

THE BLOG

Will the “Age Wave” Make or Break America? The Questions That Trump, Clinton and Sanders Must Answer

05/18/2016

Ken Dychtwald Ph.D. 
Psychologist, gerontologist, documentary filmmaker, author of 16 books and founding CEO of Age Wave



Two-thirds of all the people who have ever lived past the age of 65 in the entire history of the world are alive today. For a more local reference, when our Constitution was crafted, the average life expectancy in the U.S. was barely 36 years and the median age was a mere 16. During the time of our founding fathers, there was no anticipation of an “age wave.” In this regard, we are living in truly uncharted territory and longevity is humanity’s new frontier. As the baby boomers turn 70 at the rate of 10,000 a day, America is becoming a “gerontocracy.” Already, 42% of the entire federal budget is spent

on Medicare and Social Security. In the 2012 election, older adults out-powered all other age groups with 72% of men and women 65+ voting, while only 45% of those 18-29 did.

This demographic transformation will create new lifestyle, social contribution, and marketplace opportunities as well as potentially devastating medical, fiscal, and intergenerational crises. Are we prepared? NO. Are Trump, Clinton and Sanders addressing this “age wave” and offering innovative solutions? NO. Has the political media of all persuasions been covering this issue and all its facets in proportion to its social, political and economic importance? NO. I have watched every minute of every debate and I am outraged that these core issues have not been meaningfully covered.

Based on 40 years of research, dialogue, analysis, and activism on aging, I have come to believe that there are **five essential transpartisan issues that must be addressed** if our newfound longevity is to be a triumph rather than a tragedy.

Age Wave Issue # 1: What is the New Age of “Old?”

Our economy is hinged to 19th century notions of longevity and old age. When Otto Von Bismarck picked 65 to be the marker of old age in the 1880s, in preparation for Germany’s first pension plan, the average life expectancy in his country was only 45. Similarly, when Social Security began, the average American could expect to live only 62 years, and there were 42 workers paying for each “aged” recipient (“Social Security” is only the nickname for OASDI - Old Age Survivor and Disability Insurance). Today life expectancy is approaching 79 (and steadily rising) and due to decades of declining fertility, there are fewer than three workers to pay for each recipient. But, is 65 - or even 67 - the right marker of old age? This is not a Democrat or Republican issue that only impacts “seniors.” As longevity rises, continuing to use an obsolete marker of old age could have a particularly brutal impact on the millennial generation.

Questions for Trump, Clinton and Sanders:

- In repeated recent surveys, when asked when old age begins today, people say somewhere between 75 and 80. At what age do you think that people become “old” today?
- Do you think of yourself as “old” or as a “senior?” Why do you think this is the right age for you to be running for president?
- If there were breakthroughs that would further elevate life expectancy, would you consider “indexing” entitlements to rising longevity?
- Would you support funding the retraining of older workers for new careers? Would you incentivize employers who hired older workers?

Age Wave Issue #2: The Diseases of Aging Could Be the Financial and Emotional Sinkhole of the 21st Century.

Until recently, most people died swiftly and relatively young of infectious diseases, accidents, or in childbirth. As a result of modern medical advances and public health infrastructure, we’ve managed to prolong the lifespan, but we have done far too little to extend the healthspan—as pandemics of heart disease, cancer, stroke, Alzheimer’s and diabetes are running rampant. In addition to being quite costly, our healthcare system is incompetent at preventing and treating the complex and intertwined conditions of later life. For example, Alzheimer’s (and related dementias) now afflicts one in two people over 85, and it has become the nation’s scariest disease. Unless there is a breakthrough, its sufferers are anticipated to grow from 5+ million today to 15+ million as the boomers age, with its cumulative costs soaring to \$20 trillion by 2050. But our scientific priorities are outrageously out of synch: for every dollar currently spent on Alzheimer’s care, less than half a cent is being spent on innovative scientific research. Our doctors are also not aging-ready. We have more than 50,000 pediatricians, but fewer than 5,000 geriatricians. Only eight of the country’s 145 academic medical centers have full geriatrics departments, and 97% of U.S. medical students don’t take a single course in geriatrics.

Questions for Trump, Clinton and Sanders:

- Are you willing to make beating Alzheimer's before it beats us your "moonshot" and commit whatever resources are necessary to make it happen?
- Would you make it mandatory for medical and nursing schools to teach core geriatric skills to all students?
- Considering 34 million people are providing care to an elder loved one, what changes would you make to the tax code and work leave policies to help them out?
- Where do you stand on active euthanasia, passive euthanasia, and assisted suicide?

Age Wave Issue # 3: Averting a New Era of Mass Elder Poverty

During the 1930s, one third of America's elders were impoverished. Since then, thanks to Social Security, Medicare, pensions and a widespread savings mentality among those who grew up in the shadow of the depression, the elder poverty rate has plummeted. However, the future is precarious. Today, according to the Government Accounting Office, 52% of all households near retirement (headed by someone age 55+) have NO retirement savings and about 51% of our population have no pensions beyond Social Security. We could be heading to an era in which tens of millions of impoverished aging boomers will place crushing burdens on the U.S. economy and on the generations forced to support them. On top of this, to avert future generations of poor older adults, we are not fostering financial literacy or responsibility among the young (many of whom might live exceptionally long lives). For example, thirty-seven states require providing sex education to high school students by law, while only 17 states require financial education.

Questions for Trump, Clinton and Sanders:

- How would you avert mass poverty among the aging boomer generation (half of whom are already retired and for whom it may be too late to catch up)?
- Would you consider increasing personal savings rates through mandated, tax-advantaged savings programs such as in the UK and Australia?
- Considering the substantial "asset inequality" among older adults, would you affluence test entitlements to give more to those in need and less to those who are not?

- Describe Social Security as you think it should be for the millennial generation.

Age Wave Issue # 4: Ending Ageism

In Colonial times, elders were respected and honored for their wisdom and perspective. In addition, because the primary American industry was farming, it was grandpa and grandma who usually owned the property and decided who did what and who inherited what. During the industrial era, all of that turned upside down. Now, in our youth-focused society, many people of all ages are “gerontophobic”—uncomfortable both with older adults and their own aging process. And many institutions are both youth-centric and ageist — from education, to technology, to employment hiring practices to housing. For example, our homes and public buildings were not built for aging bodies: less than 2% of our housing stock is built to be safe and accessible for elders (and one third of the elderly fall each year). Similarly, the routes of public transportation were created with young workers, not retirees, in mind. And what of popular media - our most potent export - where advertisers still “profile” their audiences by age and will pay TV networks far more for a 30 year old viewer than one who is 60. If that profiling was race vs. age motivated, it would not be tolerated.

Questions for Trump, Clinton and Sanders:

- Do you believe that ageism exists in America? What would you do as president to wipe it out?
- Do you think our society discriminates more against aging women than men: against non-white vs. white older adults?
- How should our communities become more “aging friendly?” Since millions of older adults struggle with mobility and transportation (and corresponding social isolation), what would you do to remedy that?
- For you personally, has aging been an ascent or a descent? What do you think the “upside” of aging is?

Issue # 5: The New Purpose of Maturity

As it turns out, today's retirees feel that they are in the best time in their lives to give back. And they do: contributing both more dollars and volunteer time than any other age group - doing everything from teaching schoolchildren to read, to helping their peers recover from loss to building homes for Habitat. Going forward, medical science can—and will—increasingly prolong life. Yet political, religious, and community leaders have yet to create a compelling vision for the purpose of those additional years. For example, our 68 million retirees currently spend an average of 49 hours (2,940 minutes) a week watching television. Ultimately, the problem may not be our growing legions of older adults, it may be our absence of imagination, creativity and leadership regarding what to do with all of this maturity, longevity and encore talent. The unprecedented historical challenge/opportunity of the age wave is how we can unleash our greatest growing natural resources that are hiding in plain sight: experience, skills and wisdom.

Questions for Trump, Clinton and Sanders:

- Do we ask too little of our elders?
- What is your biggest idea for what America's 68 million retirees could be doing to contribute to our society?
- If we could trade two hours per week of retirees' television viewing time for two hours per week of volunteer time, what would you do with those 200+ billion additional public service hours over the next 25 years?
- Because of your age, do you think of yourself as a role model for purposeful aging?

An "age wave" is coming that could either make or break America. Are we prepared? No. Just as society's institutions were grossly unprepared for the baby boom, we have done far too little to prepare for the coming "age wave." Do we as a nation have the guts and wisdom to ask - and answer — these questions? I believe we do. Time and time again Americans have proved that we are a creative, industrious nation with tremendous capacity for improvement and transformation. The next eight years will be the turning

point. I surely hope that our next president is prepared to address these critical issues and boldly make the course-corrections necessary to usher in a healthy and purposeful future of aging.

Follow Ken Dychtwald Ph.D. on Twitter: www.twitter.com/AgeWave

Original URL: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ken-dychtwald/will-the-age-wave-make-or-b-9998384.html>