

8 Summary and Conclusions

Differences of political participation between younger and older citizens cannot be pinned down in a simple statement valid across European democracies or across time. Instead, the interplay of, on the one hand, generational socialisation in politics and society and, on the other, sociological changes across the life cycle and psychological experiences of ageing shape an individual's pattern of political participation at any age. Older people are not uniformly different from younger people across societies because some generational and age effects vary between countries. For one thing, countries influence the early political and social experiences of an individual in early adulthood, when he or she is impressionable. The political and social developments of a society impact most strongly on the younger cohorts. Where and when an individual grows up matter for political participation in later life. In addition, countries are also the context for the social experience of the life cycle. Societies facilitate a certain type of social construction of old age and of other stages in the life cycle. Entering 'old age' in one country can be a different experience from that in another country.

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

the societal context, we can expect the participatory process in that country to develop in a specific direction.

8.1 Older people's political participation – a summary

The populations of many advanced industrial democracies are ageing. This demographic change fundamentally alters the pool of citizens who can participate in politics. Most importantly, the group of older people is growing massively in absolute and relative terms, no matter whether we choose a definition of older people as those aged 50+, 60+ or 65+. How can this ageing process alter the democratic participation process? To what extent and why do older people participate differently in politics?

Political participation is conceptualised as an individual action based on a prior decision concerning the mode and content of that action. Individuals consider the motivation and resources they have, and the mobilisation attempts and opportunities they are exposed to. They have the choice between a whole variety of political actions that can lead to changes in policy, institutions or political personnel. Among the less intense and more common forms of participation, citizens can distinguish fundamentally between institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of participation. Institutionalised forms are organised on a permanent basis either by the state or by another organisation. Among these forms of participation, we analysed voting and membership of political organisations. Non-institutionalised forms are more transitory in nature; these political actions do not require a long-term commitment on the part of the participant nor permanent organisation. Here, we analysed three modes of non-institutionalised participation: the individual mode consisting of acts such as

signing a petition or wearing a badge; the contacting mode describing acts of contacting public officials or politicians; and the collective mode summarising group activities, such as protesting in the streets.

The differences in political participation between age groups can be traced back to four different kinds of age-related effects – older people can behave differently in politics from younger people for the following reasons:

1. They belong to a different political generation that has differently shaped political preferences. These preferences can affect the choice and content of political participation. The early experience of politics varies from one cohort to the next (*political generation effect*).
2. Older people belong to a generation whose socio-economic experience differs from that of more recent cohorts. Social experiences, such as the exposure to education and postmaterialist values, have an immediate impact on political participation because they affect preferences for ways of participation and the predisposition to participate (*socio-economic cohort effect*).
3. Older people are at a different stage in their life cycle. The social and sometimes physical experiences of their position in the life cycle affect their political interests as much as their predisposition to participate in any given channel of participation (*life-cycle effect*).
4. Older people have more participatory experience to draw from and are more likely to adhere to social norms that prescribe a certain type of behaviour in a given situation (*individual ageing effect*).

Political generation and socio-economic effects belong to the category of cohort effects. If all differences between older and younger citizens' political behaviour in a society were due to these effects, that society would experience an unstable difference in participation between these two age groups across time. At one point in time, a particular cohort of older people would demonstrate a certain participatory behaviour vis-à-vis the behaviour of a specific cohort of younger individuals. Ten years later, for example, the groups of older and younger people would consist of different cohorts that again carry different sets of relevant experiences. In contrast to cohort effects, life-cycle and individual ageing effects belong to the larger category of age effects. If all differences between older and younger individuals were due to this type of effect, ageing societies would experience long-lasting changes in the participatory process. Older people would represent a growing group of individuals exposed to a specific set of age effects that makes their participatory behaviour different from the shrinking group of younger people. In essence, both cohort and age effects can be found to be at work across all types of participation, making the impact of demographic ageing on the participatory process not only complex, but also unstable across time.

Political generation effects

In the realm of voting, the evidence brought to light clear political-generational differences. For one thing, older cohorts in many West European democracies are socialised more strongly into the belief that voting is a citizen's duty. In these countries, such as Britain, older people

are therefore more likely to turn out to vote. Their early socialisation made them on average more politically active in the electoral sphere. Younger cohorts, in contrast, did not learn to view voting as such an important act when they were young.

Voting is affected not only with regard to participation, but also voting choice. The analysis of British and West German data showed generational differences in party preferences that can be explained by knowing the political context of the early elections of each cohort. Older voters today are different from younger voters because the former were influenced by a different system of popular parties in youth than the latter. However, the socialisation impact of early elections on party preferences depends on the context. The more volatile voting and the electorate are, the less these early impressions have a lasting influence. Hence, with increasing overall voting volatility, the effects of socialisation diminish.

Another political effect of generations can be measured with regard to the degree of establishment of a democracy. In countries that have been functioning liberal democracies for a longer time, older generations behave differently in politics than more recent cohorts. This effect is striking with regard to voting, party membership and the contacting mode of non-institutionalised participation. The longer a country has been democratic, the more likely older people are to vote, to be party members and to use the contacting mode relative to younger people of the same country. This can be explained by the stronger generational experience of participatory norms and values in more established democracies. If a cohort goes through life in a context in which participation and participatory values are more prevalent,

its members develop a stronger difference from younger cohorts in that country than do cohorts in a less participatory context. For non-institutionalised participation, we also find some evidence of the experience of a free liberal democracy in young adulthood increasing a generation's participation levels.

Older people's membership of political organisations is also characterised to some degree by the changing fortunes of each kind of organisation. We find moderately strong evidence that older people are more likely to be party members in those countries in which parties have lost members in general. Hence, if parties have maintained or increased their membership, they seem to have done so by recruiting young people, reducing the relative share of older people in party membership. A similar relationship can be seen with regard to single-issue organisations, but it is even weaker. For trade union membership, no such correlation is visible. The reason for the weakness (in the case of parties and single-issue organisations) or for the non-existence (trade unions) of this pattern probably lies in the strategies of the respective organisations. Organisations are likely to notice that they are losing members in particular age groups and may pursue strategies to counterbalance these losses. For example, trade unions have to rethink their role in ageing societies in which the number of people in the labour force is shrinking and have to strike a balance between representing employees and trying to have a large number of members, so increasing their political power. Parties in Germany have reacted to their ageing membership not only by trying to attract more younger people, but also by building up

organisational structures for older members, similar to the longer-existing party youth branches.

The evidence also showed us a general political generational change. Newer forms of non-institutionalised participation previously used much less by older than by younger people are increasingly being used by older people. The gap between younger and older people is closing with regard to these forms of participation. This change is taking place regardless of other social changes. The popularity of this kind of participation is growing and is spreading disproportionately among older cohorts. The interviews brought vivid examples of how generations are experiencing this general change in politics. The older protesters reported that they felt they belonged to a different generation from their parents as regards involvement in politics. This change is being propelled at the micro level by the increasing visibility of older active individuals who serve as role models for others. This finding for non-institutionalised participation is remarkable insofar as the general change towards greater popularity of these forms of participation is affecting older cohorts more strongly than younger cohorts.

Socio-economic cohort effects

Despite the numerous social changes that have happened in Europe in the last 50 years, the evidence showed only education to be of consistent age-related importance across all areas of participation. Other changes, such as postmaterialism and religiosity, have had only a minor impact. Higher education has spread dramatically in European societies, with many governments now striving for a target of 50 per cent of school-leavers going to university. The availability of educational opportunities has increased for

younger cohorts, and so the likelihood of participation in education at a higher level tends to be higher for younger than for older cohorts.

Education is an important predictor of political participation because higher educated individuals have more resources to participate (because they are more likely to understand the workings of the political process) and more motivation to do so (because they are cognitively mobilised to understand the participatory norms of society). Thus, education has a consistently positive impact on all the political actions that we surveyed in this book. It proved to have a particularly strong impact, relative to others, on voting participation, party and single-issue organisation membership. Only for voting participation did we also find a strong interaction effect between education and age that mirrors the substitute effect of life experience for formal education, making education-level differences in old age less relevant for participation than at a young age.

All in all, we see that political and socio-economic generational changes occur in all modes of mass participation. The dynamics of political change affect generations differently, but younger cohorts most strongly. This creates a consequential dynamic for the differences between younger and older people. The impact of these generational changes on the difference between the behaviours of older and younger people varies from one point in time to the next because different generations face each other as older and younger people at each point.

Life-cycle effects

First of all, the general image of old age in a society and the numerical relationship between older people and the working population matter, but

primarily for the participation rates of *younger* people relative to those of older people. We measured the image of old age through public opinion as regards helping older people (the proportion of citizens who are prepared to help older people) and the balance between dependent older people and the labour force through the dependency ratio. In all analyses, the absolute levels of older people's participation were hardly affected by these societal characteristics.

In societies more shaped in favour of older people (positive public opinion, high dependency ratio), younger people are more active relative to older people than in other contexts. The underlying causal chain seems to be that if a society is shaped by a positive public opinion towards old age and by a high number of dependent older people (measured by the dependency ratio), the institutions of that society are likely to produce a political output favouring older people. Thus, younger people have more of an instrumental incentive to be active in politics in order to have their voices heard. If further evidence for this causal chain was found in new research, it would shed new light on the discussions of generational conflict. Ageing democracies would not just be determined by the growing influence of older people; younger people in certain contexts would balance out a public sphere shaped in favour of older people by means of higher participation rates.

The robust correlations between societal characteristics and the relative participation rates of younger people are noteworthy to the extent that the measurable effect of a socially constructed image of older people stands in sharp contrast to the lack of a common senior identity among older

people, as the interviews showed. Older people do not define themselves as ‘older people’ and are not more likely to do so when they become active in politics. If anything, being the target of a policy threat motivates older people to be politically active for themselves and others in the same situation.

Moreover, how we lead our lives affects political participation through the duration of residence, the likelihood of living with a partner and the likelihood of living with children. Older people tend to have lived in an area for longer than younger people because residential mobility decreases with age. This longer residence leads to a greater extension of networks and a higher level of familiarity with problems in the area. It therefore increases an individual’s probability of being asked to join a political action and being motivated to become active with respect to politics in the area. Older people are more likely to go to the polls, to be party members and to contact officials because of their longer residence period. Moreover, living with a partner means living with another adult who can mobilise a person to become active in politics. The probability of living with a partner increases from young to middle age and decreases thereafter due to widowhood and divorce. For voting participation, this effect is very important and disadvantages older people relative to middle-aged individuals in terms of their likelihood of voting. Also, living with children can alter someone’s interest in political participation, in two ways: on the one hand, caring for children reduces free time; on the other hand, it produces an interest in more policy areas, for example schools, kindergartens and so on. The ambiguity of childcare is also mirrored in the findings. For membership of trade unions

and single-issue organisations as well as having the collective mode of non-institutionalised participation, having children is a negative predictor; for the contacting and individual modes of non-institutionalised participation, it is a positive predictor. The likelihood of living with children increases from young to middle age and decreases thereafter. This means – from the perspective of older people – that they are sometimes more and sometimes less likely to participate due to their lower likelihood of being directly concerned with children.

In addition to our ways of life that are structured by the life cycle, health is an important physical difference between younger and older people, with older people being less fit due to the physical effects of ageing and the accumulation of the effects of unhealthy life styles. Lower physical fitness and – equally important – the individual's perception of it hamper participation in politics and therefore disadvantage older people relative to younger people. The evidence shows the persistence of this effect for voting participation, membership of parties, trade unions and single-issue organisations, and the collective mode of non-institutionalised participation. Older people are structurally disadvantaged as regards some forms of participation because of their physical background. However, the interviews demonstrated the possibility of substituting a physically demanding activity with a less demanding one. Thus, older people, especially when in a group, can organise themselves to limit this constraint on their political participation.

A final group of determinants stem from the economic sphere. In public discussions, older people are often reduced to their economic status, namely

as retirees. Interestingly, there is very little evidence that this status alone affects political participation. For the collective mode of non-institutionalised participation, being economically inactive increases participation rates. But here the causal chain seems to lie in the elite-challenging character of demonstrations that makes working individuals less willing to expose themselves in public. Receiving a pension as the main source of income somewhat increases the likelihood of being a party or single-issue organisation member. The only example of a strong effect from the economic sphere is that of being employed for trade union membership. This not very surprising effect reminds us of the instrumental use of trade union membership for employees and the mobilisation potential of trade unions in the workplace.

All in all, we find plenty of evidence that the social life cycle matters in explaining differences in political behaviour between older and younger people. The way in which a society constructs an image of the life course and old age is a manual that many of us follow and which in consequence structures our political participation patterns.

Individual ageing effects

So far, we have summarised the evidence showing how social and political changes influence political participation by shaping cohorts differently and how the social construction of the life course impacts on individuals and shapes their participation patterns. The final group of effects has nothing to do with history, economic and social developments or social expectations along the life cycle. Instead, they are founded on very basic human behaviours: our tendency to choose actions that we are familiar with, our

growing repertoire of thoughts and actions that we acquire by learning and complying with the expectations of our fellows.

We have found strong evidence for the positive effect of habituation and learning for voting participation. Older people are more likely to vote because they habituate the act of voting. Their past experience with voting increases their likelihood of voting next time. This is a classic example of a habitual kind of behaviour deriving from the fact that humans tend to repeat behaviour they are familiar with. A longer period of learning how to perform a certain type of behaviour advantages older people over younger people with regard to voting. The experience aspect was also found in the interviews, in which respondents reported their past experience with politics in rich detail, showing the greater pool of resources they had to draw upon. Closely intertwined with this learning mechanism is the growing compliance with social norms that accompanies the ageing process. The older we are, the more likely we are to identify with our environment and to feel gratification from compliance with social norms. Voting participation is a social norm in liberal democracies, even though its strength may be declining. Therefore, older people are also more likely to vote because they seem to benefit more from norm-compliant behaviour.

The evidence for the presence of life-cycle and individual ageing effects gives some over-time stability to the participatory differences between older and younger people. These effects, which are rooted in the way we lead our lives and stand outside the political process, are likely to be stable into the near future. Differences in participation caused by them are therefore likely to persist, too.

8.2 Why the findings matter for political behaviourists and social gerontologists

The analysis made use of a modified resource-based model (Verba et al. 1995). This model proved to be very useful for explaining differences in participation patterns between younger and older people. In a nutshell, the differences between age groups can be traced back to varying levels of intrinsic (motivation and resources) and extrinsic (opportunities and mobilisation exposure) factors. This mainstream model of political participation therefore found another set of supportive evidence in this study.

The strong evidence for learning and habituation points towards the usefulness of the concept of limited rationality (March 1986); that is, among other aspects, the notion that individuals have to use cognitive short-cuts to deal with complex reality. Only with such a conception, which assumes that individuals try to use all kinds of short-cuts to understand their social experience, can we explain the importance of learning and habituation. The evidence that experience becomes more important with age is complemented by recent experimental studies demonstrating that with increasing age individuals start to prefer cognitively less demanding mechanisms in making political choices (Redlawsk 2004).

Older people have more experience with social and political matters. More experience allows individuals to use experiences more easily as short-cuts in order to come to a decision. In a society with more older people, in sum, this kind of decision-making is more likely to matter. What consequences this might have can only be suggested here. It seems that party signals directed towards a growing number of voters who can draw on long experience for

decision-making need to be framed in a different way in order to affect older voters' choices. Given the general trend towards voter volatility, this development could have important consequences for political strategists. The findings also demonstrated the importance of social context in explaining individual behaviour, such as the repeated impact of the duration of residence. Citizens are not atomised individuals who listen only to their internal interests and motivation to engage in politics. Rather they depend on their social environment to be mobilised into participation, to have opportunities to become active and to be motivated. These findings resonate with results from other recent studies that again highlight the importance of social context to political participation (Zuckerman 2005; Zuckerman et al. 2007; Campbell 2006).

Another strand of literature that we drew upon when establishing the theoretical framework for this book was social gerontology, that is, the social science study of older people, old age and ageing. Our findings also provide interesting insights for social gerontologists. The first insight is old news for social gerontologists, however, and merely corroborates decades and dozens of earlier studies: there is not one type of older person as far as political behaviour is concerned. Even the 'average' older person behaves in a different manner in one area of political participation, relative to a younger person, than in another area. What makes older people different in their political activities is a conglomerate of political generation and socio-economic cohort effects on the one hand, and life-cycle and individual ageing effects on the other.

The second insight concerns the novel finding that the social construction of old age matters for differences in political participation between age groups. An increasing number of studies deal with the social image that a society constructs around the status of 'old age' and 'pensioner' and ageing in general. Different from our expectations, however, in the main it is not the participation rates of older people that are affected, but those of younger people. In those countries in which a high proportion of the populace expresses a willingness to help the elderly, younger people are more active relative to older people in voting, party membership and some modes of non-institutionalised participation. Given the same dynamic for levels of the dependency ratio, the most plausible explanation seems to be that in societies that are more shaped in favour of older people, seniors have less of a need to be active in politics because their interests are satisfied, and younger people are, in contrast, more active in politics on their own behalf. This finding should encourage social gerontologists to continue their efforts to disentangle the dynamics that surround the construction of the elderly, old age and ageing, and political scientists to measure whether the social construction of old age is related to political outcomes.

Given the potential contribution of the evidence presented in this book to discussions on political behaviour and social gerontology, what might be suggested for further research? My ideas in this domain are simple. Scholars of political science and social gerontology (often psychologists and sociologists by training) should read each other's work and try to merge the insights of the two lines of inquiry into a new discipline of the social sciences that we might call 'political gerontology', that is, research that

deals with the political aspects of older people, old age and ageing at the individual and societal levels. This call to establish a more structured approach in the study of these issues dates back at least as far as the 1970s (Cutler 1977). The current demographic changes in industrial societies, however, may make it easier for researchers to approach this new field, and their efforts can only be welcomed.

This new field of ‘political gerontology’ could concentrate on many questions. The most important are probably the following. Do politics in ageing societies work differently from politics in other demographic contexts? Will the quality and outcomes of the political process be different? How are institutions of the state and civil society affected by demographic changes? Is our conception of democracy independent of the demographic composition of a society? These questions, which represent just a small sample, go to the core of what makes political science and touch upon various of its sub-disciplines. They show the fundamental need for research in this area.

8.3 Why the findings matter for ageing democracies

Currently, political discussions about politics and policies in ageing societies are dominated by a simplistic notion: older democracies have more older voters, and these voters are very likely to vote. Thus, the ‘older’ a democracy gets – that is, the more older voters there are – the more difficult it becomes to reform any policy system in a way that might be detrimental to older people. The simple assumption behind this thesis is that all ‘older voters’ want the same things and behave in a self-interested manner to vote

against any policy changes that do not benefit them – self-interest being defined in the material sense.

At its core, this notion embodies an assumption about the behaviour of older people and an assumption about old age political interests. I and others have challenged the assumptions about the political interests of older people in general elsewhere (Goerres 2007a; Busemeyer et al. 2008), noting that to perceive them as one homogenous group with a clear preference structure in what they want is to discount the fact that there is a bigger difference within the group of older people (or pensioners) than between older and younger people. This book presents a number of results concerning interest differences with respect to party choice and tells a very comprehensive story about the behavioural differences between older and younger people. These results can be summarised in the following statements:

1. There is no simple difference between younger and older people's political participation.

This is the supreme message to be sent to public discussions concerning 'pensioner's democracy' and 'the political power of the old' and the assumptions of economistic social scientists portraying the 'ageing median voter'. As with many social issues, there is no simple story to tell about the political participation of older people. The participation differences between younger and older people are the result of a complex interplay of cohort and age factors, as well as of the social and political context of a democratic society. Panic in the face of the fact that there are more and more older people who can influence political outcomes through their political

participation is wrong and might even be dangerous insofar as politicians seem to act under the same veil of insecurity concerning what older people do and want.

2. The differences between older and younger people's political participation patterns are unstable across time.

We carried out a thorough analysis of two types of mass participation, institutionalised and non-institutionalised. For all the modes, we found the simultaneous presence of cohort effects (political generation and socio-economic cohort) and age effects (life cycle and individual ageing). If we had found that only age effects mattered in explaining differences between younger and older people, we could have concluded that the participation process in ageing democracies will change permanently. We could have done so because the participatory differences rooted in life cycle and individual ageing are stable into the near future. Older and younger people would behave differently in politics today for the same reasons as older and younger people in ten years or so.

However, since we found that cohort effects matter everywhere, the differences in participatory patterns are unstable across time because at each point in time different cohorts endowed with varying cohort effects face each other as younger and older people. This instability would be very volatile if we had found that only cohort effects matter, but the evidence also points to some stable life-cycle and individual ageing differences. Most importantly, the habituation and social compliance effect that we detected in correlation with age is sizeable and likely to yield a higher probability of

older people having some stability into the future. So, strictly speaking, we cannot predict the future development of political participation because we do not know how future cohorts will be socialised.

3. The participatory impact of a growing number of older people depends on the social context.

The participatory process in ageing societies is not only unstable with regard to differences between younger and older people in one country across time, but also differs across societal contexts. This implies that there is not one single impact of demographic ageing on the participation process, rather this impact is mitigated by the characteristics of each society. Table 8.1 summarises the distribution of the three most important macro-level variables across 21 European countries in the ESS. For ease of interpretation, these variables have been truncated into four groups, numbered variously 1 to 4: length of democratic epoch according to the wave of democratisation that the country belongs to (1 being the earliest and 4 the latest); the dependency ratio (in quartiles, 1 being the lowest and 4 the highest); and helpfulness towards older people (in quartiles, 1 meaning the lowest level and 4 the highest). Each cell has a shade of grey that becomes darker the higher the number: thus, countries with darker cells have higher values on these variables. Based on the results in Chapters 3, 5 and 6, darker shades also mean lower participation levels of older people relative to younger people (*ceteris paribus*).

Looking at the bottom of Table 8.1, we see countries such as Britain or the Netherlands (with very light colours) that are likely to show more active

older people relative to younger people. Britain and the Netherlands are likely to experience higher activism on the part of older people because (i) the elderly are more socialised into the participatory norms of a long-established democracy; (ii) their interests are less likely to be taken care of politically as public opinion towards old age is less favourable; and (iii) younger people have less of an incentive to become active given the moderate dependency ratio, capturing a low degree of inter-age competition for public resources. At the top end of the table, three countries score relatively high on all three variables: Italy, Greece and Hungary. These countries are likely to witness older people who are – relative to younger people in these countries – less active in politics because the elderly have not been socialised into participatory norms as much as in longer established democracies (although Italy is here in the 2nd quartile) and because they experience a public sphere that is shaped in their favour, with high dependency ratios and a positive public opinion towards old age, meaning that younger people have a higher incentive to become active in politics in order to have their voices heard. Other countries sometimes score high, sometimes low on one of the three variables. Luxembourg, for example, has among the highest dependency ratios (which increases younger people’s relative participation), but scores rather low on the public opinion measure and length of democratic epoch (which increases older people’s relative participation rates).

All in all, demographic ageing in the near future will have differential impacts on the participation rates of older people relative to those of younger people depending on these three macro factors. We might speculate

that the participatory impact on current political outcomes of older people in Britain and the Netherlands could be much higher than that of older people in Italy, Greece or Hungary. Political actors, such as parties, would be likely to pay disproportionately more attention to older people in Britain and the Netherlands than in Italy, Greece and Hungary. Although there is little evidence that old age political interests shape older people’s political preferences (see next section), political actors, such as parties or candidates, in Britain and the Netherlands might think that older people behave in a self-interested manner and – noting their high participation rates – make policies accordingly. This would in the long run potentially depress older people’s participation rates again and make political outcomes comparable to the countries at the other end of the table. In Italy, Greece and Hungary, in contrast, political actors would have less of an incentive to produce new political outcomes satisfying what they might perceive to be older people’s interests because older people’s participation rates are low relative to those of younger people. Thus, newly produced political outcomes should become more biased in favour of younger people, which could then lead to the participation levels of older people rising again. If these speculations are correct, it would also mean that a convergence process could develop that produced political outcomes in an equilibrium of satisfied older and younger people’s interests and participation levels. Thus, countries at both ends of the table would move closer to each other.

Table 8.1: Distribution of macro-level variables in four groups in 21 European democracies

Macro-level variables			
Dependency ratio	Helpfulness towards older people	Democratic epoch	Mean

Italy				3.33
Greece				3.33
Hungary				3.33
Poland				3.00
Belgium				2.67
Sweden				2.67
Slovenia				2.67
Austria				2.33
Germany				2.33
Spain				2.33
Portugal				2.33
Czech Republic				2.33
Luxembourg				2.00
Denmark				2.00
Finland				2.00
Ireland				2.00
France				1.67
Norway		-----		1.50
Britain				1.33
Netherlands				1.33
Switzerland		-----		1.00

Note: Missing values for Norway and Switzerland.

Shades of grey signify a group number between 1 (bright) and 4 (dark) (see above). The darker the cells of a country are, the more characteristics it has that lead to lower political participation rates of older relative to younger people.

4. Greying democracies per se are neither better nor worse democracies.

The political participation of individuals is important in liberal democracies because a high level of mass participation keeps political elites on their toes, socialises individuals into their role as citizens and helps political elites to govern. From this participatory perspective (see Pateman 1970; Barber

1983), political participation by more citizens and more political participation by already active citizens is to be welcomed.

From a different perspective of democratic theory, more participation is not necessarily better. Thinkers are concerned with the ways in which activists may be different from non-activists (see as a much-quoted example Schattschneider 1975 [1960]; see also Verba et al. 1995). If an increase in participation comes only from a group of people whose interests vary from those of the inactive, this may be seen as a problem. In an open political system, such as a democracy, activists are more likely to influence political outcomes than non-activists. This more cautious view of more participation is of great importance in the debate about the impact of demographic change on politics. Some argue that ‘older people’ will skew outcomes in their favour, permanently excluding the interests of younger people, especially children (van Parijs 1998; Hinrichs 2002).

The evidence in this book tells us that non-institutionalised participation, which has gained increasing popularity in the last few years, is used more and more by older people who are currently still less active than younger people. It can be expected that the gap between older and younger people will close fully in the future. In a participatory view of democracy, this catch-up is a positive sign and means that age groups are becoming more equal as far as their participation rates are concerned. However, in other areas, such as party membership in some countries, older people are increasingly likely to be members because younger cohorts are less attracted to these ‘old school’ vehicles of representative democracy. This is to be interpreted as a negative development from the participatory standpoint.

From the perspective ‘the more, the better’ the developments and dynamics that we observed have positive as well as negative implications.

From the point of view of equality and minority protection, these dynamics should also be interpreted with ambiguity. In those areas in which older people are catching up with younger people, the question arises whether older people, given their rising numbers, will use their increased usage of these channels of participation to the detriment of the minority. The same logic applies even more strongly to those areas in which older people are already more likely to participate and are increasing their advantage because younger people are ceasing to use these channels, such as party membership. If only older people are party members, party organisation may be shaped by older people, so that policy programmes could be rewritten to represent older party members’ interests.

For example, children are a group that would plausibly suffer if older people participated only in pursuit of their own age-related material self-interest.

Some empirical studies show negative correlations between age (or the proportion of older people at the aggregate level) and preferences for spending on education or employment (or patterns of spending) (Iversen 2005: 100-4; Iversen and Stephens 2008); the story behind these correlations remains unclear, however. The evidence that life-cycle interests are pensioners’ primary concern is not very strong, considering our findings for party choice in this book and further evidence elsewhere (Busemeyer et al. 2008; Goerres 2007a; Tepe and Vanhuysse 2008). Even if older people completely dominated some areas of participation, their pursuit of age-related material self-interest would still have to be shown. All in all,

therefore, we must conclude that 'greying' democracies are neither necessarily better nor worse democracies. The higher participation rates of older people sometimes indicate that they are catching up with younger people and sometimes mean that they are increasing their edge over them; both observations are normatively ambiguous as the interests of older people may not be so different from those of younger people after all. We have now come full circle. Demographic ageing is the most fundamental social change in Europe since the expansion of mass education at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. The latter ultimately led to increasing demands on reigning elites for more mass political participation and more elite responsiveness, and finally changed the world of politics. For demographic ageing, we must accept that its impact on the participation process depends on other societal characteristics and happens in interaction with other changes in the political process. Only a balanced view from a cross-national perspective can shed light on the political dynamics of ageing societies and their normative implications in the decades to come.