

## Why do older people support the far-right?

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Why is it that by far the largest group in the population that supports Reform and other far-right parties is those over the age of 55?

It would be easy, and trite, to say that this is because these people remember when life was very different from what it is today. Easy, because these people do remember when life was, in very many ways, easier than it is today. But that was because social democracy delivered them something that the far right never will. And trite, because this is a projection, not an explanation, as to why people of this age are rejecting the policies that delivered for them through much of their lives, and for their parents throughout theirs.

There has, in other words, to be a better explanation than this, based on the experience of these people who seem to be so angry with the world as it now is.

The main explanation for this anger is that the world really has failed a great many of these people. Neoliberalism promised security, prosperity and rising living standards, and it has not delivered for this group. In fact, for many of them, life is getting worse.

Healthy life expectancy, in particular, is declining. For many men, chronic illness is now likely to affect them from around the age of 60 onwards, and many women face a similar prospect not long afterwards. The commonplace expectation is that people will spend the last 20 years or more of their lives coping with chronic conditions and progressive decline, reducing much of the pleasure and fulfilment that they might otherwise have found in those years.

This matters because this generation was promised something very different. It was told that economic growth, rising asset values, private pensions, home ownership and expanding consumer choice would provide security in old age. Instead, many now face deteriorating health, growing insecurity, declining public services, loneliness and a sense that the future they expected has not arrived.

The result is disappointment, and disappointment readily turns to anger when people

feel that they have been misled. Many of those now in their late fifties, sixties and seventies worked hard throughout their lives, paid the taxes asked of them, raised families and believed that the social contract under which they lived would be honoured. They assumed that if they did what was expected of them, society would provide a degree of security, care and dignity in return.

Instead, many now find themselves living in a country where it is harder to see a doctor, harder to obtain social care, harder to find reliable public services, harder to help their children secure housing, and harder to believe that the government has either the capacity or the will to address these problems. They see decline around them and are told there is no alternative. They are told that the neoliberal way is all there is. They are angry as a result.

The problem is that much of this anger is being deliberately redirected and misdirected at the wrong targets. Migrants did not create the crisis in social care. Refugees did not undermine the NHS. Diversity did not cause stagnant wages, unaffordable housing or failing public infrastructure. Those problems arose from political choices around austerity made over many decades, and from neoliberalism steadily hollowing out many of the institutions on which people depend.

But for many people, admitting that is difficult. It requires them to recognise that the economic model they were encouraged to support, and which they embraced with enthusiasm from Thatcher onwards, has failed. It requires them to question assumptions that have shaped political debate for more than forty years. All of that is hard, and it is often easier to believe that someone else is to blame.

That is why far-right politics has such appeal. It offers simple explanations for complex problems. It provides identifiable enemies. It converts disappointment into resentment and gives anger a target. What it does not do is offer solutions.

The irony is that many of those now turning to the far right are seeking exactly what social democracy once offered them: security, belonging, decent public services, economic stability, good healthcare, affordable housing and confidence in the future. They are not rejecting those values. They are expressing their frustration at having lost them.

The challenge for those who oppose the far right is not simply to condemn the anger that many older people feel. It is to understand it. Unless the causes of that anger are addressed and a credible alternative vision of society is offered, the appeal of simplistic answers will only grow.

The issue is not that older voters are uniquely reactionary. It is that many have concluded, with some justification, that the promises made to them have been broken. The question is whether anyone can now offer them a better answer than resentment when, as a matter of fact, no neoliberal politician can do that, because they are the

problem and not the solution.