics, we focus on the national level, where we expect that a representative's age is perceived as more important than at the local and regional levels.

Building upon social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004/1986), we understand age as part of one's social identity. Tajfel and Turner (2004/1986) argue that people get a sense of social belonging and self-worth from their memberships in social groups—such as age groups—so that they then draw favourable

comparisons between their own group and other groups. The theory thus predicts specific intergroup behaviour that can conceptually be differentiated into three forms of discrimination (Brewer, 1999, 2016). The first form is driven by ingroup favouritism: "wherein treatment of the ingroup is biased in a positive direction and treatment of the outgroup is indifferent" (Brewer, 2016, p. 92). The second type is driven by outgroup discrimination while treatment of the ingroup is indifferent/unbiased. Brewer (2016, p. 92) explains that "[d]iscrimination that is derived from outgroup antagonism (hate) is actively directed at harming or disadvantaging members of the outgroup, whether or not any personal or ingroup benefit is gained in the process." The third form of discrimination involves both mechanisms: "differential treatment in favor of the ingroup *and* against the outgroup" (Brewer, 2016, p. 92). This form of discrimination is often associated with situations that are perceived as zero-sum—when outgroup gains are thought to be at the expense of the ingroup. For Brewer (2016, p. 92), discrimination arising from "this form of prejudice is motivated more by ingroup protection (rather than enhancement) as well as antagonism toward the outgroup."

To analyse citizens' preferences and ingroup–outgroup dynamics regarding the evaluation of political representatives, we assume this third type of discrimination to occur among age groups, as elections can be understood as zero-sum situations due to the limited number of seats in parliament. Results from research on candidate characteristics point in this direction. Immigrant candidates in Switzerland are disadvantaged both through ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination by native voters (Portmann & Stojanović, 2022) and, when analysing the white population in the US, both effects have impacted candidate evaluations in past elections (Jardina, 2021).

We expect to observe the same ingroup–outgroup preference pattern for age groups. Ingroup favouritism in this context might either be identity-based (feeling closer to representatives of the same age groups) or based on instrumental motives, i.e., the belief that members of their own age groups represent age-specific interests better. This can be seen as analogous to voters preferring candidates who actually live in their own electoral districts due to them being "personally affected by policy choices, so voters can assume that candidates have a personal stake in representing the needs of their districts" (Velimsky et al., 2024, p. 1094). These instrumental motives can become relevant in policy fields where public spending disproportionately benefits certain age groups, such as pension systems, healthcare, or education. Based on these instrumental considerations we also expect to observe outgroup discrimination. Just like parliamentary seats, public spending is perceived as a zero-sum game, so that age groups can be understood as competing for a limited resource.

Additionally, one could argue that young people and old people might not react equally strongly to their underrepresentation—young people might be more used to politicians being older than them and thus discriminate less against older representatives. Alternatively, older people might show less aversion to being represented by someone young since they are descriptively better represented. Since these arguments remain quite speculative, we put forward the following two hypotheses without detailing differences between the age groups in expected effect size:

> H2: Citizens prefer to be represented by their own age group as compared to other age groups (ingroup favouritism).

> H3: Citizens dislike being represented by age groups that are the furthest away from their own age group as compared to other age groups (outgroup discrimination).

3. Research Design

3.1. Case Selection and Data

We consider Germany an intriguing and pivotal case, which, surprisingly, has not been thoroughly analysed in terms of age-based representational preferences. Germany's political landscape is characterised by a complex, federalised, and decentralised multi-level system, where political competition, legislative decision-making, and institutional features are intricately linked across federal, state, and local levels (Gross et al., 2023). Elections at different political levels rarely coincide. This staggered election schedule continuously reminds voters of political representatives' attributes. For example, recent research has shown that a candidate's migration background and social class matter to citizens and impact their voting decisions (Goerres et al., 2022; Matthews & Kerevel, 2021; Vivyan et al., 2020). Furthermore, public discussions on the age structure in parliaments in Germany are not only prevalent at the federal level but also at the state and local levels (e.g., media coverage by Erhardt-Maciejewski, 2018; Kohler & Pentz, 2023), leading us to expect the political representatives' attribute "age" to hold significance for citizens.

In our hypotheses, we expect especially the descriptively underrepresented age groups to be sensitive towards a representative's age—namely young adults and seniors. In this regard, Germany presents itself as a least-likely case. Despite having a relatively old and ageing population, at least Germany's federal parliament is comparatively young when contrasted with countries like France, Italy, Japan, or the US. Nevertheless, young adults are still severely underrepresented. After the 2021 Bundestag elections, for example, there were 0.29 parliamentarians aged 30 or under for every person in the corresponding age group in the population (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022a). Seniors in Germany not only hold considerable political power due to their large numbers but also have institutionalized ways of influencing party policies through the seniors' wings, which might prevent them from attributing much importance to the age of their representatives. For people who are 61 and over, the share of MPs relative to their share in the population amounted to a score of 0.84. While this indicates only a slight underrepresentation compared to young people, the difference with the overrepresented age group of those between 40 and 60 remains strong: their share relation amounts to a score of 1.82 (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022a). A similar pattern can also be observed for the various state parliaments (Kalisch, 2008; Koch et al., 2024).

Germany therefore presents itself as an ideal case to better understand when and how citizens use age as a heuristic to evaluate representatives on various levels of political governance. If we observe the above-hypothesized ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination in a least-like scenario like Germany, the results are very likely to be generalizable for countries with lower representation levels for the young and the old.

We rely on original survey data from Germany, making use of Bilendi's online access panel fielded from 6 to 15 November 2023. The survey was based on a sampling design that drew on parameters representative of the population, ensuring minimal socio-demographic distortions. The survey was specifically tailored to analyse citizens' preferences for representation and had 1,200 respondents. Since only respondents who provided a substantive answer to the relevant indicators were included in the analysis, a total of 949 respondents remained.

3.2. Dependent Variables

To assess our first hypothesis on the influence of respondent age on the importance assigned to representative age, we run individual models for each government level in Germany. Respondents were asked to indicate how important a representative's age is to them in local, state, and federal elections, respectively. From this, we generated three distinct variables: *Age (local level)*, *Age (state level)*, and *Age (federal level)*, each ranging from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*very important*). For further details about the wording, see Table A1 in the Supplementary File.

To assess our second and third hypotheses, we use an indicator based on individuals' responses to how desirable they find being represented by individuals who are (a) 30 years or younger, and (b) 60 years or older. They were asked: "Generally speaking, how desirable do you think it would be to be politically represented by a person belonging to one of the following groups?" and rated this desirability on a scale from –5 (*not at all desirable*) to +5 (*completely desirable*). Figure 1 shows the distribution of answers. It shows that the mean values for respondents' desirability of being represented by politicians who are 60 years and older and politicians who are 30 years and younger only slightly differ. Yet, it immediately becomes clear that there is a large variation within the respective items that needs to be explained.
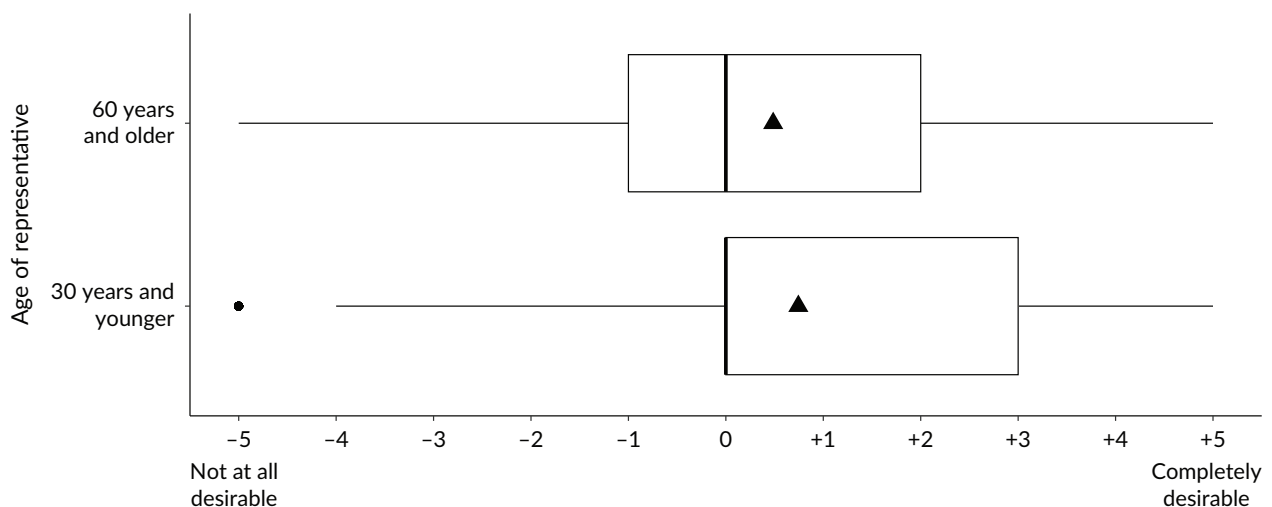

Figure 1. Distribution of answers for the desirability of being represented by someone old or someone young. Notes: The mean values are represented as a triangle; the dot in the graph indicates an outlier; $N = 1,200$. Source: Own presentation and calculation.

In an additional analysis in the Supplementary File, we compare the ingroup–outgroup desirability of age groups to other ingroup–outgroup patterns, namely self-identifying as a blue-collar worker (dependent variable: *Blue-Collar Rep.*) and the effect of gender (dependent variables: *Female Rep.* and *Male Rep.*). We generate two dummy variables, one for respondents identifying as a *Blue-Collar Worker* and one based on respondents' sex (*Sex*; 1 = *male*, 2 = *female*). All models feature the entirety of group-related respondent characteristics.

3.3. Independent and Control Variables

To analyse the importance assigned to age (H1) and age-based ingroup-outgroup patterns (H2 and H3), we use the same age brackets for the respondents as described above for representatives: young adults below 31 years and seniors over 60 years, with those in between as a reference category (31–59 years). By choosing age groups at the opposite sides of the age continuum, we make sure that group members are likely to perceive themselves as "different" from those in the other group. The age distribution of our respondents is as follows: 22.33 percent ($N = 212$) fall within the 18 to 30 age range, while 59.22 percent ($N = 562$) are between 31 and 59 years old. Additionally, 18.44 percent of respondents ($N = 175$) are 60 years or older. Although the younger age group is slightly overrepresented and the older cohorts are underrepresented, this is typical for an online access panel survey. However, both groups are sufficiently large, particularly in comparison to the reference category of 31–59-year-olds, allowing for reliable conclusions about the different age categories.

We control for several additional variables that have been identified in the literature to affect citizens' representational preferences. As education seems to impact representational preferences for other forms of descriptive representation—e.g., less-educated white individuals responding more negatively to representation by non-white legislators (Jones, 2016)—we firstly control for respondents' level of education (*Education*) based on their highest general school-leaving qualification. Secondly, we include a 6-point-scaled item on citizens' place of residence (*Urban–Rural*), ranging from 1 (*big city*) to 6 (*isolated farmstead or detached house in the countryside*), as it has been shown that the place of residence impacts political behaviour (Walsh, 2012).

Moreover, ideology affects voters' preferences regarding descriptive representation. While voters generally prefer candidates of their own race or gender, this preference is moderated by ideological alignment (Martin, 2019). Additionally, it can be argued that liberal/progressive voters are more likely to be used to and hence are more favourable towards young representatives. This might be because at least in proportional representation systems, such as Germany, progressive parties tend to have more young MPs (Kurz & Ettensperger, 2023) and some parties emphasise age more often. For illustration, the average age of party parliamentary groups after the 2021 Bundestag election ranged between 42.5 years for the youngest party parliament group (Alliance 90/The Greens) and 51.3 years for the oldest (Alternative for Germany; Deutscher Bundestag, 2021). Thirdly, we control for respondents' own assessment of their positions regarding the socio-cultural dimension (*Ideology: Liberal Urban–Rural Conservative*), ranging from 1 (*liberal*) to 11 (*conservative*).

Additionally, we control for several characteristics and perceptions that are known to influence political behaviour and might therefore also impact citizens' representational preferences. *Political Interest*, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very strong*), might impact the importance assigned to representatives' characteristics. Furthermore, respondents' overall satisfaction with democracy—*Satisfaction: Democracy*, ranging from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*)—and with being politically represented—*Satisfaction: Representation*, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*)—might impact ingroup–outgroup behaviour, with rising satisfaction leading to less outgroup discrimination.

People often seek representation from individuals who share their identity, irrespective of party affiliation, as they feel their specific interests and experiences are not adequately addressed in politics. Descriptive representation encompasses identity traits such as gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation that can cut

across party lines. Research indicates that, regardless of party affiliation, representatives with a working-class background (e.g., Hemingway, 2022), women (e.g., Erzeel & Celis, 2016), or those who self-identify as LGB+ (Debus & Wurthmann, 2024) are more likely to represent individuals from the same social community. Therefore, we have chosen not to control for party affiliation, but instead to focus on sociocultural ideology as described in the previous paragraphs. Summary statistics for all variables can be found in Table A2 in the Supplementary File.

3.4. Analytical Strategy

In the following sections, we will first present a series of descriptive findings on the perceived importance of various individual characteristics, with a focus on differences across levels of government. Additionally, we will examine age-related variations regarding representation preferences. As we assume linear relationships between our variables, we will subsequently employ linear regression models to, first, explore which factors influence the importance of a political representative's age for citizens and, second, to analyse the specific factors that affect respondents' desirability of younger versus older representatives.

4. Results and Discussion

We start the presentation of the results by giving a descriptive overview of the importance of age for voters on different government levels by comparing it to the importance assigned to other characteristics (Figure 2). On all three government levels, age receives the highest average importance score, comparable to occupation and immigration status. Voters thus perceive age to be more important than highly politicised characteristics, such as gender or sexual orientation. Regarding the various levels of government, we do not observe significant differences between the average importance scores on the local, state, or federal levels. In the Supplementary File, we additionally present the distribution of answers over the three analysed
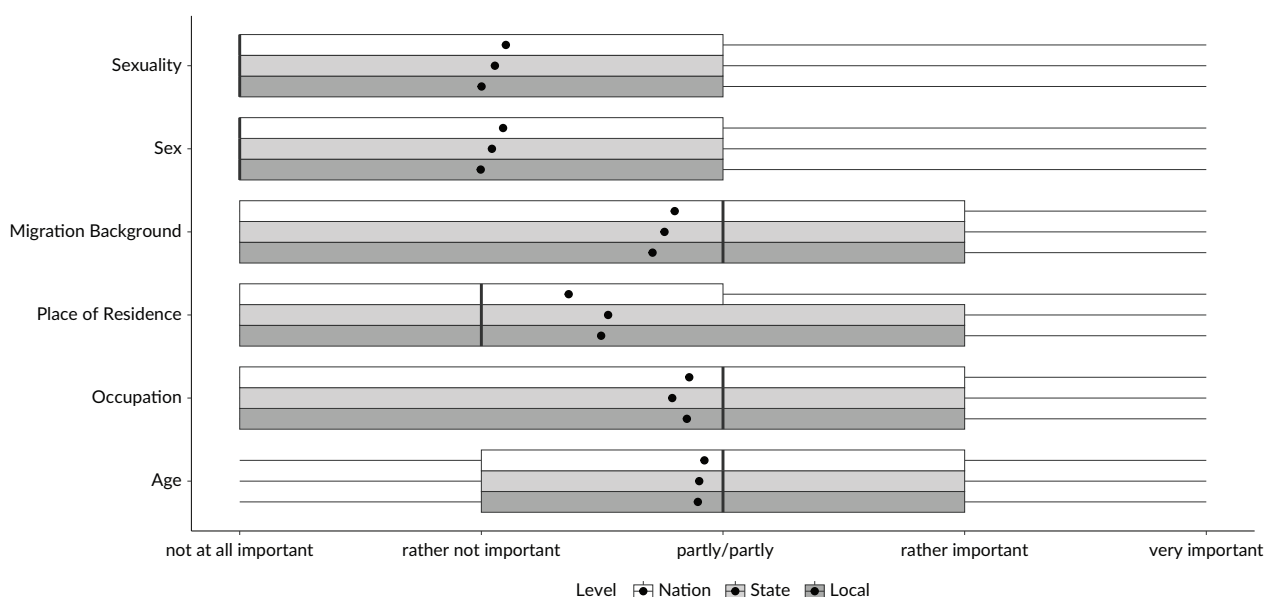

Figure 2. Distribution of importance ratings for several characteristics of political representatives. Notes: The mean values are represented as dots; *N* = 1,200. Source: Own presentation and calculation.

age groups on the different government levels (Figures A1, A2, and A3). Young people and, to a lesser degree, old people exhibit a left-skewed distribution—an observation we analyse more closely with our regression models.

Figure 3 presents the results from regression models for the different government levels (full results in the Supplementary File, Table A3). Regarding the government levels, we again observe no clear pattern over the different age groups (and neither for the control variables). In H1, we assumed that politician age would be more important both for young adults (18–30) and seniors (60+) than for those in between. But interestingly, we observe this only for young adults. Seniors do not differ significantly from the reference category. Hence, our first hypothesis only partially holds true. This might be due to differences in perceived political power and party responsiveness, as people above 60 years make up a large share of the electorate and have high turnout rates, especially compared to young adults. Seniors could thus be more likely to perceive parties as more responsive towards their needs and might care less about a representative's age. Most of the included control variables do not impact the importance assigned to a representative's age. We observe a small, but significant effect of ideology which could be linked to more liberal/progressive respondents generally assigning greater importance to descriptive representation of social groups. Furthermore, being more satisfied with the current state of democracy has a positive impact on the importance assigned to age—a relationship we will further discuss below with regard to the desirability of being represented by someone young or someone old.

In the second step, we analyse how citizens judge the desirability of being represented by either someone up to 30 years old or someone aged 60 or older. We again start by giving a descriptive overview. Figure 4 presents the distribution of desirability ratings for an old and a young representative by respondents' age groups. Overall, we observe the expected distribution: most older respondents rate an older representative positively, while half of them assign a young representative a negative score. Most young respondents, on the
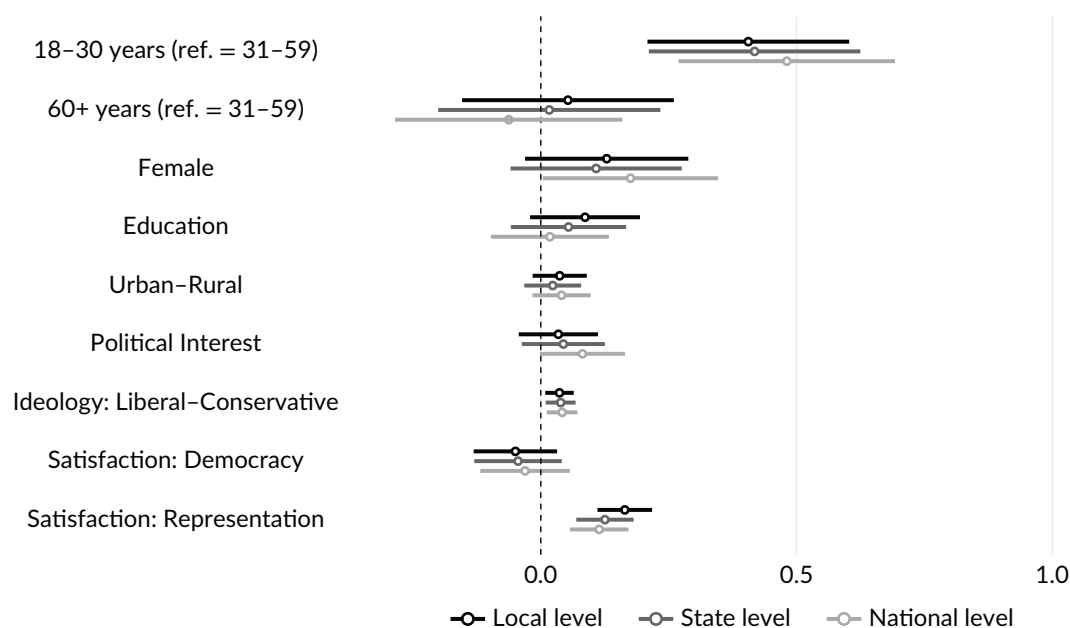

Figure 3. Importance of a political representative's age. Coefficients with 95 percent-Confidence Intervals for models on different government levels. Notes: $N = 949$; full model specification is presented in Table A3 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own presentation and calculation.
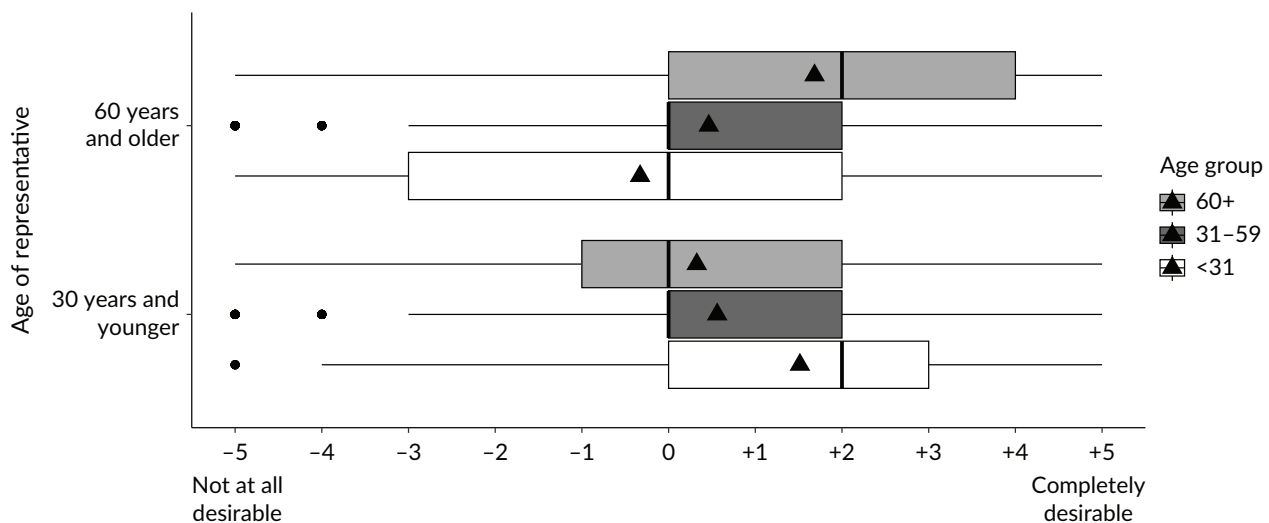
Figure 4. Distribution of desirability ratings for an old representative (60 years and older) and a young one (30 years and younger) by respondents' age groups. Notes: The mean values are represented as triangles; the dot in the graph indicates an outlier; *N* = 1,200. Source: Own presentation and calculation.

other hand, rate a young representative positively, while half of the age group assigns a negative score to the desirability of being represented by someone aged 60 or older. Interestingly, the distribution is much more concentrated around zero for the middle-aged group, leading to the extreme negative values being outliers. This difference in distribution might already indicate that respondents between 31–59 years old feel less strongly about old or young representatives. In addition to the boxplots, we present histograms for the overall distribution of answers in the Supplementary File (Figure A4).

Figure 5 presents the results of our regression analysis regarding the desirability of being represented by someone young and someone old on the federal level. For young people, we observe the expected ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination: compared to middle-aged people, young people prefer to be represented by someone young and dislike being represented by an old parliamentarian. Interestingly, for senior citizens, we only observe ingroup favouritism, but no significant outgroup discrimination towards young representatives. Our second hypothesis, that young people prefer to be represented by young people and seniors prefer to be represented by seniors, thus finds empirical support. Our third hypothesis must be partly rejected for seniors, as only young adults dislike being represented by seniors, but seniors do not perceive a young representative to be less desirable.

The behaviour of seniors can thus only be linked to positive attitudes towards one's own group, whilst the behaviour of young people fits with what has been described as a form of discrimination that is linked to zero-sum games, in "which gains for the outgroup are seen as being achieved at the expense of the ingroup" (Brewer, 2016, p. 92). Following Brewer (2016), the outgroup discrimination in this case is not motivated by ingroup enhancement but rather ingroup protection. This difference between the ingroup–outgroup-behaviour of seniors and young adults points towards differences in the perception of political processes and raises questions, such as: Do young people as a social group feel somehow "threatened" by seniors? The idea seems plausible with regard to recent developments. Societal ageing leads to a decrease in the share of young people in the voting population, which makes it harder to assert youth-specific interests through elections. The emergence of a variety of youth-led climate organizations
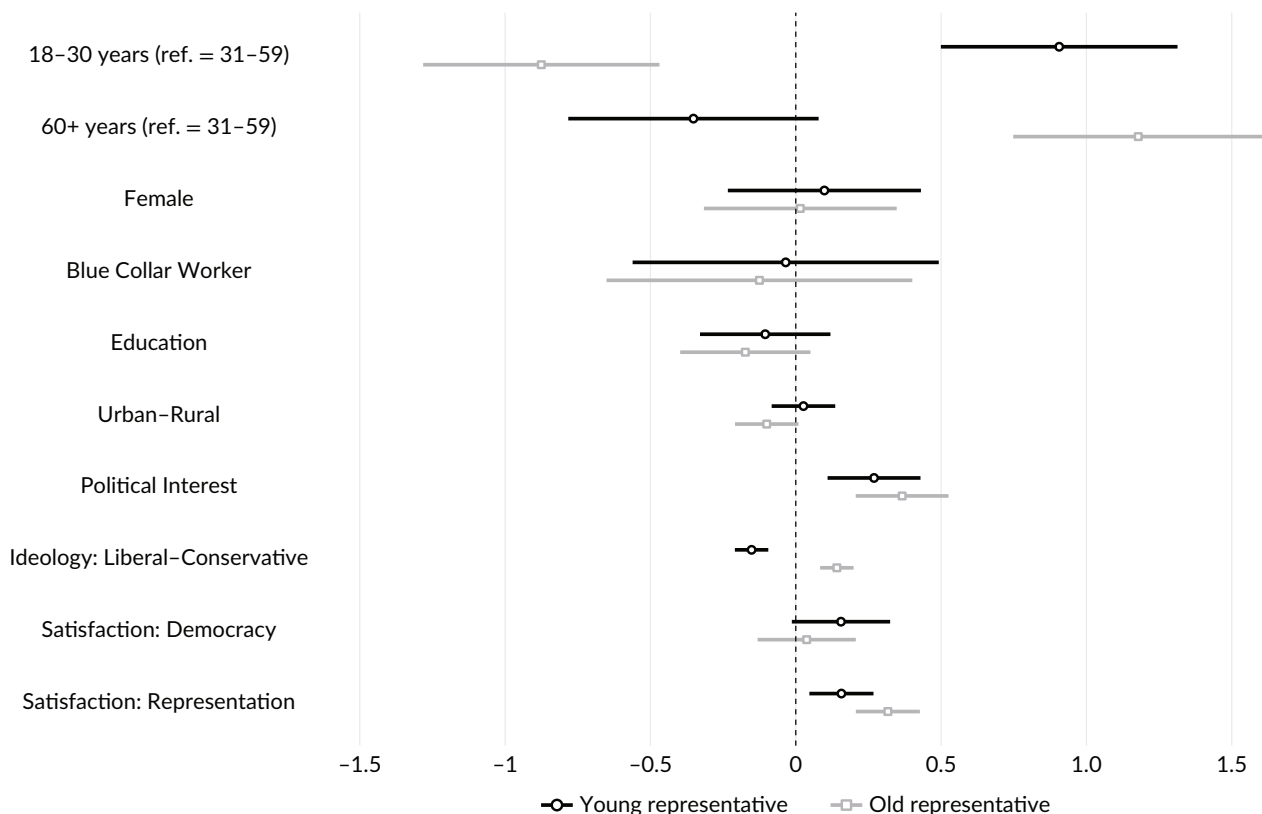
Figure 5. Desirability of being represented by someone young and someone old on the federal level. Coefficients with 95 percent-confidence intervals. Notes: N = 949; full model specification is presented in Table A5 in the Supplementary File. Source: Own presentation and calculation.

that organise mostly outside of political parties and other forms of institutionalised representative democracy could be understood as a reaction to this shift in political power. Societal ageing also leads to insecurities regarding the stability of welfare regimes, especially pension systems and the latest German pension reform has been described as a "gigantic redistribution program from young to old" (Jacobsen, 2024). These developments might lead to young people's feeling that their age groups need protection. Furthermore, party behaviour might also contribute to the difference in outgroup discrimination, if young people should perceive parties as less responsive than seniors do.

Additionally, our results provide deeper insights into how voters evaluate age when compared to results from the experimental studies on candidate choice. Whilst Eshima and Smith (2022) found evidence for an old-age penalty in their meta-analysis, they did not analyse individual-level characteristics such as respondent age. Our results suggest that the old-age penalty is driven especially by young voters and—to a lesser extent— by middle-aged voters. While this is still in line with existing research, the ingroup favouritism we observe among German seniors (statistically significant on the $p < 0.001$ level) challenges results from McClean and Ono (2024), who found no ingroup preference among the Japanese elderly, who are, "if anything, even more critical of elderly candidates than others" (McClean & Ono, 2024, p. 3). What seems to be a contradiction at first glance might be explained by differences in political and social contexts. The authors argue that results from Japan could translate quite well to other countries as it is "a country known for its predominantly older elected officials, strong norms of elder respect, and the world's highest proportion of elderly citizens" (McClean & Ono, 2024, p. 8). However, it might be exactly this context that leads to the absence of ingroup favouritism

among seniors. In Japan, the share of MPs aged 61 and older is already more than twice as high as the share of this age group in the population (Stockemer & Sundström, 2022a), so older citizens might not feel the need for increased descriptive representation. Additionally, the authors describe their results to be driven by age-related stereotypes, something that might be less present in Germany, where politicians tend to be significantly younger than in Japan, where elderly citizens are underrepresented in the parliament, and age is considered less important with regard to social hierarchies and respect than in Japan.

In the Supplementary File, we present a robustness check by comparing our results with those from a model that tests for a linear age effect (Table A4). Age remains a significant predictor for the desirability of being represented by someone young or someone old with the expected effect directions: the desirability of being represented by someone aged 30 or under decreases with age, while the desirability of being represented by someone aged 60 or older increases with age.

Additionally, we present models that compare age-based intergroup desirability to the desirability of being represented by a woman, a man, or a blue-collar worker (see Table A5 in the Supplementary File). For gender-based in-and outgroups, we observe that women perceive female representatives as more desirable than men do, but women do not express negative views towards a potential male representative (ingroup favouritism without outgroup discrimination). This confirms existing research on female affinity effects (e.g., Golder et al., 2017; Martin, 2019). The effect size of female ingroup favouritism (0.687) is smaller than the effect sizes observed for age-related ingroup favouritism (young: 0.906, old: 1.178). Interestingly, senior citizens also perceive a female representative as more desirable than those in the middle-aged group. For blue-collar workers, we do not observe significant in-group favouritism. This comparison with other characteristics underlines the importance of understanding age as a variable of analytical interest and not just as a control variable.

In addition to the absence of ingroup favouritism among blue-collar workers, higher education levels negatively impact the desirability of being represented by a blue-collar representative ($p < 0.05$). This could to some extent be the result of outgroup discrimination as social class partly results from education. In times of growing political marginalisation of the working class and a resulting need for descriptive representation (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2022), the described findings resonate with research by Matthews and Kerevel (2021) who show that working-class candidates in German state elections are less likely to win, even when controlling for party identity.

Regarding our control variables, education does not significantly impact age perceptions, but living in more urban areas leads to a slight aversion towards old representatives. This might be linked to differences in the age structure, as the share of elderly inhabitants in urban areas is lower than in rural ones (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). Political interest is positively associated with evaluating all the different tested characteristics as desirable. While the direction of the association is always the same, the effect size varies: especially older representatives and male representatives are perceived positively by politically interested people. Additionally, we observe effects of self-identifying as progressive or conservative. Being more liberal leads to a more positive evaluation of a young representative, which might be linked to the better descriptive representation of young people in progressive parties in proportional representation systems (Kurz & Ettensperger, 2023) and the general association of progressive ideology with valuing increases in descriptive group representation for politically marginalised groups and being open to change and new ideas

(traits often associated with youth). Therefore, it is not surprising that we observe a similar relationship regarding the desirability of a female representative and, to a lesser degree, a blue-collar worker representative. In contrast, self-identifying as more conservative is positively associated with perceiving an old representative as desirable ($p < 0.001$). Lastly, higher democratic satisfaction does not significantly impact the desirability of different characteristics. Satisfaction with representation is positively associated with the desirability of being represented by young, old, female, and male representatives, but not with a blue-collar representative.

5. Conclusion

For the average voter, age matters. In this article, we provide evidence that a political representative's age is an important factor in citizens' preferences for descriptive representation. Providing new empirical evidence for the case of Germany, we show that this is the case at all levels of government (local, state, and federal), especially for young adults. We observe strong and significant ingroup favouritism for both young and elderly citizens (below 31 and above 60 years old). Furthermore, we have described a notable asymmetry in outgroup discrimination, as young adults exhibit a significant aversion to being represented by individuals over 60 years old, while seniors do not significantly discriminate against young representatives.

This is relevant with regard to the participation gap between age groups. Young adults' turnout is lower than the turnout of older age groups. At the same time, a politician's age is especially important for young adults, and they express a preference for young representatives. Therefore, in line with McClean and Ono (2024, p. 1) we argue "that greater youth turnout could increase youth representation." But even more importantly, the results speak to recent findings that enhanced descriptive youth representation leads to an increase in turnout among young people (Angelucci et al., 2024; Castanho Silva, 2024; Pomante & Schraufnagel, 2015) by providing additional insights into the mechanisms behind this relationship. If young people find the representatives more attractive, this might lead to a rise in political interest and might also be a motivating factor to participate in elections.

While this article adds to the understanding of citizens' age-centred representational preferences, our research is not without its limitations. Firstly, we have limited knowledge about the stability of age preferences over time. Our cross-sectional data is insufficient to rule out potential cohort effects. Moreover, age and age group membership are factors that fluctuate over time. As a result, it is unclear whether our findings based on cross-sectional data will shift as group memberships change or if they remain stable. Secondly, our respondents were not limited when being asked about the importance and desirability of different representative characteristics, meaning that they could, for example, rate all of them as completely desirable/not at all desirable. Lastly, further data collection is needed to investigate different facets of desirable representation in a multilevel setting, which we were only able to capture here with a generalised indicator. Nevertheless, our analyses provide interesting insights on citizens' age-related representational preferences that might serve as a basis for further investigations, especially for experimental setups needing clear model specifications: One such avenue would be to investigate whether stricter or looser age thresholds lead to similar results. Another one would be to focus on the role age plays as a cue for (political) experience in citizens' evaluation of a representative's age and to analytically differentiate this mechanism from identity-based ones. And, as it is likely that young women face higher barriers to being perceived as competent, we hope that our article may also serve as the basis for investigating the interaction of age and

gender. As we are comparing the desirability of being represented by someone young and someone old, not including an interaction between age and gender (e.g., a young woman vs. a young man), we are not able to entirely cover potential gender biases.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Replication files are available in the Harvard Dataverse (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Q5F157).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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