

Courtesy: Division of Aging

Lt. Gov. Robert B. Jordan III leads older adults on a walk for fun and fitness.

Politics and the Elderly: The Potential and the Reality

by Jack Betts

Just a decade ago, the elderly segment of North Carolina's population was almost ignored politically. After all, those over 65 amounted to less than 8 percent of the population, and most politicians were preoccupied with other issues, such as the economy, the environment, and education. Besides, didn't federal programs like Social Security and Medicare already take care of old folks? What could the state do, anyway?

Lots, as it turned out. Since 1977 the elderly have quietly and steadily gained influence at the ballot box, in city hall and the county courthouse, and especially in the N.C. General Assembly, where the elderly no longer must wait in line for statutory handouts and a pat on the back. They have become, if not a powerful force, at least a political entity to be reckoned with.

Several factors account for the turnaround in the political fortunes of the elderly. One, no

doubt, was the realization by those in public office in the early Seventies that demographers were forecasting startling changes in the makeup of the nation's—and the state's—population. Where once the elderly could be overlooked because of their small portion of the population (a scant 4 percent of the populace at the turn of the century and by 1960 not yet twice that percentage), the latter part of the Seventies and the Eighties would bring about a wholesale graying of the population. By the end of the 20th century, North Carolina's elderly would grow to about 15 percent of the population, the experts warned.

In 1977, Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. initiated an emphasis on programs and policies designed to benefit the elderly. He upgraded the state's chief advocacy agency for the elderly, the Office of Aging in the Department of Human Resources, to division level, renaming it the Division of

Aging. He also designated the head of the division as an assistant secretary of Human Resources. In addition, Hunt recommended and the legislature approved a general beefing-up of budget and staff for the new division.

Concurrently, the legislature recognized that older North Carolinians needed their own advocates. In the House of Representatives, House Speaker Carl J. Stewart (D-Gaston) appointed the first standing House Committee on Aging and named state Rep. Ernest Messer (D-Haywood) to be chairman. "We are plowing new ground in a field that has been hardly touched," declared Messer on January 22, 1977, shortly after his appointment.

John Young, human resources analyst in the legislature's General Research Division, gives credit to Messer for recognizing and pushing the aging issue into a major concern of the legislature. "Messer had pushed for the appointment of the elderly committee," Young said in an interview. "He carved that out and brought it to the General Assembly. He saw the need and advocated the cause."

However, it would not be until 1981 that the Senate, presided over by Lt. Gov. Jimmy Green, would get its own committee on the elderly. That year, Green named state Sen. Rachel Gray (D-Guilford) to chair the Senate Committee on Senior Citizens Affairs. That committee was downgraded to a subcommittee of the State Government Committee in 1983, but was restored to a full committee by Lt. Gov. Robert Jordan in the 1985 session.

The legislature also saw fit to study the problems of the aging on an annual basis, authorizing the first Legislative Study Commission on the Aging in 1977. That commission has been reauthorized each year since and has produced annual reports to the General Assembly on varied topics of interest to the state's older citizens. The continued existence of that study commission is further evidence of the clout the elderly have with the General Assembly. Only those issues which the legislature deems to be of utmost importance are given study commission status more than once. Among study commissions, only the Revenue Laws Study Commission and the Mental Health Study Commission have greater longevity.

Young, who has worked with the study commission on aging, estimates that the General Assembly passed "close to 80 percent" of the commission's recommendations in past years. "Most of the bills that have been recommended have been passed," said Young. "We really haven't had many failures."

Helping keep the elderly issue before the legislature has been Messer himself, although he

has not been a legislator since 1981. That year, Governor Hunt tabbed Messer to become assistant secretary of Human Resources and director of the Division on Aging. Messer succeeded Nathan Yelton as the state's chief advocate for the elderly, who in turn had succeeded the late Dr. Ellen Winston, credited with creating the Office of Aging in the early 1960s. When Gov. James G. Martin succeeded Hunt in the governor's office, Martin replaced Messer with Elaine Stoops of Greensboro as assistant secretary and director of the Division of Aging (see page 32 for an interview).

Messer has, through extensive personal and political contacts, kept the aging issue before the General Assembly. He is still regarded as one of the most effective spokesmen for older persons with the legislature. Other groups which frequently appear before the legislature are the N.C. State Legislative Committee of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the N.C. Senior Citizens Association, the Retired Governmental Employees Association, and the Retired School Personnel of North Carolina.

Among the issues for which the elderly have lobbied in recent sessions of the legislature are bills dealing with taxation, including the home-stead exemption (reduced property taxes for older persons), the inheritance tax, the intangibles tax, sales taxes on food and non-prescription medicine; legislation creating day-care centers for senior citizens; improvements in health care; and toughening penalties for crimes committed against the elderly. As a lobbying group, the elderly may not be as powerful or as successful as, say, the bankers or the insurance

Former state Rep. and ex-director of the Division of Aging Ernest Messer, left, and former Gov. James B. Hunt Jr., right, flank the late Dr. Ellen Winston, generally regarded as the founder of the state's programs for the elderly.



Courtesy N.C. Division of Aging

companies, but each year those who represent the elderly manage to win legislative support for a growing body of laws designed to benefit the elderly (see summary of tax breaks on page 59). Yet lobbyists for the elderly say their greatest achievement is not any specific legislation, but maintaining continued legislative support for overall programs for, and studies of, the elderly (see list of lobbyists below).

Rufus Forrest of Wake Forest, a retired educator and chairman of the AARP's state legislative committee, says the annual study commission is of critical importance to the elderly. "Our biggest thing on behalf of the elderly is the Legislative Study Commission on the Aging. That's been a great move forward, just terrific in getting our legislative program developed and approved."

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Forrest's group claims a dues-paying membership of nearly 300,000 in North Carolina, easily the largest of the organized groups representing the elderly. Yet another group is the N.C. Senior Citizens Association, which claims 30,000 members, about one-tenth the size of the AARP's state membership. Frank H. Jeter Jr., of Raleigh, a retired newsman and president of the group, believes the elderly's greatest legislative accomplishment is generating continued legislative support for the Division of Aging and its programs and budget. Both Jeter and Forrest say that the division has done more for the elderly in the state than any other agency, group, or institution.

As Forrest puts it, "I think the legislature *does* listen to the elderly. But the most important punch we have is the Division of Aging, particularly with Mr. Messer in the past and, we hope, with Mrs. Stoops in the future."

Legislators themselves confirm that they are listening—and acting. Former state Rep. Al Adams (D-Wake), who has himself become a lobbyist this year, notes that "people down here seem to be right much concerned about the elderly. And when Ernie Messer was here, they

surely did listen. Generally, I'd have to say their concerns are still pretty well received."

Rep. Marie Colton (D-Buncombe), a member of the House Aging Committee, perceives "a growing sensitivity on the part of the General Assembly to the elderly population." Rattling off a list of bills affecting the lot of the elderly, Colton says the attention given to the needs of older citizens "shows that we are increasingly aware of them, much more so than when I first came here eight years ago."

But that does *not* mean that the elderly are in the front lines of the powerbrokers in the legislature. While the aging committees in both legislative chambers have had their successes, for instance, their chairpersons—Rep. Sidney A. Locks (D-Robeson) and Sen. Wanda H. Hunt (D-Moore)—are on the periphery of the legislative leadership. When the key decisions are made behind closed doors of the offices of Speaker Liston Ramsey and Lieutenant Governor Jordan, the participants are likely to be Sens. J. J. Harrington (D-Bertie), Kenneth Royall (D-Durham), Anthony Rand (D-Cumberland) and Charles Hipps (D-Haywood); and Reps. Dwight Quinn (D-Cabarrus), Billy Watkins (D-Granville), and Bobby Ethridge (D-Harnett)—but not Locks and Hunt. Much the same situation existed in the 1983 session, when former Rep. Gus Economos (D-Mecklenburg) and Sen. Rachel Gray (D-Guilford) chaired the aging committees. Neither was among the inner circle of legislative leadership, and both were defeated for reelection.

Major Lobbyists for the Elderly in North Carolina

| Lobbyist | Group Represented |
|----------------------|---|
| Rufus Forrest | N.C. State Legislative Committee, American Association of Retired Persons |
| Frank H. Jeter Jr. | N.C. Senior Citizens Association |
| Martha R. McLaughlin | N.C. Retired Governmental Employees Association |
| John R. Rice | N.C. Retired Governmental Employees Association |
| A.C. Dawson | N.C. Retired School Personnel |
| Woodrow B. Sugg | N.C. Retired School Personnel |

The Elderly and the Ballot Box

The increase in the size of the elderly populace is not the only reason that the legislature listens to the elderly. Another reason, no doubt, is the growing awareness that the elderly go to the polls in large numbers. They vote regularly, and they can have a profound impact on local, state, and federal elections.

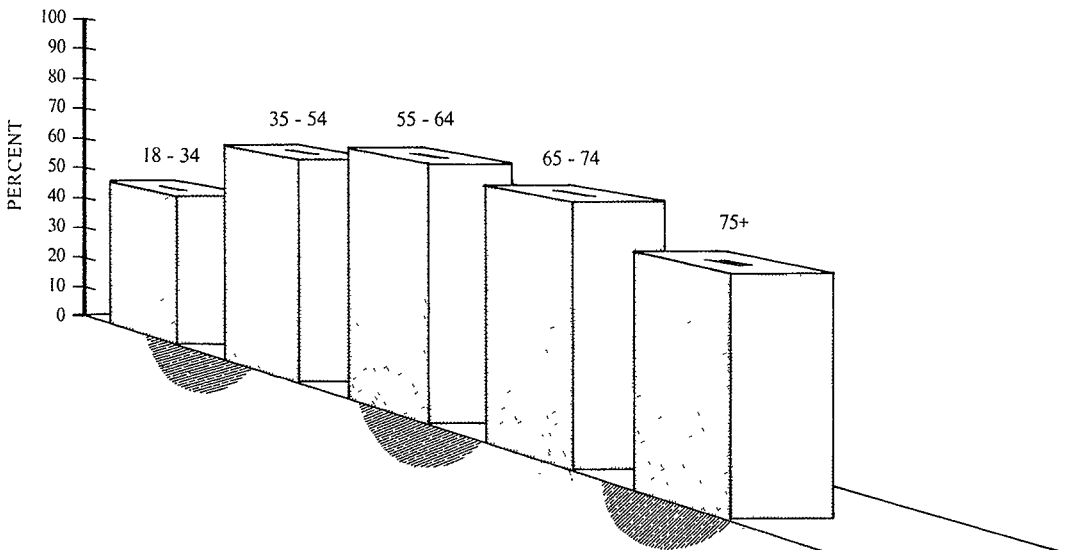
According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the middle-aged and the elderly generally are registered to vote in higher numbers and participate in elections in higher numbers than the rest of the country's population. For instance, the 1980 Census showed that nearly 75 percent of those aged 65 and over were registered to vote and 65 percent of them voted. By contrast, about 67 percent of the total population—young and old, was registered, and slightly less than 60 percent actually voted in the 1980 election.¹

The U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging provides a further breakdown of the Census figures in its report *Aging America: Trends and Projections*. According to that breakdown, 71 percent of those aged 55-64 voted in the 1980 presidential election while 69 percent of

those aged 65-74 voted—the two heaviest voting groups in the population. In other words, those who are soon to be elderly, and those who already are elderly (by the age 65 standard) are those most likely to participate in elections.²

In 1984, *Public Opinion*, the bimonthly journal of the American Enterprise Institute, studied the political preferences within the population, including the elderly.³ Their survey found that substantially more of the population over 65 considered themselves Democrats than Republicans, but that neither of the major political parties could claim a clear majority of the elderly. In that survey, 45 percent of the elderly identified themselves as Democrats; 10 percent called themselves Independents closer to Democrats; 11 percent considered themselves Independents closer to Republicans; and 29 percent considered themselves Republicans. From these surveys and data, it is clear that the elderly *are* active participants in the political process. But what is not clear is any real sense of unity of political purpose or homogeneity in voting patterns of the elderly. That is due most likely to the broad diversity of the elderly themselves. Save for age (that is, the fact that all

Figure 1. Percent Reported Voting in 1980
Presidential Election, by Age Group



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1980. Current Population Reports. Series P-20, No. 370, 1982

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—Former state Rep.
Ernest Messer (D-Haywood)

elderly are in some sense "old"), the elderly are not necessarily alike.

Some generalizations can be made, according to Walter DeVries, of N.C. Opinion Research of Wrightsville Beach. Based on his own research over the years, says DeVries, the elderly are generally conservative, and as the population grows older, the elderly are likely to become more conservative, favoring conservative candidates. But the elderly voters do share a common commitment to preserving and, where possible, strengthening the benefits from the Social Security system and Medicaid and Medicare.

Those who assume that the elderly can be molded into a single-minded political force, to coalesce behind a certain philosophy or belief, will find what social researchers and political scientists have found—that the elderly are no more likely to conform to their expectations than any other age group. Says Messer, "They (the elderly) tend to vote a little on the side of their own interests, but they have so many different interests that they do not vote right down the line in any one way."

For instance, in North Carolina's most recent statewide election, the U.S. Senate race between former Governor Hunt and U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, the elderly population was split between the two candidates—just like most other voting groups in the state.

Joseph W. Grimsley, Hunt's long-time political adviser, for instance, believes that at least among elderly whites, both candidates got their share of the vote, with the edge to Hunt. "White seniors voted slightly more Democratic than the population at large, and that was because of the Social Security issue," says Grimsley.

The elderly do have clout, both on the national and the state levels. Charles E. Odell, an expert on gerontology who makes his winter home in North Carolina, sees the evidence

everywhere. The fact that President Ronald Reagan backed off on his plans for changes in Social Security benefits is directly attributable to opposition of the elderly, says Odell. "A lot of Mr. Reagan's early efforts to tamper with the Social Security system were frustrated by the opposition of older people and organizations representing older people," says Odell, a former director of the United States Employment Service and former director of retired workers' programs for the United Auto Workers before he retired to Pinehurst.

The elderly particularly have clout at the local level, says Odell. That means not only that the elderly exert influence over new programs, but that they also—sometimes—stand in the way of such programs as bond issues for education or public works projects.

John T. Denning of Clinton, who will take over the national presidency of the American Association of Retired Persons in 1986, acknowledges that tendency to sometimes stand in the way of progress. "These are areas where we need to do a great deal of education," says Denning. "It can be a problem and we need to do a good educational program. These people often have children and grandchildren, and they need to be reminded and educated to the fact that voting against a bond issue might really be a vote against the future of their children."

While older persons do influence elections, making generalizations about their specific voting performance remains difficult—if not impossible. Despite all the organizations representing the elderly, there still is no sure-fire method of attracting, or even predicting, their vote. As Charles Odell puts it, "I don't think the seniors in North Carolina are all that well organized politically."

Young, the legislative analyst, doesn't think there's much chance of the elderly in the state becoming organized, either. "I'm not sure you could weld that group into a political force," says Young. "I don't think the people who are most affected by programs for the elderly vote that much alike." □

FOOTNOTES

¹*Voting and Registration Highlights from the Current Population Survey: 1964 to 1980*, U.S. Bureau of the Census, February 1984, Table 2, p. 4.

²*Aging America, Trends and Projections*, U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, 1984, Chart 72, p. 93.

³"Independents Demographically Defined," *Public Opinion*, bimonthly magazine of the American Enterprise Institute, April/May 1984, p. 29.