Government and Opposition (2025), **60**, 939–958
doi:10.1017/gov.2025.10012

Government & Opposition

ARTICLE

Intergenerational Blame Attribution and Political Ageism among Young Europeans

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(Received 25 May 2024; revised 14 March 2025; accepted 21 May 2025; first published online 4 August 2025)

Abstract
Recent crises have raised concerns about intergenerational fairness and conflict and claims that older generations imperil the future of young people. These arguments may reflect the political intolerance towards older adults: political ageism. Why and which kinds of young people are more likely to adhere to such views is still uncertain. Prior studies refer to the importance of perceived threats and authoritarian values. We introduce an interaction effect, suggesting that perceived threats temper the impact of authoritarian values on intergenerational blame attribution and discriminatory views against older individuals' political rights. The analysis of survey data from nine European countries, focusing on respondents aged 18–34, reveals that perceived economic threat rarely relates to increased ageism. Young individuals with authoritarian values are likelier to attribute intergenerational blame and hold politically ageist views. In Sweden and the UK, however, the effect of authoritarian values diminishes when young people perceive economic threats.

Keywords: ageism; young people; authoritarian values; economic insecurity; cross-national analysis

Against the backdrop of economic crisis, rising youth unemployment, the recent pandemic and a looming climate crisis, some groups of young people have voiced concerns that older generations' political choices jeopardize the present and future of younger generations. These objections have been expressed in formal settings, such as Greta Thunberg's direct address to world leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit, as well as in informal contexts, including narratives on Twitter and TikTok under hashtags like 'OK Boomer' and 'BoomerRemover' (Elliott 2022). While the Boomer memes have mostly been regarded as ageist rhetoric (Anderson 2023), they may also tap into more fundamental fears among the younger generation, such as their anxieties about the economy and the environment (Gonyea and Hudson 2020). The intergenerational contention is also visible in the political sphere; it has been found that

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https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.10012 Published online by Cambridge University Press

determinants of party choice differ systematically across generations, and several pensioners' parties have enjoyed electoral success (Otjes and Krouwel 2018; Van der Brug and Rekker 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, various political actors employed ageist rhetoric that portrayed older generations as responsible for lockdowns, thereby furthering their own political objectives (Skipper and Rose 2021). Consequently, especially in the context of an ageing population in Europe and beyond (Walker 2012), it becomes increasingly important to investigate age-based prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and, more specifically, the varying intergenerational attribution of blame by young people (North and Fiske 2012).

While research on intergenerational solidarity and conflict already addresses some of these questions (Ayalon 2020; Bengtson and Oyama 2010), it is inconclusive. Some studies find that intergenerational conflict increases, and stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination based on age are prevalent across the world (WHO 2021). Others argue that intergenerational solidarity persists and is expressed among young people through strong support for maintaining and improving older people's benefits and healthcare (Timonen et al. 2013). Arguably, other cleavages, such as class or race, are still more important than the ones of generations (Kohli et al. 2005). Recognizing this complexity, we suggest that part of this inconclusiveness could be solved via a micro-level analysis that pays particular attention to explaining young people's varying attitudes towards older generations in two respects: through intergenerational blame attribution and political ageism.

Although there certainly are ambivalent attitudes towards older people (Nelson 2005; Prinzen 2014), we focus on the negative aspects of these attitudes. Specifically, we look at younger citizens' disappointment in a perceived fracturing of the generational contract, where older voting blocks are seen – rightly or wrongly – as obstacles to younger generations' political aspirations and future prospects. While extensive research has explored intergenerational conflict concerning welfare distribution, the dimension of political rights remains understudied. Hence, although the family's role as a mediator in welfare-related conflicts is well documented (Kohli 2013), its effectiveness in mitigating tensions over fundamental political rights remains unclear. In public discussions about older citizens' electoral influence and the increasing power of pensioners' parties (Goerres 2008; Hanley 2011; Otjes and Krouwel 2018), some actors have even called for the disenfranchising of older citizens (Poama and Volacu 2023). Following Robert Butler (1969), such views are defined as political ageism.

We study the factors underlying the variation in blame assigned by younger individuals to older people for the current economic situation and the extent to which young people are willing to restrict the voting rights of older individuals.[1] We focus on blame attribution concerning the economy because it indicates the perceived adverse effects of the older generations' decisions on young people's livelihood. The willingness to restrict voting rights, on the other hand, is an indication of political intolerance and undemocratic attitudes. One could also see blame attribution as a first step towards potential discrimination of older generations and a sign of undemocratic attitudes, which some studies have found to be increasing among young people (Weber 2019).

The few studies that have specifically analysed intergenerational blame attribution and the research on ageism at large usually relate these attitudes to threat perceptions, specific values and a lack of intergroup contact (Francioli et al. 2023; North

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and Fiske 2012; Stanciu 2022). We build on the prior research that relates ageist attitudes to perceived outgroup threat and authoritarian values (Davidson 2016; Henry et al. 2019). However, we suggest that the effect of values depends on the perceived threat individuals experience. Since people with authoritarian values tend to be prejudiced and have stereotypical attitudes towards other groups as a matter of habit, they will not shift their attitudes when a tangible threat arises (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). For such people, the perceived economic threat would have little effect. Consequently, the perception of threat would increase intergenerational blame attribution and political ageism among those young people who do not hold strong authoritarian values. Economic insecurity and related perceived threats would reduce the impact of authoritarian values on intergenerational blame attribution and political ageism, and individuals with lower scores on the authoritarian scale are the main drivers of this effect. Considering that young people are one of the most vulnerable groups in an economic crisis (Pastore 2015) and that older generations usually decide on possible solutions or mitigation strategies, it would not be surprising that economic insecurity feeds into blame attribution and political intolerance towards older people. Young people – defined here as those aged 18 to 34 – are also known to be more progressive than older generations, and therefore authoritarian values might be less critical in predicting increasing ageism.

We test our argument using unique representative cross-national survey data with an oversampled number of young people in nine European countries. Data was collected via an online survey instrument in 2018 in a project primarily interested in young people's political attitudes and behaviour. As we are interested in the micro-level effects, the analysis pays less attention to the cross-national variation than the general factors explaining blame attribution and political ageism among young Europeans. The discussion unfolds as follows: first, we present the principal findings of ageism research and articulate our argument for the anticipated interaction between perceived threat and authoritarian values. Subsequently, we delineate the dataset and detail the operationalization and measurement of intergenerational blame attribution, political ageism and related independent variables.

Intergenerational relations and political ageism

The notion that young people may attribute blame to older generations is not a recent revelation, but 'ageism' also has a broader meaning – referring to 'every prejudiced opinion or discrimination against or for any age group' (Palmore 1990: 4; see also Butler 1969). Thus, ageism is unique among other forms of prejudice, as individuals experience different age categories during their lifespan. At the same time, family ties can mitigate negative attitudes towards other age groups and create a complex dynamic of intergenerational ambivalence where feelings of intergenerational solidarity and negativity can coexist (Bengtson and Murray 1993; Kohli 2013; Lüscher and Pillemer 1998; Nelson 2005). For instance, Katrin Prinzen's (2014) study on Germany reveals that approximately 14% of working-age Germans hold ambivalent attitudes towards older people – simultaneously viewing them as deserving of welfare state support based on societal norms while expressing concern about the economic strain they pose in an ageing society.

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Still, while scholars of intergenerational solidarity focus on the interdependence and commonality across generations, ageism studies primarily discuss direct negative feelings towards older individuals, such as perceiving them as a burden and fostering discriminatory attitudes in the workplace (Hövermann and Messner 2023; Marques et al. 2020; North and Fiske 2013; Stanciu 2022). These studies provide evidence of escalating intergenerational conflict and ageism directed towards older generations (Murphy 2021; Stanciu 2022; Swift et al. 2018). Consequently, micro-level ageism studies mainly focus on the negative side of ageism (a review by Levy et al. 2022). These pay particular attention to intergenerational tensions between Baby Boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1964) and Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) (Francioli et al. 2023). A growing body of evidence highlights age inequalities, asserting that older generations possess more economic and political resources and power than those born since the 1980s (Bessant et al. 2017). At the same time, young people lack political representation in contemporary Europe (Stockemer and Sundström 2023), and some of them call for a limit on voting opportunities for older people (Poama and Volacu 2023). Therefore, in addition to the usual focus on prejudiced opinions towards older generations, we are particularly interested in explaining varying political ageism – an intolerant attitude towards older people that might increase the likelihood of being ready to support diminished political rights (e.g. the right to vote) for older people. While intolerance towards a specific group does not necessarily mean willingness to limit the group's democratic rights by disenfranchisement, the opposite is rarely true. Young people who are ready to limit the voting rights of older generations are also very likely intolerant towards them. Thus, viewing political ageism as part of a larger spectrum of ageism, we build our argument on the theories of intergenerational threat and authoritarian values.

Intergroup relations: perceived intergenerational threat and blame attribution

Theories about ageist attitudes on intergroup relations often claim that conflict arises when two groups compete for scarce resources (Jackson 1993). Walter Stephan and Cookie Stephan's (2000) integrated threat theory stands out as one of the more influential adaptations of this argument. The theory distinguishes between collective threats, which are perceived threats to the power and resources of the group by another group, and individual threats, defined as 'actual physical or material harm to the individual … such as economic loss' (Stephan et al. 2008: 61). The theory assumes that a group feels threatened when a specific group evokes the threat (Becker et al. 2011), while individuals feel threatened following actual deprivation, irrespective of a threat elicited by an outgroup. In the case of ageism, discrimination is age-based and often directed towards older or younger individuals (Rauvola et al. 2022).

Prior psychological research suggests that the relative societal standing of an ingroup – in this context, the fact that young people occupy a less powerful economic and political position (Bessant et al. 2017; Stockemer and Sundström 2023) – shapes the extent to which perceived threat drives intergroup bias. This could explain younger generations' animosity towards older ones (Stephan et al. 2008). In line with this, Michael North and Susan Fiske (2012) argue that social modernization has altered the expectations of intergenerational equity. As more people age, older demographics gain

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perceptual salience and an actual increase in power and resources. Younger generations may perceive these changes as a burden that they must bear and see older individuals as obstacles to achieving their goals. The trend could be evident in contemporary discussions about the climate crisis and the call by younger activists to older politicians to take urgent action (Murphy 2021) and blame them for inaction (Han and Ahn 2020). Accordingly, North and Fiske (2013) propose that intergenerational conflict is a result of youth expecting older generations to live up to certain obligations, such as refraining from over-consuming shared resources, prioritizing younger people's access to work-related advancements and refraining from engaging in activities that should be reserved for younger people.

Blame attribution is closely linked to intolerance and prejudice, especially in the context of perceived threat. For example, Julia Becker et al. (2011) explore how unspecific threats initiated by a societal event are fertile ground for intergroup conflict, particularly when coupled with specific attribution patterns. They suggest that when individuals seek to understand and explain the perceived threat, they may latch onto causal attributions that provide a sense of clarity and inadvertently exacerbate intergroup tensions. This phenomenon, wherein unspecific threats are translated into specific prejudices through attributional processes, aligns with 'scapegoating', where particular groups bear blame for broader societal issues (Rothschild et al. 2012). Besides providing clarity, blaming a target (e.g. older people) for personal losses may restore a threatened sense of personal security for younger people (Bukowski et al. 2017), making older generations a viable scapegoat for the young people experiencing economic insecurity or a looming climate crisis.

Thus, following the intergenerational threat theory, it is likely that young people who perceive their contemporary economic situation as threatened, or insecure, might attribute their economic struggles to the actions of older generations. Additionally, such individuals may exhibit discriminatory behaviour towards the scapegoat group with more political power and adhere to political ageism. Specifically, we suggest the following:

Hypothesis 1a: *Young people with higher threat perception tend to blame their economic problems on older people.*

Hypothesis 1b: *Young people with higher threat perception are more likely to support the ideas of political ageism.*

Other reasons for ageism: authoritarian values

The cultural perspective in ageism studies acknowledges the importance of perceived threat as a source for ageism but also emphasizes that one's value orientation should be essential for explaining varying ageism (Stanciu 2022). Expressing prejudices like ageism could be restrained or justified by specific values (Crandall and Eshleman 2003). The research on authoritarian values and attitudes has demonstrated that values like collective security and cohesion, social control and attitudinal resistance to change are related to generalized prejudice against outgroups (Duckitt and Sibley 2009; Feldman 2003).[2] Motivated by a similar theoretical argument, Israel Doron and Hanna

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Kafka (2015) examined the relationship between authoritarian values and ageism among the general population and measured the latter via compassion for people over 70 rather than blame attribution or political ageism. While they found no general effect of authoritarianism, we suggest that the effect of authoritarian values on ageist beliefs might still exist if we focus on a specific dimension of ageism (blame, political ageism) and study only young individuals rather than the general population.

If we assume that there is a specific value divide between 'libertarian' and 'authoritarian' preferences among young people – that some have a higher degree of adherence to traditional social norms and morals (Evans et al. 1996; Tilley 2005) – then we could expect that those who score closer to the authoritarian end of the spectrum would be more likely to express ageist attitudes than those with more libertarian values. However, the dynamic between authoritarian values and ageism is complex. While some research suggests that authoritarians' general tendency towards prejudice should extend to attitudes towards older people (Henry et al. 2019), others find no direct relationship, possibly due to authoritarianism's positive association with respect for traditional authority figures (Doron and Kafka 2015). Still, authoritarians' characteristic view of the world as dangerous and threatening predisposes them to punitive responses and blame attribution (Duckitt and Sibley 2009). As authoritarian values relate to outgroup blaming and support of restrictions of civil liberties (Feldman 2003), young authoritarians might simultaneously respect older people's traditional status while blaming them for perceived failures in addressing societal challenges. Hence, we expect that young people with authoritarian rather than libertarian values would be more likely to blame older people and hold attitudes of political ageism – to limit the political rights of older people. Considering recent reports about increasing support for authoritarian government alternatives among younger generations in North America and Western Europe (Foa and Mounk 2016), increasing ageism would not be surprising.

Hypothesis 2a: *Young people with authoritarian rather than libertarian value orientation are more likely to blame their economic problems on older people.*

Hypothesis 2b: *Young people with authoritarian rather than libertarian value orientations are more likely to support ideas of political ageism.*

The interaction effect of threat and authoritarian values

The literature concerning authoritarian values posits that specific individuals possess an inherent authoritarian predisposition that becomes active solely in the presence of threats to social cohesion (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005). For instance, recent experimental studies that focus on intolerance towards immigrants and minorities show that individuals with authoritarian predispositions become more intolerant in the face of threats to social conformity, but this does not apply to non-authoritarians (Claassen and McLaren 2021). Hence, the theory of 'authoritarian dynamic' argues that there is some interaction between threat and authoritarianism and that threats increase prejudice and intolerance among those with authoritarian values (Feldman and Stenner 1997). While scholars agree regarding the presence of an interaction, Marc

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Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler (2009) focus on a different type of threat dynamic, finding that distinctions in attitudes between libertarians and authoritarians become apparent only in the absence of perceived societal or personal threats. When such threats are heightened, there is a convergence of libertarian attitudes towards those of authoritarians (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). This transformation occurs because threats can reduce cognitive capacity and increase reliance on instinct, resulting in similar cognitive approaches between libertarians and authoritarians.

We suggest that similar mechanisms also underlie the expressions of ageism, and the impact of authoritarian values on ageist attitudes may depend on the perception of threat. In light of the growing challenges young people face, including the recent economic and health crises and the impending climate crisis, personal threats and authoritarianism may interact to perpetuate ageist attitudes and behaviours. Specifically, we propose a negative interaction between authoritarianism and personal threats on ageist attitudes: individuals scoring high on authoritarianism tend to perceive threats even in ordinary circumstances, showing little change in attitude as threat levels rise. In contrast, libertarians alter their attitudes in response to elevated perceived threat levels, thereby contributing to the negative interaction. This phenomenon could explain why young people who are concerned about climate change – those more likely to hold libertarian rather than authoritarian values – blame the current situation on older generations (Elliott 2022; Roy and Ayalon 2024).

In sum, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 3a: *The effect of authoritarian values on blame attribution decreases for young people with higher threat perception.*

Hypothesis 3b: *The effect of authoritarian values on political ageism decreases for young people with higher threat perception.*

Methodology: data, operationalization and measures

We test our argument with data collected in the frame of a large EU-funded collaborative research project. In contrast to studies of ageism that usually rely on non-representative data on college students or just a general population, our data includes booster samples of young people aged 18 to 34 in nine European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Data was collected by a professional polling company that used specific online panels and quotas (age, gender, region and education) reflecting national population statistics for young people in each country (see more in EURYKA 2018). Hence, we have an advantage in studying ageism with a specific sample of almost 20,000 young Europeans – the generation born between 1983 and 2000 – interviewed between April and December 2018. We have opted for this specific age group, 18 to 34, for practical reasons: the boosted dataset is made for this particular age group.

The dependent variables

The survey has two specific questions suitable for operationalizing and measuring ageism. First, to study intergenerational blame attribution, we use a degree of

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agreement on a five-point Likert scale with the following statement: 'The economic problems we face are the result of financial mistakes made by older generations'. Our measure is similar to those used to study the relationship between blame attribution, intolerance and outgroup prejudices (e.g. Becker et al. 2011), even though they are usually interested in different groups as blame recipients (e.g. immigrants). Second, we measure political ageism on a similar scale but with a statement: 'The votes of older people should count less'. The attitudes towards restricting the political rights of older people are rarely studied in the frame of ageism, but such questions are typical in the studies of intolerance towards other outgroups (e.g. immigrants). We argue that the willingness to restrict the voting rights of people from older cohorts is a good indicator of ageism as it manifests openness to discrimination on the grounds of a person's old age.

The independent variables

Our theoretical model also requires operationalizing and measuring threat and authoritarian values. The first primary independent variable measures the level of threat. Here, we have opted for two types of measures. First, an index demonstrating the level of perceived economic insecurity, measured via responses to a question: 'Would you say that the economic situation of your household now is better or worse to how it was five years ago?' Those responding that their situation is much worse are the most insecure and threatened. While in countries with very turbulent economies (e.g. Greece, Italy, Spain), this variable might not be the most accurate for measuring the perceived economic threat, it captures an individual's perception of their economic position in a way that can affect their sense of security. It follows Walter Stephan et al.'s (2008: 61) definition of individual realistic threats as 'actual physical or material harm to the individual such as pain, torture, or death as well as economic loss, deprivation of valued resources, and threats to health or personal security'. Second, we use a binary measure of economic threat for purely pragmatic reasons. While dichotomization results in some loss of information, it simplifies the demonstration of interaction effects. For the distribution and correlation between independent and control variables, see Table 1.

The second independent variable measures authoritarian value orientation. It is a composite of answers (on a Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree', from 1 to 5) to five statements often used to measure libertarian and authoritarian values:

- A woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled.
- Abortion should not be allowed in any case.
- Homosexual couples should not be allowed to adopt children under any circumstances.
- Children should be taught to obey authority.
- People who break the law should get stiffer sentences.

The responses form a coherent set of beliefs, load as one factor in the factor analysis, and the item has an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.57$). The aim

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Predictors and Control Variables (N = 20 616)

					Correlation between some independent and control variables			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Threat	1	2	3
Dependent variables								
Intergenerational blame attribution	3.31	1.06	1	5				
Political ageism	2.22	1.17	1	5				
Independent variables								
Perceived threat (binary)	0.49	0.50	0	1				
Authoritarian values	2.65	0.72	1	5	−0.04	−0.04	0.05	−0.02
Control variables								
Female	0.52	0.50	0	1	−0.06	0.00	−0.02	0.04
Age	25.43	4.99	18	34	0.04	−0.02	0.04	−0.43
Primary education	0.22				−0.09	−0.01	−0.11	−0.13
Secondary education	0.48							
Tertiary education	0.29							
1. Born in the country	0.91	0.29	0	1	0.05		−0.04	0.08
2. Experienced economic hardship	0.33	0.47	0	1	0.26	−0.04		−0.08
3. Lives with parents	0.41	0.49	0	1	0.03	0.08	−0.08	

is to capture values emphasizing a desire for obedience and social order by submitting to authority and wanting to limit the freedom of those who deviate from the rules governed by that authority. Although there is a discussion within the authoritarianism literature about whether some frequently used measurements of authoritarianism measure attitudes rather than values (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Weiler 2009), authoritarian attitudes can be used as a proxy for values. Moreover, Karen Stenner (2005) argues for a separation between authoritarian predisposition and authoritarian attitudes because the latter tends to be confounded with measures of intolerance of difference and political conservatism, which are often what is intended to be explained. Thus, according to her, a lack of separation creates a tautological bias (Stenner 2005). We do not have this problem because our dependent variables, blame attribution and political ageism, are conceptually distinct from authoritarianism and measures that tap into the desire for sameness and distaste for change.[3]

Control variables and model specification

The commonly used control variables in the studies of ageism are the gender and age of the respondents, their level of education, and whether the respondents live with

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their parents (all measures are in Table 1). In addition, we add the variables indicating whether the respondent was born in the country of study and their experience of economic hardship. These last control variables are included because studies of political tolerance have shown that those who experience economic difficulties and have a migrant background might be more supportive towards restricting the political rights of different outgroups (Gibson 2013). Such people might also be more likely to perceive their economic situation as worse than before. We measure economic hardship as a binary response to a question: 'Have you experienced real financial difficulties (e.g. could not afford food, rent, electricity) in the past 12 months?' Although this question might seem somewhat similar to the question of perceived threat – our independent variable – the last focuses on the perceived relative situation of the household rather than the experience. The correlation between the two variables is relatively low (0.26), and the analysis does not suffer from the problem of multicollinearity. In the robustness check (see Supplementary Material), we also test if the effects of the main independent variables change when excluding this control variable.

Regarding statistical analysis, we have opted for a simple multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis with country-fixed effects and robust standard errors. While we have no theoretical reasons to expect significant differences in the effects of independent variables across countries, prior studies analysing the interaction between threat and authoritarian values in political tolerance have found some significant cross-national variations (Claassen and McLaren 2021). Therefore, for robustness checks, we also conduct the analysis separately for each of the nine countries in our study.

Empirical results and discussion

The presence of blame attribution and political ageism among young people in Europe

Our data reveals that among respondents aged 18 to 34, almost 45% agree or strongly agree that older generations are to blame for the economic problems, and 22% disagree or strongly disagree. The remaining 33% are indifferent, suggesting that some young people probably consider the question of blaming older generations for their financial difficulties as unimportant. Our respondents generally support intergenerational blame attribution more than political ageism, as 65% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the statement, and 17% agree or strongly agree with it. Still, these numbers signal significant political intolerance towards older people among European youth. The intergenerational blame attribution is weakly correlated to the attitudes of political ageism (0.28), as it is likely that people who are attributing blame to older people are also willing to restrict their political rights.

Similar to some prior studies that show minor but still existing cross-national differences in ageist attitudes among Western countries (Löckenhoff et al. 2009; North and Fiske 2015; Skipper and Rose 2021; Ward and Fleischer 2023), we also find some noteworthy cross-national variation (see Figure 1). The highest average level of intergenerational blame and political ageism can be found in Greece, and the lowest levels in Sweden.

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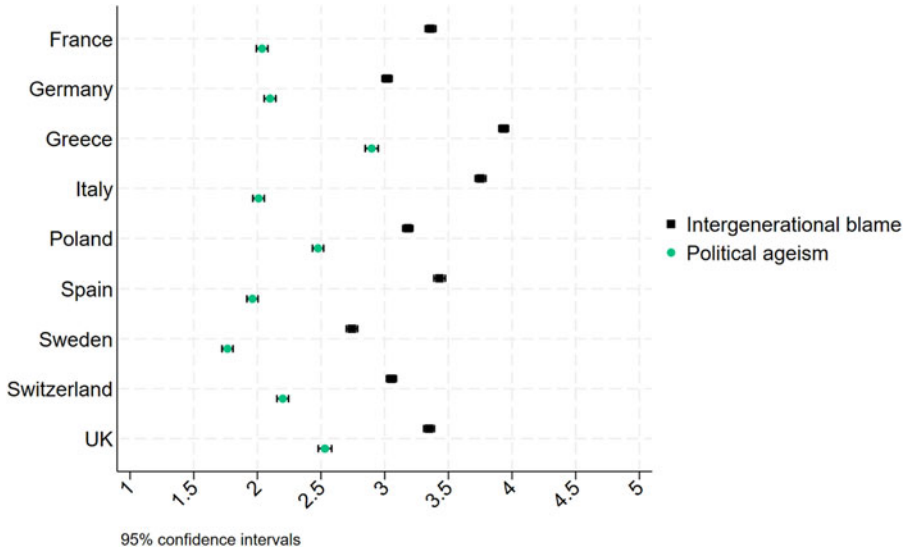

Figure 1. Intergenerational Blame Attribution and Political Ageism among Young Europeans (N = 20,616)
Notes: Mean values on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates strong disagreement, and 5 indicates strong agreement with the statements 'The economic problems we face are the result of financial mistakes made by older generations' and 'The votes of older people should count less'.

While our goal is not to explain these diverse levels of ageism in different countries, prior research focusing on the pandemic has found some correlation between ageist attitudes and support for policies isolating the old rather than young people during the pandemic (Spaccatini et al. 2022).[4] Others propose that the variance of ageism relates to dissimilar understandings of what 'youth' and 'old people' refer to in different countries. For example, Dominic Abrams et al. (2011) have shown that in Greece, people perceive that youth ends at 52 years of age and 'old age' starts at 68, while in Sweden, the respective age is perceived to be 34 and 62. However, we focus not on elucidating diverse rates of intergenerational blame attribution and political ageism but on identifying which young people are more predisposed to support ageist attitudes and understanding how these predispositions manifest under different conditions. In light of previous studies, there is scant justification to anticipate any conspicuous cross-national variations in how perceived threat, authoritarianism and their interaction correlate with the extent of blame attribution and political ageism. Consequently, our empirical analysis will predominantly concentrate on the pooled dataset, reserving a separate analysis for different countries solely for a robustness check.

The importance of threat and authoritarian values

We have used OLS regression to test the proposed hypotheses, and Table 2 presents our primary findings (supplementary tables with robustness checks are available in the Appendix in the Supplementary Material). The results show that the typical young person who attributes intergenerational blame is likely to have more authoritarian than

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Table 2. The Results of OLS Regression with Country-Fixed Effects

	Intergenerational blame		Political ageism	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Perceived threat (binary)	−0.010	0.155***	−0.062***	0.217***
	(0.014)	(0.056)	(0.016)	(0.064)
Authoritarian values	0.134***	0.163***	0.189***	0.238***
	(0.011)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.018)
Perceived threat (binary) x authoritarian values		−0.062***		−0.106***
		(0.021)		(0.024)
Control variables				
Female	−0.088***	−0.150***	−0.150***	−0.167***
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)
Age	−0.005	0.049**	0.049**	0.053**
	(0.018)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.024)
Age^2	(0.0001)	−0.001***	−0.001***	−0.001***
	(0.0003)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)	(0.0005)
Education (primary = baseline)				
Secondary education	0.091**	−0.008	−0.011	0.005
	(0.019)	(0.021)	(0.021)	(0.024)
Tertiary education	0.152***	0.057**	0.052**	0.074**
	(0.021)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.026)
Born in the country	−0.018	−0.108***	−0.108***	−0.064*
	(0.025)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.038)
Experienced economic hardship	0.063***	0.144***	0.141***	0.139***
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.020)
Lives with parents	0.050***	−0.009	−0.008	−0.005
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.020)
Constant	2.978***	2.978***	2.978***	2.978***
	(0.232)	(0.232)	(0.232)	(0.232)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adjusted R^2	0.121	0.122	0.106	0.108
N	20616	20616	20616	20616

Note: Level of significance *$p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

libertarian values, to be relatively well educated and to have experienced economic troubles. The effect of education on blame attribution decreases when we consider interaction effects (Model 2), suggesting that it mainly concerns young people with tertiary education. Those young people likely to support political ageism differ somewhat from the ones attributing blame, as they are predominantly male and have a non-native background, but also hold authoritarian values and have experienced economic difficulties.

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The analysis (Models 1 and 3) shows *no* support for our first hypotheses (1a, 1b), which expected that young people with higher threat perception are more likely to attribute blame to older people. Furthermore, the relationship between the dichotomous variable measuring the perceived threat and political ageism is even slightly negative (Model 3, Table 2). These effects hold even when using the continuous variable for threat perception and excluding the objective economic hardship control variable (Appendix, Table A1). These unexpected findings suggest that our measure of perceived economic insecurity probably does not grasp the perceived outgroup threat as the integrated threat theory would propose. Moreover, the threat variable captures an enduring economic deprivation and thus differs from outgroup-specific threat perceptions and the immediate uncertainty stemming from societal crises that theoretical frameworks typically emphasize. Hence, it might not provoke a need to blame personal economic threats on social outgroups such as the older generation.

Still, Hypotheses 2a and 2b, regarding the effect of authoritarian value orientation, find clear support. As expected, young people with authoritarian rather than libertarian values are more likely to attribute intergenerational blame (Model 1, Table 2) and hold politically ageist views (Model 3, Table 2). A one-unit increase in the index of authoritarian values leads to a 0.13-point increase in intergenerational blame attribution and a 0.19-point rise in political ageism – both measured on a scale of 1 to 5. It is a noteworthy change indicating the significant effect of authoritarian values on blame attribution and ageism among young Europeans.

Even more important is the significant *interaction* effect of the perceived threat and authoritarian values (Models 2 and 4, Table 2). We expected that there would be a negative effect so that perceived (economic) threat increases the support for blame attribution (Hypothesis 3a) and political ageism (Hypothesis 3b) among non-authoritarians. The perceived threat significantly increases the likelihood of intergenerational blame attribution and political ageism for libertarians or those low in authoritarian values. At the same time, there is a slight negative effect of threat for those high in authoritarian values (see marginal effects in Figure 2). Hence, the perceived economic threat significantly dampens the impact of authoritarian values on political intolerance towards older people. In other words, when young libertarians feel threatened, they may become intolerant towards older generations. Even though the economic crisis might mobilize young people for progressive causes, they might still blame it on older generations or express political intolerance towards them.

These findings are consistent with Hetherington and Weiler's (2009) authoritarian reaction argument. Our results not only indicate that young people with authoritarian tendencies are more likely to blame older generations for economic crises and hold politically ageist attitudes but also that the perception of threat is likely to generate a similar inclination in typically liberal-minded people. Hence, a perceived economic threat can shift the average blame attribution among the most liberal young people in the sample.

Extending the insights from the literature on authoritarianism to the setting of social cognition can shed further light on the psychological motivations for blame attribution and political ageism. Social cognition theories propose that people use cognitive shortcuts when making causal judgements (Fiske and Taylor 2013). One's cognition is also

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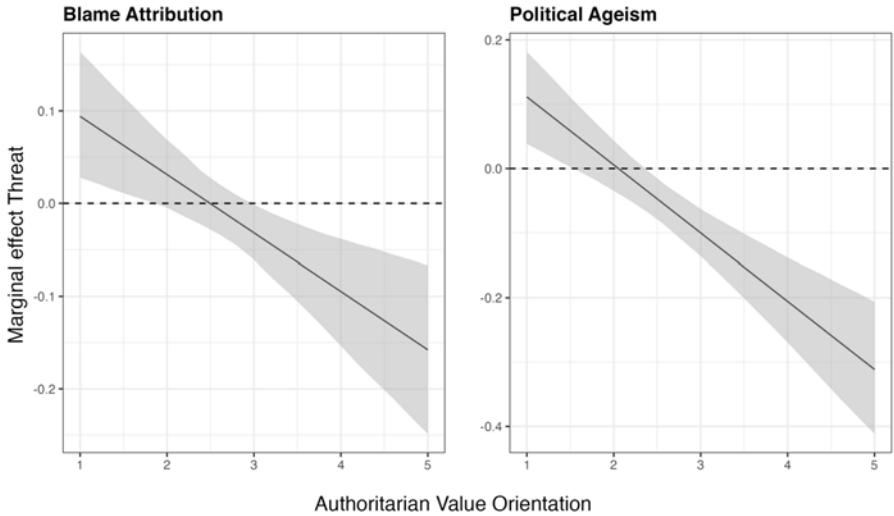

Figure 2. The Marginal Effect of Threat on Intergenerational Blame Attribution and Political Ageism, Conditional on Authoritarian Values

susceptible to the ebb and flow of life, as situational circumstances can enforce the tendency to blame adverse outcomes on scapegoats (Becker et al. 2011). Under conditions of stress and threat, people tend to rely more on instinct rather than careful deliberation, leading to increased similarity between authoritarian and non-authoritarian responses (Hetherington and Weiler 2009).

These cognitive processes can be understood within the broader context of economic challenges facing young Europeans. As Judith Bessant et al. (2017) document, those born since 1980 have become the first generation to experience a lower standard of living than their predecessors. Their analysis reveals how structural changes in labour markets and welfare systems have created a 'precarious generation' facing unprecedented economic uncertainty. This broader context of generational inequity may help explain why economic threats can trigger politically ageist attitudes even among typically liberal-minded youth. While our analysis shows relatively low support for disenfranchisement ideas, the findings suggest that economic insecurity could transform intergenerational ambivalence into more explicit political opposition.

Conclusions

This article has explored the relationship between perceived (economic) threat, authoritarian values and young people's intolerant attitudes towards older generations in Europe. Thanks to the large samples of young people in each country (more than 20,000 respondents aged 18 to 34), we have provided a more nuanced analysis of which kind of young people are intolerant towards older people than prior research focusing on all age groups. Building on previous research on ageism and political intolerance, our findings suggest that under specific conditions – such as when individuals perceive

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an economic threat – young people with libertarian values may attribute intergenerational blame or endorse political ageism to a similar extent to those with authoritarian values. Thus, the influence of authoritarian values on ageism is contingent upon perceived threat. While more exhaustive evidence is necessary for establishing any causal relationship between contextual factors, value orientation, economic threat and ageism, our findings are robust across several model specifications and make two key contributions to the existing literature on ageism.

First, we add the dimension of political ageism, which has rarely been explicitly studied. Prior research instead focuses on burden-focused ageism, particularly regarding welfare state provisions, while we add the political angle that shows the existence of political intolerance among young Europeans. In contrast to young people's attitudes towards intergenerational resource distribution, which tend to reflect concerns about the sustainability of a system they might eventually rely on, political ageism – particularly support for voting restrictions – represents a distinct form of intergenerational opposition where immediate political interests may override long-term considerations. This particular characteristic of political ageism emerges as reducing older generations' political influence offers more immediate benefits to young people than challenging welfare provisions that they may depend on in the future. Indeed, while all types of ageism may contribute to the erosion of intergenerational solidarity, fostering a sense of division and animosity between different age groups, supporting ideas of disenfranchisement for older generations is an apparent problem of democratic values. It can be combined with recent initiatives to lower the voting age at national and local elections to increase the turnout of younger generations (see Wagner et al. 2012). In the context of significant underrepresentation of young people in political leadership (Stockemer and Sundström 2023), the success of pensioners' parties (Hanley 2011), and the media discourse that focuses on young people as a problem (e.g. Kousis and Giugni 2020), the presence of 'counter'-attitudes in the form of political ageism towards older generations might not be surprising. Still, our findings also show that the support for disenfranchisement ideas is relatively low. Thus, similar to studies on intergenerational ambivalence, we can conclude that while there is some intergenerational divide, these ideas do not dominate how young people perceive older generations.

Second, we have shown that the effect of authoritarian values on intolerant attitudes towards older people depends on anticipated economic insecurity. The perceived threat mainly affects the attitudes of those who hold libertarian values. Considering that European youth tend to be more liberal than authoritarian, this might indicate the increase of ageism in the context of perceived threat. While our analysis focused on the economic threat, recent discussions about the climate crisis and related 'underserved suffering' of younger and future generations have drawn attention to climate threat-related intergenerational conflict (Roy and Ayalon 2024). Future studies could examine if those young people who feel especially threatened by climate change are also more likely to blame older generations for the situation and express ageist attitudes or if intergenerational solidarity dampens it.

While our results unveil a significant variation between young individuals with ageist attitudes and those without, several limitations exist. Our correlational analysis cannot demonstrate any causal effects. Further, the demonstrated negative interaction or dampening effect of perceived threat is relatively small in our total sample of nine

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European countries. The national-level analysis reveals that it mainly holds for three countries: France, Sweden and the UK (Figures A2 and A3, as well as country-specific tables in the Appendix). In the rest of the countries, there is no significant interaction effect, and the authoritarian value orientation increases the likelihood of intergenerational blame attribution and political ageism regardless of the respondent's perceived level of economic threat. Findings of cross-national differences in interaction effects between threat and authoritarian values are not unusual in the studies of political intolerance towards immigrants (e.g. Claassen and McLaren 2021), so it would require further research concerning ageism.

None of the three countries looks specific in various measurements of age inequalities of political representation (Stockemer and Sundström 2023) or contact possibilities for the younger and older generations (Hövermann and Messner 2023).[5] While Sweden is considered highly individualistic across age groups, this is not the case in the UK or France. There are also not enough cross-national studies that would allow us to relate these results to portrayals of older and younger generations in the mainstream or social media – a factor sometimes associated with the presence of ageism in society (Davidson 2016).

Further, some of the presented cross-national results might be statistical artefacts. For example, in Greece, the variation in dependent variables is very low, making it difficult to estimate any effects of perceived economic threats or authoritarian values. The relatively low goodness-of-fit measures in all the models suggest that factors other than the ones proposed by our analysis might explain the variance of micro-level ageism. It might be that due to intergenerational ambivalence – the simultaneous presence of intergenerational solidarity and conflict – the micro-level analysis of ageism requires more complex models. Our focus on political ageism and its operationalization via a willingness to disenfranchise the older generation might be a particularly hard test for the theories used to explain the individual-level variance of ageism among younger generations.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.10012.

Acknowledgements. We would like to thank the editors of *Government and Opposition* and two anonymous reviewers for their excellent comments and suggestions, and are also grateful to Marco Giugni and Maria Grasso for their help and support.

Financial support. This work has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 727025 (EURYKA project).

Notes

1 Note that the opposite to this situation is also possible: for example, Pickard (2016) describes negative stereotypes about youth (e.g. laziness, entitlement) among older people.

2 We do not consider authoritarianism as a personality trait (Adorno et al. 1950), but rather as a long-term psychological orientation that has led to a specific set of values and attitudes (Altemeyer 1981). We agree that adherence to the authoritarian values might be related to specific personality traits (Duckitt and Sibley 2007), but have no aim to analyse it here.

3 Sometimes it is argued that a more strict separation is needed between values and attitudes on the item level define authoritarianism as the trade-off between social conformity and individual autonomy. Often,

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child-rearing values are used to measure the concept of authoritarian predisposition (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005), but Schwartz's (1992) dimension of autonomy and conformity has also been used. This warrants us to include items that capture the desire for conformity among the respondents. The item that is closest to measuring a desire for social conformity in the available dataset asks the respondents to say if they agree that 'Children should be taught to obey authority'. Including the item in the composite variable decreases the Cronbach's α from 0.71 to 0.57 – but it remains fairly high and avoids prioritizing a data-driven approach before a theory-driven one.

4 In a global context, scholars studying ageism as a prejudicial attitude that portrays older persons as a burden on society have found that ageism is more prevalent in societies where younger and older generations rarely come into contact, where there is a relatively younger population, and where there is a dominant culture of 'marketised mentality' (Hövermann and Messner 2023). The measurement of this mentality, however, is relatively complicated – it is a composite measure of values that emphasize lack of concern for the welfare and interests of others, pursuit of one's interests, and relative success and dominance over others (Hövermann and Messner 2023).

5 It is noteworthy that in contrast to Hövermann and Messner (2023) we find no clear correlation between the degrees of ageism and reported average age of population in our nine countries. The average age varies from Poland (40.0), the UK (40.3), France (40.6), Sweden (41.7) and Switzerland (42.3) to Greece (44.4), Germany (44.6), Spain (44.9) and Italy (45.2) (data source – Eurostat 2018).

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Cite this article: Darakhsh M and Uba K (2025) Intergenerational Blame Attribution and Political Ageism among Young Europeans. *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics* **60**(4), 939–958. https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.10012

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