

# **1 Introduction: The Political Participation of Older People in an Era of Demographic Ageing**

I am afraid to say that we are currently witnessing the early signs of a pensioners' democracy. Older people are becoming more and more numerous, and all political parties pay extraordinary attention to them. This development could end in a situation in which older people plunder the young.

Roman Herzog, former judge at the Federal Constitutional Court (1983–94) and former President of Germany (1994–99) on the German government's announcement in April 2008 that it would raise public pensions by 1.1 per cent and so deviate from the pension formula (Blome et al. 2008).

This book is about the political participation of older people in Europe; how and why it differs from the participation of younger people; and why it matters for ageing democracies. At the moment, the public debate about the political impact of population ageing is rather superficial, with sensationalist undertones. Politicians and public commentators expect growing political pressures from a group of older people who will dominate all political processes and influence outcomes in their favour. According to this view, electoral politics in particular will be determined by people aged 50 and older who will soon be in the voting majority due to sheer numbers and their high voting propensity. In democratic systems that are based on majority decisions, this group of older voters will influence all policy outputs. This opinion is not only held by prominent elder statesmen, such as Roman

Herzog, but also resonates in the writings of economists, international organisations and scientific journalists (International Monetary Fund 2004: chap. 3; Kotlikoff and Burns 2004; Wallace 1999; Peterson 1999; Sinn and Uebelmesser 2002; see Lynch and Myrskylä forthcoming [2009]; Tepe and Vanhuysse 2008).

This book opposes the idea that a political ‘war of the generations’ will be waged in ageing societies. Its objective is to put the debate about the political behaviour of older people on a sound empirical basis and to generate a more balanced view. Older people do not behave uniformly in a different manner from younger people across European societies; some generational and age effects vary between countries. For one thing, different national milieus influence the early political and social experiences of individuals during impressionable early adulthood. Where and when an individual grows up matters for political participation in later life. In addition, countries are also the context for the social experience of the life cycle. Societies facilitate a particular type of social construction of old age and of other stages in the life cycle. Reaching ‘old age’ in one country can be a different experience from those encountered in other countries and have varying consequences for political behaviour.

Since the differences between older and younger people are determined by national characteristics, the continuous increase of the old age group relative to other age groups has varying consequences for political participation. A simple message such as ‘demographic ageing will affect participatory politics in manner X’ is false and untenable in light of the evidence reviewed for this book. Rather the message must be: given the societal

context, we can expect the participatory process in a given country to develop in a specific direction. Most importantly, the extent to which a society is structured in favour of older people shapes participation differences across age groups. In countries in which many older people depend on relatively few working people and public opinion on the subject of older people is very positive, older people are less likely to participate in politics relative to younger people. Put differently, this means that younger people are more active relative to older people in those countries in which the welfare state and the public sphere are more favourable to older people. Thus, in contrast to the simplistic notions referred to above, older people are less likely to dominate the political process in countries in which political reforms are most needed in order to cope with ageing populations.

Even within a given country, the differences in political participation between older and younger people are not stable across time. Some of them are due to particular political and social cohort experiences whose impact on the political process is limited to each cohort's presence in the populace. In contrast, other differences stem from age effects that are grounded in social and psychological experiences along the life cycle that affect all generations. Their influence will be long-lasting and shape the differences between older and younger people for some time to come.

Besides the analysis of party choice, this book is not about the political interests of older people and how they may differ from those of younger people. Inter-age differences in political interests are important issues, and I and others have tried to shed some light on them elsewhere (Busemeyer et al. 2008; Goerres 2007a). Nor is the book about the new strategies of

political parties, trade unions and single-issue organisations, whose ‘customers’ are ageing by the day, although I do offer a number of expectations concerning what these organisations may want to do.

### ***1.1 Exploring the political participation of older people in Europe***

#### **Defining ‘older people’ in advanced industrial societies**

One of the great imbalances in public discussions about older people and old age is the discrepancy between the homogenous image that ‘older people’ have in society and their own, much more varied view of old age, as well as their general unwillingness to identify themselves as older people. ‘The elderly’, ‘seniors’, ‘senior citizens’, ‘older people’, ‘the aged’ – there is a multiplicity of terms for older citizens in everyday English. However, older people rarely identify themselves as being old and do not agree on the labels given to them by others (see Walker and Maltby 1997: 17-18).

Technically speaking, the elderly are the most advanced in terms of *chronological age*, which is the number of years they have lived. Chronological age is only a proxy variable for many other characteristics and does not have a simple social meaning (Jennings and Markus 1988: 308). Chronological age is not culture-free in its social and political implications because it depends on the developmental circumstances of the society in which the person lives. One year in a pre-industrial society, such as the Amazonian Yanomami culture, is not the same as one in post-industrial Europe (Albert and Cattell 1994: 19-26). Among the Yanomami, a 70 year old man will cause wide interest because his still being alive is a rare occurrence. In Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a 70

year old scarcely raises an eyebrow and can be expected to be largely free from morbidity. Because of the cultural embeddedness of chronological age, this study looks only at societies that are similar in their stage of socio-economic development, so that chronological age is comparable in social and cultural terms. If we take only post-industrial societies in Europe, chronological age as a mere number assures us that one year of age is roughly the same for everybody in terms of expected life span.

While the maximum life span of about 110 years has been stable for the last 100,000 years, average life expectancy at birth has steadily risen with the socio-economic development of societies (Albert and Cattell 1994: 26-27). Life expectancy is in fact a direct indicator of socio-economic development or modernisation, as the cause of death in more advanced societies has largely shifted away from external causes (such as infectious diseases) to internal causes (physical and mental deterioration) (Avramov and Maskova 2003). The average life expectancy in the 21 European countries mainly under investigation here (Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland) is quite similar in comparison to the rest of the world. The estimated average for children at birth in 2000–5 was 80.8 years for women and 74.7 for men (United Nations 2004). The group means in these countries were above the world means of 67.9 (women) and 63.4 (men). Along similar lines, the proportion of older people in these European societies is above the world mean, ranging from 15.2 per cent in Ireland to 24.1 per cent in Italy (60+ year olds as a proportion of the whole

population). Most countries in the world are well below the minimum in Ireland. The world minimum lies at 3.0 per cent in Kuwait, the maximum at 25.5 per cent in Japan and the mean at 9.9 per cent (United Nations Common Database 2004).

As a working definition, I use 60 years of age as a cut-off point to separate seniors from non-seniors. The age of 60 approximates the mean retirement age in Europe, making it an important social division point.<sup>1</sup> As I define older people as those aged 60 and older, I identify the comparison category of 'non-older people' as those who are 59 and younger and will term them 'younger people'. Sometimes, when it is conceptually appropriate, I will make specific comparisons between older (60+), middle-aged (30–59) and young people (<30). In those instances, I clearly state which chronological age I am referring to.

The socio-economic situation of individuals who are 60 and older is changing. Thus, resources and interests as regards political participation are changing, too. First of all, senior citizens today are on average much better off in socio-economic terms than they used to be. The present senior cohort in Europe is better educated, has a higher income and has occupied higher-prestige jobs than earlier generations. This is mainly due to overall economic progress and development after the Second World War. In particular, the post-war baby-boomer generation, those born between 1945 and 1955 and who are currently crossing the 60-year threshold, is much better off than earlier generations in many advanced industrial democracies (see for example for Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom Huber and Skidmore 2003; Geschäftsstelle Seniorenwirtschaft 2004; Kunz 2005;

Walker 1999). Second, today's older people in Europe find themselves in a social environment that has changed greatly with regard to relations between seniors and their families. Whereas the tradition in European societies was to take care of parents in a three-generation household, the trend has been towards older people living separately from their family members, either on their own or in retirement homes (Tomassini et al. 2004). A third point is the reconstruction of European welfare states. European democracies began to experience increasing strains on their state budgets after the two oil crises in the 1970s because of negative economic growth, growing mass unemployment and high inflation. Social welfare systems that were based on particular assumptions about societies – such as lifelong permanent employment, short life spans after retirement and the care-giving social net of the family – are being reviewed. The elderly have become a major target of reform efforts and a change in political discourse. Older people receive expensive welfare benefits, such as public pensions, long-term care and medical treatment. If individuals perceive imminent cuts to policy regimes that they benefit from, they are likely to become mobilised on the issue. This is because individuals are more likely to become mobilised against losses of existing benefits than by the potential gain from benefits with the same value (Campbell 2003b; Weaver 1986; Kahnemann and Tversky 1979; see also Vanhuysse 2006).

### **The scope of political participation in the analysis**

This book contributes to the discussion on the potential influence of demographic ageing on politics and public policy through the *individual* participation of older people. The analysis is limited to liberal democracies

that give room for *voluntary* participation. We shall not be concerned with political actions that are forced upon the individual, such as in totalitarian systems. Nor shall we occupy ourselves with paid political activities, such as those of public affairs professionals or paid party employees, because their motivational structures can also be assumed to be different. Bearing in mind Max Weber's differentiation between politics as *Beruf* (profession) and as *Berufung* (vocation) (see Verba et al. 1995: 39), I disregard the *Beruf* sphere of political participation. There may be influences of demographic ageing on the world of professional political participants, such as the activities of old-age interest groups, but they are outside the scope of this book. Moreover, we are interested in individual voluntary political participation that is intended to influence political outcomes, to change existing institutional arrangements of the political process or to influence the selection of political personnel (see Verba et al. 1995: chap. 2 for a similar definition). Thus, I shall restrict the analysis to the impact of participation on public policies and public institutions.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I concentrate on mass political participation. These are political actions that are reasonably easy to carry out and do not require intense commitment. For example, party activists tend to commit themselves to regular activities for their party. The transition between mass and high-intensity participation is fluid. The main reason for this limitation is practical and derives from the type of evidence used here. Conventional mass surveys capture only a very small number of activists. This kind of evidence does not give enough statistical leverage to properly investigate high-intensity forms of

participation, as over-samples of activists would (Whiteley and Seyd 2002; Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Whiteley et al. 1994; Verba et al. 1995).

This book focuses on various modes of mass political participation that can be classified as institutionalised (voting and membership in political organisations) and non-institutionalised participation outside of organisations, such as signing a petition. This division, suggested, for example, by Max Kaase (1999), is important because the political participation process in advanced industrial democracies is in flux. The universe of participation is becoming more diverse, with non-institutionalised forms of participation supplementing and to some extent replacing institutionalised forms. It is therefore vital to know how the growing group of older people falls into these categories. Institutionalised participation requires some form of organisational effort on a regular basis. Non-institutionalised participation can be done more spontaneously and does not require long-term preparations by an organisation.

**Table 1.1: Patterns of difference between older (60+) and younger people (59-) with regard to single political actions, 20–22 European countries in 2002 (%)**

	Proportion of countries with the relevant pattern (sums to 100%)		
	Older people more active	Older people not different	Older people less active
Been a party member	<b>72</b>	28	0
Voted in parliamentary elections	<b>68</b>	32	0
Signed a petition	0	5	<b>95</b>
Bought a product for political, ethical or environmental reasons	0	9	<b>91</b>
Been a trade union member	0	16	<b>84</b>
Boycotted a product for political, ethical or environmental reasons	0	18	<b>82</b>
Taken part in a legal demonstration	0	28	<b>72</b>
Worn a badge	0	45	<b>55</b>
Contacted a public official or politician	0	45	<b>55</b>
Taken part in an illegal demonstration	0	<b>86</b>	14
Been a member of a humanitarian or human rights group	0	<b>80</b>	20
Donated to a political party	25	<b>75</b>	0
Been a member of environmental/peace/animal rights groups	0	<b>70</b>	30
Donated to humanitarian or human rights groups	0	<b>60</b>	40
Donated to environmental/peace/animal rights groups	0	<b>55</b>	45

Note: Percentages indicate the proportion of countries in which the dominant, statistically significant pattern of the respective column may be found, observations weighted by design weight. Respondents were asked: ‘In the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?’

Source: ESS. Some items were not available in all countries.

Table 1.1 reports the patterns of significant differences between the group of older people (60+) and that of younger people (59–) in 20–22 European countries in 2002. Each row summarises the proportions of countries that fall into one of three categories: older people are more active/not different/less active than/from younger people. The first striking finding is that each political action shows only one significant type of difference. In general, older people tend to be significantly more *or* less active in a given political activity, but not both, in different countries. In each row of the table, we find only countries in which there is no significant difference and countries with a significant difference in just one direction. In the first section, there are two forms of participation, voting and party membership, in which older people are more likely to engage than younger people in most countries. In the case of party membership, 72 per cent of all countries show a significantly higher occurrence of party membership among older people than among younger people. In the case of voting, 68 per cent of countries have significantly more active older people. In the second section, there are six forms of participation for which older people are predominantly less active in the majority of countries: signing a petition, buying a product, boycotting a product, trade union membership, demonstrating legally and contacting a public official or politician. The share of countries with this dominant pattern ranges from 95 per cent in the case of signing a petition to 55 per cent in the case of contacting a public official or politician. In the third section, there are six political actions that do not show any inter-age differences in a majority of countries. The patterns range from 86 per cent of countries not showing any age differences

as regards taking part in illegal demonstrations to 55 per cent of countries as regards donating to an environmental/peace/animal rights group.

### ***1.2 The 'state of the art' in the literature on the political participation of older people***

The existing body of knowledge about the political behaviour of older people in Europe is disparate. Few political science studies deal with the politics of older people (Campbell 2003a; Lynch 2006; Schulz and Binstock 2006). Instead, we find one part of the relevant literature scattered across social gerontology, the discipline studying all social aspects of older people, and the other in political science studies, in which age-related effects on political behaviour are analysed. Age-related effects are generally divided into cohort effects or generational effects on the one hand, and age effects or life-cycle effects on the other. A cohort effect is shared by a group of people born during a certain period. It is typical of all members of that generation and remains the same as the cohort members become older. An age effect is shared by people in the same age group, regardless of the cohort to which the individual belongs.

#### **Generational accounts**

The only available long-term panel study (spanning 50 years) predicts that political-ideological attitudes (important antecedents of behaviour) are very stable throughout the ageing process. Attitudes acquired at a young age are usually maintained, although specific later personal experiences can change them (Alwin et al. 1991). In social gerontology, continuity theory claims that seniors continue doing what they learnt when they were younger (Tirrito 2003: 123-4; Atchley 1989). Middle-aged and older individuals

make 'adaptive choices' to maintain and preserve their personal psychological and social structures. They do so in order to support and reinforce their self-image.

Whereas the process of attitude formation seems to be the same for all cohorts, the content of early socialisation is not. One prominent body of writing emphasises long-term generational value change from materialism to postmaterialism: older people show a more materialist predisposition because they were socialised during times when basic material needs had not been satisfied (Inglehart 1971, 1990; Abramson 1989; Abramson and Inglehart 1987). This value change can also have subsequent effects, such as preferences for new political issues and political parties (Klein and Arzheimer 1997; Kohler 1998). Related to the discussion concerning postmaterialism is the idea of societal modernisation that leads to both a change of political values toward postmaterialism, and new participatory demands. New generations favour non-institutionalised over institutionalised participation (Topf 1995a, 1995b; Fuchs and Klingemann 1995a; Delli Carpini 1986). Some authors (Norris 1999; Dalton 2004, 2008) also put forward generational explanations for declining political trust in the institutions of representative government, which could then lead to more participation outside of these institutions.

There are also specific cohort explanations for voting participation. Cohorts that were affected by the lowering of the voting age when they were young show a relatively lower turnout probability than precedent or subsequent cohorts. The newly enfranchised group of 18–20 year olds at the time, as with women in the first elections in which they exercised universal

franchise, did not vote with the same probability as the already enfranchised 21+ group. This lower likelihood of voting was maintained in relative terms throughout the life course (Franklin 2004; see for a comprehensive review of voting behaviour and age groups Goerres forthcoming [2008]).

Accounts of party structures and organisations suggest that the fact that older people are more likely to be party members than younger people is a sign of the decline of political parties. West German parties were good at attracting young cohorts in the 1970s, but deteriorated in later decades. As a consequence, party members are more likely to be older in Germany today. Britain's biggest parties have been unsuccessful in attracting young cohorts since the Thatcher era (see Scarrow 1996; Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 32; Whiteley et al. 1994: 43; Whiteley and Seyd 2002). Party membership in most European countries (with the exception of, for example, Spain) has declined in recent decades (see Mair and van Biezen 2001; Scarrow 2000) and has led to a higher likelihood of party members being older people today. The fortunes of parties can also go the other way, however. For example in Germany, the Netherlands and France, Green parties emerged at the beginning of the 1980s and attracted young party members, meaning that older people are less likely to be Green party members today (Kitschelt 1990).

With regard to party preferences, young people are susceptible to political forces during their impressionable years, that is, when they first go to vote (Butler and Stokes 1983 [1974]; Green et al. 2002; Rose and McAllister 1990). The dominance of a party leaves its mark on the youngest cohort of new voters. Over a lifetime, this impression is strengthened through

growing identification with that party. These voters perceive all emerging political events through the lens of their party identification. Thus, at old age, the cohort as a whole can potentially differ from younger cohorts that do not share the same socialisation experience.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, the piecemeal evidence suggests two things. Generations differ in their preferences for types of political participation, with newer generations increasingly favouring non-institutionalised forms. They also vary in their political preferences in general. Value changes in the area of postmaterialism and libertarianism, as well as party-political experiences, affect generations differently.

### **Life-cycle explanations**

The most prominent sociological theory about senior social participation proposes the ‘disengagement thesis’. Seniors disengage themselves from society once they leave the workforce as much as society retreats from its older members (Cumming and Henry 1961; Glenn 1969; Rollenhagen 1982).

Norval Glenn and Michael Grimes (1968) refined the disengagement theory: becoming a senior, they argue, might be accompanied by selective withdrawal, that is, senior citizens withdraw from some parts of social life (such as employment) and remain active in others, including politics.

The second major explanation of differences between age groups is life experience. John Crittenden (1963) undertook a cohort analysis of party identification and turnout (following up on Campbell et al. 1960). Raymond Wolfinger and Stephen Rosenstone (1980) established the higher likelihood of older voters voting, once demographic variables have been controlled for. They also found an interaction effect between age and education, which they

explained with the function of life experience. Thus, not only does formal education affect voting participation, but also the accumulation of life experience as people age. Other authors have suggested that the accumulation of various resources, such as political knowledge, over a lifetime increases the likelihood of voting (Jankowski 2000; Strate et al. 1989; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Eric Plutzer (2002) and Mark Franklin (2004) also proposed the importance of habituation. The more often people vote, the higher the likelihood that they will do so the next time. Older people go to the polls more often because they have more experience than younger voters. M. Kent Jennings and Gregory Markus (1988) analysed individual-level change of political participation with a three-wave panel study. Ageing individuals showed an overall decline in all participation other than voting. They also attributed this rigidity of voting to early habituation.

‘If you're not a liberal when you're 25, you have no heart. If you're not a conservative by the time you're 35, you have no brain.’ This quote, attributed variously to Winston Churchill, Otto von Bismarck and Bernard Shaw, illustrates the common belief that people get more conservative as they age. This prominent hypothesis (first put forward by Glenn 1974; Crittenden 1962) exists in three different variations: (i) voters become economically more conservative as they age because they accumulate more material goods that they want to preserve, that is, older people want lower taxes (Binstock and Quadagno 2001); (ii) older people favour the status quo, to which they have adapted, because they want to minimise insecurity (Williamson et al. 1982: chap. 5); (iii) older people become more

authoritarian in their political attitudes because they increasingly value social and political order (see Tilley 2005; Danigelis and Cutler 1991). Another life-cycle hypothesis for voting choice is growing adherence to parties that are large and/or regularly part of government (Barnes 1989). These parties can leave a recurring impression on ageing voters over their lifetimes by being members of government or the leading opposition (and the greater media coverage that goes along with it). As we age, we develop a stronger established-party bias. Smaller parties are consequently at a disadvantage among older voters because their sustainable legacy in ageing voters' minds is less well established.

Finally, Andrea Campbell (2003a; 2003b) analysed the political behaviour of recipients of social security in the US (state pension and old age health benefits), who are normally 65 and older. She found that they can be mobilised into participation even though they would normally not be active when they perceive potential changes to a policy programme as a threat to the level of their entitlements.

In sum, the existing life-cycle explanations concern the participation as well as the political interests that are pursued. Variations across the life cycle can occur due to growing experience or social situations that change along the life cycle. The literature on both generational and life-cycle explanations suffers from the lack of a comparative framework that can incorporate several country contexts and fails to see the implications of contexts for differences between age groups.

### ***1.3 A model for studying the political participation of older people***

In order to talk about the impact of the growing number of older people on the political process, we must carry out a robust empirical analysis at the individual level, endogenising the macro-level context into the explanation. Being older involves many different things that might also affect political behaviour: for example, relative to younger people, seniors have more life experience, other generational experiences, such as the memory of the Second World War, or are at a different position in the life cycle, such as retirement. Once the mechanisms for differences at the individual level are worked out, we can relate them back to the macro level and discuss their wider implications.

Why should older people show different patterns of political participation from younger people? The recent political science literature (Verba et al. 1995) suggests a model that includes intrinsic as well as extrinsic contextual factors. When we assume such a resource-based model of political participation, we can find two answers to the question: (i) older people are different ‘from within’: they might have other levels of motivation and resources that they can use to participate in politics; (ii) older people face a different environment from younger people. They might be exposed to a different kind of mobilisation to participate in politics or to a different set of opportunities for participation.

In this book, we trace age differences in political behaviour back to four different types of age-related effects: political generation, socio-economic cohort, life cycle and individual ageing (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion). This conceptualisation extends the conventional discussion of

age-related effects in order to get a better understanding of underlying causal mechanisms. Traditionally, differences between age groups are explained by the classification of age, period and cohort effects and their interactions. A period effect is the impact of the context in which a survey was conducted that affects all respondents (and which – on its own – is thus not helpful for explaining differences between age groups at a certain point in time, but its impact on a particular age group creates a cohort effect). A cohort effect is shared by a group of people born during a certain period and comes up in surveys at different points in time (either in panel surveys or in repeated cross-sectional surveys). An age effect is shared by people in the same age group. It can also be measured at different points in time. My definitions of the ‘political generation’ and ‘socio-economic cohort’ effects fall into the category of ‘cohort effects’. My ‘life-cycle’ and ‘individual ageing’ effects must be placed in the category of ‘age effects’.

A ‘political generation’ effect stems from the shared experience of a group that was born during a certain period. Cohort membership is important because the early period of our adulthood is so decisive in terms of political socialisation. We are much more open to political influences between about 15 and 30 (the ‘impressionable years’) than between 50 and 65. This early political socialisation leaves an imprint in citizens’ heads as it shapes our early political preferences. Since socialisation influences stem from political circumstances at the time of young adulthood – such as differences between parties in attracting first-time voters – political preferences differ between cohorts. This cohort effect is based on the shared historical, *political* experience of a cohort, not the *socio-economic* experience that is captured

by the socio-economic cohort effect to be explained next. Political experience in young adulthood can influence political preferences. It can also determine attitudes towards political participation as such, most importantly the scope of political participation considered to be open for engagement. Individuals who grew up in times of limited political participation perceive less scope for political participation in later life. The 'socio-economic cohort' effect derives from the varying probabilities between cohorts of acquiring certain socio-economic characteristics. Changes in the class structure and educational composition of the population affect generations differently and so must be taken into account. Education is the most important case of a socio-economic cohort effect. The probability of a younger person today having finished secondary school is much higher than that of an older person because they grew up in different times, the latter before the mass expansion of secondary and higher education. A higher degree of formal education stimulates higher levels of political participation. According to this perspective, educated individuals also tend to have a better understanding of the political process and live in social contexts in which political participation is valued more strongly. These generational changes are correlates of long-term social changes, such as economic development. This unidirectional development separates this effect from the political generation effect, whose influence can differ even between two decades. Political generation effects capture the effects of political history in youth rather than those of macro-social changes. 'Life-cycle' effects on political behaviour derive from changes in our social situation over the life course. Each life-cycle stage – such as youth,

adolescence, middle and old age – puts the individual into social contexts with rather different demands. For example, young adults often struggle to succeed in their professional lives, and are occupied with starting a family and securing their family's income. Older people can suffer from deteriorating health, have settled down in a certain area and do not usually need to support children anymore. These different social stages are contexts that create differences in political interests as much as in available resources for participating in politics. Health, for instance, deteriorates with age due to the combined effects of the accumulation of unhealthy lifestyles (a social phenomenon) and the physical effects of ageing. Physical ability can be important for various forms of political participation. This age effect is rooted in the social experience associated with (and often constructed around) a certain age. It is thus dependent on social and cultural circumstances.

As a final age effect on political behaviour, 'individual ageing' entails two universal human mechanisms that affect the likelihood of political participation: accumulation of experience and growing adherence to social norms. First, past participation experiences influence the future probability of participation. If we learn that something brings some kind of gratification to us that outweighs our costs, we will do it again. If something does not give us enough gratification, we will not do it again. Over a lifetime, the repertoire of situations that we know (and also believe we know) grows steadily. The older we are, the more likely we are to 'know the show'. Drawing on our own experience is one type of cognitive short-cut. An older person can fall back, for instance, on many more elections than a younger

one and can use that experience to cast his or her vote again. Issues, candidates and the procedure of voting are more familiar to the former than to the latter, entailing lower costs in performing that political action.

Second, increasing adherence to social norms as we age is the result of a complex transmission process between social norms and our individual behaviour. At the level of the individual, we are motivated to behave in a certain way by our own subjective norm. The subjective norm is our perception of the social norm in our personal environment. This subjective norm is the sum of social pressure and gratification that we expect to receive from people we know. Thus, it plays an integral part in any cost–benefit calculation of political action. The social gratification that we receive increases the benefit of our action. As we age, the perception of the social norm changes because we are more and more likely to have followed societal rules in the past and identify with the society that produces the social norm. The older person has held many social roles in his or her life – such as parent, employee, grandparent, retiree – and has been subjected to many social expectations. The social norms of that society have increasingly become part of the older person’s personal, subjective norm because of the growing expectations to behave according to social norms. For example, as voting represents a social norm in liberal democracies, the older person feels more obliged to comply with that norm than the younger. This age-related effect is psychological in nature and exists independently of social contexts, whereas the content of social norms is, of course, contingent on it.

### ***1.4 The country-level implications of age-related effects***

The four age-related effects not only help us to systematise the differences between younger and older individuals in a given context, but also inherently include expectations of differences in the context, that is, how we can endogenise differences between countries. Furthermore, the nature of age-related effects has varying implications for the impact of demographic ageing on the participatory process.

#### **Expectations concerning between-country differences**

Political generation effects are due to varying period effects when a cohort is impressionable in early adulthood. These effects are strongly shaped by a cohort's political history. There are a few historical events and processes that can potentially determine generational experiences at a young age across national borders, and which have an effect on the decision to participate and create similar lasting influences at a later age. Examples might be experience of the World Wars or the fall of totalitarian regimes. For instance, the experience of a totalitarian system with its lack of participatory opportunities in young adulthood may influence attitudes towards participation in later life. To that extent, the participatory predisposition of a Polish older person should be similar to that of a Slovenian older person. By and large, however, political generation effects should vary between countries and should be due to national circumstances. This is especially true with regard to electoral preferences, as the experience of parties is national in character.

If cohorts differ in the probability of attaining a certain socio-economic characteristic, this difference is largely due to broad societal processes that

tend to go only in one direction (in the periods under study). For example, many sociologists, such as Bryan Wilson (1966), claim that socio-economic development and declining religiosity are correlates of modernisation. Older cohorts are more likely to have lower degrees of formal education and be more religious. Differences between cohorts vary across countries, but are likely to be qualitatively similar because European societies follow comparable socio-economic trajectories. For example, the difference in religiosity between older and younger age groups is greater in Spain than in Germany. This is because in Spain, the older generations are strongly religious and younger generations less so, whereas in Germany there is only a modest generational difference because older generations are already less religious than their fellow generational members in Spain.

Life-cycle effects depend on the cultural perception of the life course. This perception is very similar across Europe. Thus, social demands and expectations, resources and identities vary similarly across the life cycle. So if life-cycle factors play a role in political participation, they should do so in a similar way across Europe. This is not to say that there are no differences between European countries as to the social position of older people.

Indeed, one of our findings is that there are differences in terms of public opinion towards older people that determine the activity levels of older people relative to those of younger people.

Individual ageing is the sum of accumulating life experience as well as the habituation of certain patterns of political behaviour. These are genuinely human processes that should be the same in all countries, regardless of cultural context.

## **Implications for the long-term impact of demographic ageing on the participatory process**

Discussions of the political impact of demographic ageing are always about the future. The elderly of the coming decades are already being born.

Research on their political preferences today can be carried out today. But what will the participatory process look like in, for example, two decades? We can make projections concerning how many older people there will be and calculate their numerical power vis-à-vis younger age groups with reasonable precision. But to what extent will there be differences in political participation? The empirical research carried out on data that do not go further back than 2005 can provide some limited answers.

The argument for these projections draws on the assumption that the four age-related effects differ in their implications for ageing societies. We can make a distinction, on the one hand, between political generation and socio-economic cohort effects, whose impact depends on specific cohorts, and, on the other hand, life-cycle and individual ageing effects, whose impact is relatively stable across time. Generational effects, be they political generation or socio-economic cohort effects, are specific to generations that constitute certain age groups at a given time point. Therefore, differences between age groups are unstable across time. For example, the baby-boomers in Germany belong to the Brandt Generation that is more pro-SPD and pro-Green than preceding generations. The impact of these generational preferences is visible in the political process as long as members of the Brandt Generation vote, but will be gone once its members die. In contrast, those findings that are mainly rooted in life-cycle or individual ageing

effects will be long-term characteristics of ageing democracies. Life-cycle and individual ageing effects make the differences between age groups independent of generations and thus stable across time. For example, as I will demonstrate, retirement has a positive impact on political protest because retirees have the time to engage in protest and are no longer concerned about any repercussions their protests might have for employment. This effect is independent in its nature from specific generations. The effect on political behaviour today, all other things being equal, should be similar to the effect of retirement on political behaviour in ten years' time.

The process of demographic ageing, witnessed all over Europe, is a significant social change. If differences between age groups are stable across time, as are life-cycle and individual ageing effects, ageing democracies will have enduringly changed. If the differences between age groups are unstable across time, ageing democracies will experience changes only insofar as a generation, when it is old, will have a strong influence due to its demographic weight. The importance of that generation will not linger. This is because a new generation will soon be old and assume the demographic power.

For the near future, the voting process appears to be tilted in favour of older voters. Life cycle and individual ageing dominate as causes that make older people more likely to vote. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that life cycle and individual ageing are sociological and psychological factors that stand outside the political process. They are embedded in the way we live our lives and the way we

think, and are not easily amenable to the influence of policy-makers. Other important life-cycle factors can be found at the macro-level: in societies that favour older people more (more positive public opinion of old age and relatively many older people dependent on few working people), older people are less likely to be active, compared to younger people, across various modes of political participation. Thus, ageing societies of that kind are less likely to see a disproportional participatory impact of older people.

Other differences are due to cohort effects, such as education, which has a depressing effect on participation in many areas. The varying levels of education shape the differences between older and younger people today, but are likely to vanish in the future. Another example concerns non-institutionalised participation. There is evidence of cohorts of older people catching up with younger people. This difference is cohort-specific and therefore dynamic across time.

### ***1.5 Organisation of the book***

The book is divided into four parts: theoretical framework, institutionalised participation, non-institutionalised participation and conclusions. In order to keep the book accessible and the number of figures and tables manageable, many regression results are shown and discussed only with the help of a graphical presentation. All regressions, additional tests and other material can be found in the web appendix that is available from <http://www.achimgoerres.de> or directly from the author. The book itself also contains a small appendix with the coding details of the variables.

In Chapter 2, I put forward a theoretical model of resources and incentives as conditions of political participation that can be empirically

tested. The framework explicitly incorporates the contextual implications and expectations of the individual-level differences.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 constitute the first empirical part about institutionalised forms of mass participation. As Chapter 3 shows,<sup>4</sup> older people in Europe are more likely to vote because of a combination of psychological and sociological factors experienced through individual ageing. As we age, we habituate voting and become more deeply entangled in the social fabric of a liberal democracy. Thus, we are increasingly exposed to the social norm of voting and feel growing gratification from it. Furthermore, social factors such as the duration of residence or not living with a mobilising partner are the most important determinants of the difference between younger and older citizens. Political factors such as politicisation or generational factors such as educational differences do not play a major role. The country context also shapes the difference between younger and older voters. In countries with low turnouts, low dependency ratios –in essence a low number of pensioners relative to the working population - and a less positive public opinion of old age and a shorter democratic tradition, older people are – relative to younger people – more likely to vote. Our findings suggest that in societies favouring older people more (high dependency ratio and more positive public opinion towards old age), the levels of younger and older people's voting participation are more balanced, making the gap between the age groups smaller. So, in contexts in which public resources are more likely to be targeted at older people, their overall impact on the voting process is smaller.

In Chapter 4,<sup>5</sup> the focus lies on the content of the voting decision by looking at longitudinal data for party choice in Britain and West Germany. The findings suggest that older people choose differently from younger people when they vote. This difference depends on a complex interplay of the characteristics of the party system and a combination of generational and life-cycle factors. In more aligned systems in which voting volatility is low, older people vote differently because of their generational membership: on average, their party choice mirrors the party fortunes of their young adulthood. Furthermore, in more proportional electoral systems, older people tend to vote more for established, large or governmental parties. Finally, there is no evidence for any form of growing conservatism.

Chapter 5 analyses age differences in terms of political membership (parties, trade unions, single-issue organisations). For each type of membership, there is one outstanding life-cycle effect at work at the individual level: the duration of residence (parties, positive impact from the perspective of older people), employment (trade unions, negative impact for older people) and living with children (single-issue organisations, positive impact for older people). The country contexts shape the variance between individuals of different ages, too, especially the country-specific popularity of the organisation and dependency ratio. Finally, there is some moderate evidence for parties and single-issue organisations, supporting the cohort notion that the decline in political parties indicates an ageing membership and the rise in single-issue organisations entails a rejuvenating membership. The lack of findings for trade unions and the weak evidence for parties and single-issue

organisations suggest that these organisations might be reacting to the changes and therefore avoiding membership losses in certain age groups. Chapters 6 and 7 make up the third part of the book, concerning non-institutionalised political participation. The quantitative findings in Chapter 6 are as follows: older generations are less likely to use non-institutionalised forms of participation, but are steadily catching up with younger generations of similar social backgrounds; older people have a different level of endowment with predictors of participation, of which three are socio-economic cohort phenomena (education, postmaterialism, religiosity) and three are based on the life cycle (duration of residence, the number of children in the household and health). Also, compared to younger people of the same country (*ceteris paribus*), older people are more active in countries with low participation rates, long democratic traditions, low dependency ratios and a less favourable public opinion of older people.

In Chapter 7, interview material is analysed from a case study of English council tax protesters to trace the personal experience behind correlational associations of the large-N quantitative study in Chapter 6. For example, health does not matter because less healthy individuals can substitute physically more demanding actions (for example, street demonstrations) with less demanding ones (for example, letter-writing). Most importantly, the interviews mirror the generational change that is affecting the current cohort of older people and the societal embeddedness of their experience as protesters.

In Chapter 8, I conclude by comparing my findings, discussing the limits of the investigation, suggesting avenues for future research and relating the findings to the broader debate about the implications of population ageing. With regard to data sources, I use the European Social Survey (version 5, round 1) in Chapters 3, 5 and 6. It is a broad survey that has been coordinated between European countries. The sampling period covered spring 2002. There are 21 European countries in the survey: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland. If necessary from a theoretical point-of-view (for example, to control for differences in totalitarian socialisation), I split Germany into East and West, in which case the sample consists of 22 countries. The survey is cross-sectional only, that is, we have data only from one point in time, albeit in a multitude of countries. The countries cover a whole range of cultural regions, welfare systems and democratic experiences. All countries are functioning liberal democracies that have had regular elections and changes in government by democratic means.<sup>6</sup> In addition, I draw on the World Values Survey series (WVS, 1981, 1990, 2000) with different sets of countries (see chapters for details). In Chapter 4, I use national election studies (the British Election Studies, BES, 1964–2001, the German Election Studies 1961–98) and monthly surveys (Gallup 1958 and 1959 and Politbarometer 1977–2002). All surveys are available from the British and German Central Data Archives in Colchester and Cologne, respectively.

Finally, the analysis in Chapter 7 draws on interviews that I conducted with older British protesters in autumn 2005.