

## The World Belongs to the Young Party

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Imagine you are in charge of a healthcare system. You face an outbreak of a disease and you need to make a tough choice between two options. Option A: You can save the lives of 100 people aged 75 (with life expectancy of another 10 years). Option B: You can save the lives of  $X$  people aged 30 (with life expectancy of another 50 years). What is the minimal  $X$  for which you would choose Option B?

There is no correct answer to this question, of course. Each answer reflects the respondent's moral judgment. Every reasonable person would choose Option A if  $X$  equals 0, because why would anyone choose Option B if it saves no lives? On the other hand, if  $X$  equals 120, everyone would probably choose option B because this would help more people who are younger, too. At some point in the middle, there is a value of  $X$  where people change their choice from saving 100 senior citizens to saving  $X$  young adults.

I presented this question to a pool of students who had taken a course in Game Theory in recent years. The students were in their twenties, from a wide range of countries including China, India, the U.S. and Israel. About 200 of the 450 respondents also sent me explanations for their choice. Based on their responses, we can identify four types of respondents.

1. "A person is a person" – the respondents chose the number 100 or 101. They want to save as many lives as possible, without distinguishing between the old and the young.
2. "Calculate years of life" – the respondents chose the number 20 or 21. When Option B saves 20 young people, the two options yield an equal number of years of life – 1,000. When the number of young people saved in Option B is greater than 20, these respondents prefer to save the younger people. If  $X$  is less than 20, they prefer to save the older people.
3. "Weighing" – the responses range between the numbers 22 to 99. The respondents in this range are torn between maximizing the number of people saved and maximizing the years of life, and they choose a response that balances the two approaches. For example, a student who chose 50 explained:  
"Economically, a young person is worth five times more than a senior citizen. Emotionally, all people are equal. Politically, you can't set too high a value on young people without violating the basic rights of older people. Therefore, in my

view, the ratio of the value of a young person's life to an elderly person's life is 2:1."

4. "Young people first" – the respondents chose a number less than 20 (often 10 or 1). Respondents in this range have a strong preference for saving young people. A student who chose X equals 1 explained his preference for saving even one young person rather than 100 older people by saying that the latter "should already be ready for their lives to end." He added: "It's an easy decision when it's a hypothetical question." A student who chose X equals 10 wrote: "This is a political question, not a scientific one. The loss entailed in the death of a 30-year-old (the loss of income and the suffering caused to his loved ones) is much greater than the loss from the death of a 75-year-old. There is no formula that expresses this disparity in terms of life expectancies."

This is not a scientific study or a representative sample of the world's young population. It is a survey that offers a glimpse into the mindset of young people throughout the world in the coronavirus era. In a nutshell: The overwhelming majority of respondents (83%) believe a young person's life is worth more (and usually much more) than the life of an elderly person.

Only about 17% of the respondents adopted the "a person is a person" approach and chose to save 100 older people rather than 99 younger people. About 32% opted for the "calculate years of life" approach, preferring to save 21 young people instead of 100 senior citizens. About 30% of the students "weighed" the options and tried to balance the first two approaches. Nearly 20% of the respondents devalued the lives of older people so much that they preferred saving 20 young people rather than 100 older people.

"This is a difficult question that required a lot of thought," many respondents wrote. Some noted, explicitly and at their own initiative, that the question seems very relevant in the coronavirus era. This dilemma is unavoidable at a time when decision makers are considering measures aimed primarily at saving the lives of older people, while fully aware that the measures will severely affect the lives of young people, or at least their quality of life. However, the dilemma arises also in normal times. For example, the healthcare system must choose whether to invest in hospital wards devoted to prolonging life at "the end of the road" or instead allocate resources to the HMOs – resources that increase the life expectancy of young people.

Can the current political system in Israel give expression to the conflict of interests between the young and the elderly? I doubt it. There is no clear connection between the only political question on the agenda – for Bibi or against Bibi – and a person's

stance on the conflict between the young generation and senior citizens. The political system is supposed to give voice to the public's views on the burning issues, and it is not doing that these days.

The surprise in the 2006 elections was the Pensioners' Party (*Gil*), which won seven seats in the Knesset and a place in the cabinet. The party was formed to address the problems of senior citizens, but many of its voters were actually disgruntled young people. The political arena is ripe for a young people's party that would raise a single banner in the upcoming elections: recalibrating the economic system for the benefit of young people. Quite a few older people would vote for a party like this, whether out of concern for their children or because they are sick and tired of debating the usual, unresolved questions.

I am not sure this would be a positive development, because it would help to perpetuate the chronic ills of the State of Israel, and especially the occupation. But at a time when the conflict of interests between the young and old is intensifying, and assuming that most young people indeed prefer their own needs to those of the elderly, I would not be surprised if a "World Belongs to the Young" party competes in the next elections.