Civic Engagement in Later Life

A multilevel exploration of multidimensional civic engagement of older adults

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1. Introduction

In the last decades, civic engagement of older adults has emerged as a significant topic in the gerontological field (Serrat et al., 2020). This interest stems from its potential to foster healthy ageing, which has been heavily promoted by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020), while simultaneously benefiting and strengthening communities (Cegolon & Jenkins, 2022; Ghiglieri et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2011; Morrow-Howell et al., 2019).

To study civic engagement in later life, it is necessary to establish a clear conceptual demarcation. However, this is challenging given the wide range of interpretations of the term in academic discourse (Ekman & Amnå, 2022). In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam brought the term 'civic engagement' into mainstream academic and public discourse. He interpreted it as almost all activities that contribute to fostering social capital (Dodd et al., 2015). One of the most used definitions is the one of Adler and Goggin (2005), who define civic engagement as "how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (p. 16). Nevertheless, this definition is rather broad and leaves room for debate about the activities that constitute civic engagement. More recently, Serrat et al. (2021, p. 246) defined civic engagement in later life as "informal and formal activities aimed at seeking better benefits for others, the community or wider society, or influencing collective decision-making processes." In this dissertation, this definition coined by Serrat et al. (2021) is used.

Understanding how older Europeans engage civically is highly relevant as Europe experiences a long-term trend of population ageing (Ekman & Amnå, 2022; European Commission, 2020; Serrat et al., 2022). Between 2019 and 2050, Europe's population will age significantly: the 75–84 cohort is projected to increase by 56.1%, while the 65–74 age group is expected to grow by 16.6%. Conversely, the population under 55 is projected to shrink by 13.5% (Eurostat, 2022). This demographic shift underscores the growing importance of healthy ageing, which the World Health Organization (2020) defines as the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that supports well-being in later life, encompassing physical health, mental well-being, social participation, and autonomy. This involves creating environments and opportunities that enable individuals to pursue what they value throughout their lives, including contributing to

society where possible. Similarly, the active and healthy ageing framework, used by the European Commission, highlights the need to empower older people to retain autonomy and, where possible, to continue contributing to the economy and society (Eurostat, 2020). By highlighting the importance of social participation and older adults' contributions to society, these two perspectives emphasise the significance of civic engagement, especially in later life. Civic engagement enables older adults to share their knowledge, experience, skills and time in ways that benefit their communities (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

Although civic engagement in later life has received increasing scholarly attention in recent decades, the field remains conceptually and empirically fragmented. Much of the existing research has focused on formal, unidimensional forms of engagement and individual-level factors (Serrat et al., 2021). While these studies offer valuable insights, they often overlook the broader environmental and societal contexts in which engagement occurs. As Europe continues to experience a long-term demographic shift towards an ageing population (Eurostat, 2020), there is a pressing need to explore the full complexity of civic engagement in later life, including the roles of both individual and contextual factors (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Serrat et al., 2021). Therefore, the following research gaps concerning civic engagement in later life warrant further investigation.

Firstly, civic engagement in later life is often conceptualised in narrow terms, focusing primarily on formal and institutionalised activities (Serrat et al., 2022). While the definitions of civic engagement suggest a wide-ranging view of the concept, most recent gerontological research predominantly focuses on the sole dimension of volunteering (Burr et al., 2002; Doolittle & Faul, 2013; O'Neill, 2019; Serrat et al., 2020; van Deth, 2016). This perspective overlooks the concept's inherently multidimensional nature. Non-formal, non-institutionalised or alternative forms of civic engagement are frequently excluded from mainstream analyses, despite representing meaningful and socially valuable forms of engagement (Dury et al., 2016; Putnam, 2000; Reuter, 2021; Serrat et al., 2022). Restricting civic engagement to formal and institutionalised activities also risks reinforcing narrow cultural norms about 'good' ageing, potentially marginalising those who contribute in different or less visible ways (Martinson & Minkler, 2006). This is especially relevant for groups at higher risk of exclusion, such as older migrants (Ågård & Torres, 2025), older people with disabilities (Majón-Valpuesta & Levasseur, 2025), and older rural residents (Winterton et al., 2025). A critical re-examination of traditional civic engagement frameworks is essential to ensure that research and policy reflect

the full spectrum of older adults' civic contributions. Adopting a broader, more inclusive definition challenges exclusionary norms and promotes visibility, inclusion, and value of all dimensions of civic engagement (Serrat et al., 2021). This dissertation aims to examine how older adults contribute to society across various dimensions and how these forms of engagement intersect to form profiles of multidimensional civic engagement.

Secondly, while individual-level factors such as health, education, and income have been widely studied (Serrat et al., 2021), the broader socio-ecological context in which civic engagement occurs remains insufficiently addressed. Despite evidence that contextual factors significantly shape opportunities for engagement (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Serrat et al., 2021), the influence of the living environment (meso) and national-level (macro) conditions on older adults' engagement is still poorly understood (Lu et al., 2021; Näsman et al., 2025). This dissertation, therefore, adopts a socio-ecological perspective, examining how micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors interact and how they shape civic engagement in later life.

By combining a multidimensional and socio-ecological approach, this study aims to develop a better understanding of civic engagement in later life, one that captures both the variety of activities older adults undertake and the diverse contexts in which they civically engage.

2. Multidimensional civic engagement in later life

Historically, studies on civic engagement in later life have only defined volunteering and political engagement as dimensions of civic engagement (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Serrat et al., 2021). However, this dissertation examines a broader range of activities. It challenges binary classifications, such as labelling an individual's civic engagement as either 'just' volunteers or 'just' politically active, which overlooks the nuanced and diverse ways older adults contribute to society (Hustinx & Denk, 2009). Therefore, this study follows the typology of civic engagement in later life as proposed by Serrat et al., (2022), which includes volunteering, informal help, and both formal and informal political engagement. This typology is complemented by associational engagement, which, according to Putnam (2000), Dury et al., (2016) and Bishop and Alamdari (2020), contributes to the development of social capital. Additionally, digital engagement is an increasingly prominent dimension of civic engagement that is gaining recognition as a meaningful avenue through which older adults can engage in political activities, volunteering, and other civic engagement activities, as discussed by Reuter (2021).

2.1. Dimensions of civic engagement and their prevalence

Having defined civic engagement as a multidimensional concept, this section explores in greater depth the specific dimensions it encompasses, offering a clearer understanding of the various ways in which older people are civically engaged.

First, volunteering is defined as engagement in a voluntary organisation without being compelled, usually without pay or with minimal reimbursement to cover expenses (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Serrat et al., 2022). It aims to address community issues (Cnaan et al., 1996). According to a recent study, using data from the Survey of Health, Age and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), 14.1% of Europeans who are 50 years of age or older engage in volunteering (Serrat et al., 2023). According to Eurostat data, however, 19.9% of Europeans aged 50 to 64 volunteer, compared to 17.8% of those aged 65 and above. (Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2024). The discrepancy in volunteer numbers likely stems from Eurostat's broader definition and questioning of volunteering (Serrat et al., 2023; Weziak-Bialowolska et al., 2024).

It is important to note that in the academic literature, the term volunteering can refer to just volunteering in organisations only (e.g. Dury et al., 2019), or to a more general concept that

also includes volunteering outside of organisations, thus making a distinction between formal volunteering and informal volunteering (e.g. Lam et al., 2023; Serrat et al., 2022). In this dissertation, the term volunteering is used to refer to volunteering in organisations, while informal help is used to refer to forms of volunteering outside the formal structures of organisations.

Second, informal help consists, thus, of individual activities aimed at benefiting others, the community, or society. These activities may take place within or beyond the family context and often involve altruistic or prosocial behaviours, such as providing care or assisting with everyday tasks like grocery shopping (Martinez et al., 2011; Strauss, 2021). Due to the lack of measurement of informal help, precise European statistics on the informal assistance provided by older adults are scarce. However, the European Economic and Social Committee (2024) reports that 80% of all long-term care in Europe is provided by informal carers.

Third, political engagement encompasses both formal and informal activities, reflecting the various ways in which individuals engage in political processes (Bherer et al., 2023). Formal political engagement refers to civic activities conducted through established and regulated political entities and processes, but not by politicians themselves (Serrat et al., 2022). It involves structured and institutionalised forms of engagement aimed at influencing political outcomes or decisions (Nyqvist et al., 2024). Examples include casting your vote, reaching out to political representatives, contributing financially to political parties and organisations, working on campaign efforts, and engaging in political organisations or forums. A recent study on the SHARE data shows that only 5.5% of Europeans aged 50 and over are engaged in political or community-related organisations (Serrat et al., 2023), while the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) data indicates that 7.2% of Europeans aged 65 and over are engaged in formal political activities (Eurofound, 2017). This difference can be explained by the fact that the EQLS question on political engagement includes a greater variety of political organisations (SHARE-ERIC, 2024; Eurofound, 2017).

Fourth, informal political engagement consists of voluntary activities related to government or politics that take place outside formal organisations (Bherer et al., 2023; van Deth, 2016),. These activities can include protesting or taking part in social movements (Offe, 1985), boycotting certain products, writing articles with political content (Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018), signing petitions and undertaking illegal actions in support of a political cause (Serrat et

al., 2022; Smith, 2013; Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018). In terms of the prevalence of informal political engagement, numbers from Eurofound (2017) show that 22.0% of older Europeans are engaged in informal political activities. The greater prevalence of informal over formal political engagement highlights the importance of including informal and non-institutionalised forms of civic engagement in gerontological research, to ensure that older adults' contributions are fully recognised and valued.

Fifth, associational engagement refers to engagement in organisations such as sports clubs, religious groups, charities, professional associations, retirees' groups, cultural organisations, and neighbourhood or community associations (Nyqvist et al., 2025). Not only does this form of engagement contribute to the development of social capital (Putnam, 2000), it also strengthens social solidarity and supports active ageing, which in turn enhances the sustainability of pension and healthcare systems while generating broader economic benefits for society (Nyqvist et al., 2025). According to data from Eurofound (2017), 34.6% of Europeans aged 65 or above are engaged in associational engagement, making it one of the most prevalent dimensions of civic engagement among older Europeans.

And finally, digital engagement is defined by Seifert and Rössel (2021) as engagement in the digital society through the utilisation of modern information and communication technologies. Digital spaces can facilitate traditional civic activities, as those mentioned in the other dimensions of civic engagement above (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis & Van Deth, 2018), as well as posting political content online, exchanging text through online means (Smith, 2013), online content creation (Gauthier & Durocher, 2018) or making community radio (Reuter, 2021). EQLS data shows that only 4.0% of Europeans aged 65 and over were civically engaged in the digital space in 2017 (Eurofound, 2017).

2.2. The importance of a multidimensional interpretation

In pursuit of the research aims, a multidimensional interpretation of civic engagement is adopted throughout this dissertation (Alamdari & Bisshop, 2020; Serrat et al., 2022), encompassing volunteering, informal help, political engagement, associational engagement and digital engagement. This inclusivity captures the complexity of engagement across political and social spheres and helps to promote civic engagement by encouraging individuals to recognise the value of their everyday actions as meaningful contributions to society (Ekman & Amnå, 2022). It provides researchers with a comprehensive framework to study different forms of

engagement that enhance democratic health, not only by direct political activities, as is often done in research on civic engagement, but also by fostering trust, social capital, and community networks (Ekman & Amnå, 2022; Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, this broad interpretation accommodates cultural and societal differences, allowing the concept to be applied more universally (Serrat et al., 2023).

The importance of studying civic engagement as a multidimensional concept is also underscored by the interplay between the role extension and role overload hypotheses, both rooted in role theory. Role theory, as established by Merton (1957), refers to the behaviour that people exhibit based on their societal roles. Older individuals in particular tend to lose more societal roles than they gain, such as those associated with parenthood, marriage or professional employment (Greenfield and Marks, 2004). However, this loss of societal roles can be replaced by pursuits like volunteering and informal caregiving (Aartsen and Hansen, 2019; Hämäläinen et al., 2023). The role extension hypothesis suggests that older people who are engaged in one type of activity are also more likely to be engaged in others (Dury et al., 2016; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Serrat et al., 2015; Strauss, 2021). Conversely, the role overload hypothesis suggests that limited resources or time prevent individuals from engaging in multiple civic activities (Choi et al., 2007; Strauss, 2021). Engagement in a civic activity, such as informal caregiving, requires time and energy that cannot be allocated to other civic activities (Ackermann, 2019; Dury et al., 2016). Resources are finite; if allocated to one activity, they may not be sufficient for other civic engagements. Hence, both the role extension and role overload hypotheses explain the usefulness of approaching civic engagement in later life as multidimensional. However, previous gerontological studies have not explored the extent and manner in which individuals combine various civic activities simultaneously (Serrat et al., 2022). This dissertation aims to address this gap by investigating the multidimensional civic engagement of older adults and the different combinations of activities they partake in, offering a more detailed understanding of civic engagement among older Europeans.

Nevertheless, a broad definition might risk conceptual overstretch, making distinguishing civic engagement from related concepts such as social participation (which includes meeting friends or family (Carver et al., 2018) difficult. This could potentially dilute its analytical value (Kuzma, 2010; Serrat et al., 2022). It complicates empirical studies due to the challenge of developing standardised metrics, and it may trivialise the concept by including everyday actions (Ekman & Amnå, 2022; National Research Council, 2014). The overlap with other related terms

can blur boundaries, and the expansive definition might be misused as a buzzword, particularly in policy-making, leading to superficial interventions (Berger, 2011). Consequently, it is imperative to delineate the dimensions of civic engagement employed in this dissertation, as outlined above, and within each constituent paper. This ensures both transparency and correct interpretability (Serrat et al, 2022).

2.3. Consequences of civic engagement in later life

The literature on older people's civic engagement shows that it is associated with a multitude of benefits, including improved physical and mental health outcomes, as well as a number of other personal and societal benefits (Martinson & Minkler, 2006). Older people who are civically engaged report enhanced mobility, better overall physical functioning and lower rates of chronic diseases (Hajek et al., 2017; Morrow-Howell et al., 2019; Nakamura et al., 2024). These benefits can partly be attributed to the physical demands of many civic activities, such as engaging in sports associations or volunteering at events, which help to maintain mobility and general physical health (Nelson et al., 2019).

Civic engagement also plays a role in enhancing mental well-being and cognitive functioning. It can reduce feelings of isolation and foster social networks, both of which are vital for mental health (Guiney & Machado, 2018; Kelly et al., 2017). Various forms of civic engagement, including volunteering (Morrow-Howell et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2023), political engagement (Nelson et al., 2019), informal help (Nakamura et al., 2024), and associational involvement (Hajek et al., 2017), have been linked to lower levels of depression and anxiety. The social interactions embedded in these activities provide emotional support and a sense of belonging (Kelly et al., 2017). Civic engagement that involves problem-solving, social interaction, or the acquisition of new skills, such as volunteering or associational engagement, can stimulate cognitive processes and help maintain brain function in later life (Cegolon & Jenkins, 2022; Guiney & Machado, 2018). Additionally, Ghiglieri et al. (2021) suggest that civic engagement can enhance older adults' self-efficacy, life satisfaction, positive self-image, and emotional resilience. Vega-Tinoco et al. (2024) further link these benefits to growth-oriented values, which are reinforced through civic engagement in later life.

However, contrary to the aforementioned benefits of civic engagement, informal caregiving can impose significant emotional and psychological burdens, especially when the care is intensive and the care recipient has dementia (Cheng, 2017). Caregivers may experience elevated levels

of anxiety and depression due to the demands of their role (Liu et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2018). Nevertheless, informal caregiving is also associated with lower mortality rates, potentially due to the stress-buffering effects of altruistic behaviour (Roth et al., 2018).

In addition to the personal benefits, civic engagement also has positive effects on the social fabric of society. For instance, volunteering in later life is linked to the sharing of experience and to generativity and the provision of supportive roles within families and communities (Villar et al., 2023). Furthermore, older people's engagement in civic activities, like volunteering to read to school students, fosters intergenerational solidarity (Lai et al., 2025). Older people also possess a sense of history that is valued by the wider civic community (Stoecker & Witkovsky, 2023). Civic engagement, and specifically associational engagement (Putnam, 2000; Suragarn et al., 2021), volunteering (Ghiglieri et al., 2021; Suragarn et al., 2021) and informal caregiving (Martinez et al., 2011), also foster social cohesion and trust within a community, thus enhancing social capital.

Additionally, civic engagement in later life is widely regarded as a hallmark of democratic societies (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), and older adults' continued engagement contributes to the preservation and renewal of these democratic values over time (Mankell & Fredriksson, 2025). This democratic relevance has also been recognised at the policy level. For instance, ahead of the 2024 European elections, the AGE Manifesto called on the European Union to promote engagement and active ageing as essential components of democratic life (AGE Platform Europe, 2023).

3. Ecological perspectives of civic engagement in later life

The benefits of civic engagement among older adults for the community are well-documented (e.g., Suragarn et al., 2021; Villar et al., 2023). However, the role of neighbourhood attributes and the societal context in shaping civic engagement among older individuals, and how these factors interact, remains underexplored (Caperon et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021; Morrow-Howell & Greenfield, 2016). Older Europeans volunteer, provide care, and engage in associations, political activities, or digital platforms within their local communities. Due to transitions such as retirement, daily mobility often becomes more limited in later life (Urbaniak et al., 2023), while attachment to place tends to increase (Lebrusán & Gómez, 2022). As a result, the local context becomes a more decisive factor in shaping civic engagement in later life (Buffel et al., 2012; Musick & Wilson, 2008). This study addresses this gap by investigating how individual and contextual factors, at both meso (living environment) and macro (country) levels, and their interactions shape civic engagement in later life. To understand these socio-ecological relations, the next part of the introduction delves deeper into environmental gerontology and ecological models that are relevant to studying civic engagement in later life. Ecological models provide a framework for analysing the contexts in which civic engagement occurs, ranging from the micro to the macro level.

3.1. Understanding context through ecological models

Ecological models are used to reflect on the personal, contextual and temporal factors, as well as their interactions, that shape older people's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Throughout the last decades, a multitude of ecological models catered towards different populations and outcome variables have been conceptualised (Sallis et al., 2008). One of the most widely cited ecological models is that of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1994). This model was originally developed to study the social environment for children's development. Although this base model was focused on children, it has been an inspiration for a multitude of research fields to adapt similar models, catered to other populations (Crawford, 2020). Within his ecological model, Bronfenbrenner (1994, 1999) distinguishes five interrelated systems. The microsystem includes immediate settings such as family, peers, and community organisations. The mesosystem refers to the interactions between these microsystems; for example, how family life influences engagement in local groups. The exosystem encompasses external environments that indirectly affect the individual, such as local policies or the media. The macrosystem represents broader societal values, norms, and institutional structures. Finally, the chronosystem captures the

influence of time, including life transitions and sociohistorical events. This model incorporates personal characteristics, contextual factors, and the dimension of time, all of which interact through dynamic and mutually reinforcing proximal processes. Rather than viewing these elements as merely additive, they should be considered as interdependent and evolving influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

3.2. Environmental gerontology and a multilevel approach to civic engagement in later life

Within the field of gerontology, the most developed ecological strand is environmental gerontology. This multi-disciplinary field has asked since the 1970s how person and place co-create well-being (Chaudhury & Oswald, 2019; Wahl & Weisman, 2003). This perspective is particularly relevant when studying civic engagement in later life, as it emphasises the importance of age-friendly environments that support older adults' functioning and engagement (Chaudhury & Oswald, 2019; Serrat et al., 2022). Recent work in environmental gerontology highlights transactional processes, whereby older adults not only adapt to their environments but also actively shape them (Oswald et al., 2024). Civic engagement represents one important channel through which older adults can exercise such agency. However, previous studies have often focused on isolated activities (e.g., volunteering) or single contextual layers (e.g., neighbourhood design), rather than approaching engagement as a multidimensional, multi-level phenomenon (Cheung & Mui, 2023; Schröder & Neumayr, 2023). Environmental gerontology thus offers a valuable lens for developing a more holistic understanding of civic engagement, one that considers the interplay of multiple contextual layers (Oswald et al., 2024). Within environmental gerontology, several studies adopt an ecological approach based on Bronfenbrenner's model. However, these studies vary considerably in their definitions and conceptualisations of the different ecological levels (Burholt et al., 2020; Greenfield et al., 2019; Hansen et al., 2021; Serrat et al., 2021), as is also common in other academic disciplines (Sallis et al., 2008). The remainder of this section introduces three key ecological models within social gerontology that inform the theoretical foundation of this dissertation. Each of the following subsections describes and discusses one of these influential frameworks: the ecological model employed by Burholt et al. (2020) to examine social exclusion in later life; the ecological model proposed by Greenfield et al. (2019) in their conceptualisation of community gerontology; and the framework developed by Serrat et al. (2021) to analyse exclusion from civic engagement in later life. Each subsection identifies the specific contribution of its respective model to our understanding of civic engagement in later life. These

insights are then brought together in a final subsection, where the models are synthesised into a three-level ecological framework, comprising the micro, meso, and macro levels. This framework underpins the empirical chapters of this dissertation.

3.2.1. Ecological model for social exclusion

While this dissertation does not adopt social exclusion as its primary conceptual framework, it engages with literature that identifies exclusion from civic engagement as a key dimension of social exclusion in later life (Van Regenmortel et al., 2016). Given that scholars in this field often use socio-ecological models to examine the multilevel factors contributing to such exclusion, these insights offer valuable perspectives for understanding civic engagement in later life (Juma & Fernández-Sainz, 2024; Van Regenmortel et al., 2016). The model used by Burholt et al. (2020) (Figure 1) draws upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1986) to explore the dynamics of social exclusion in later life. First, at the micro level, personal characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, and partner status are considered, alongside psychological resources, individual well-being, socioeconomic status and socio-emotional processes are considered. In this model, neighbourhood characteristics, such as the physical attributes found in an individual's neighbourhood, are also part of the micro level. At the meso level, the interactions between elements of the microsystem, such as social relationships, are captured. The exo level comprises the physical environment, including neighbourhood design, housing diversity, population density, access to open space, and social cohesion. The macro level considers the role of societal structures and policies, such as welfare state systems. Finally, the chronosystem introduces a temporal dimension, recognising that both individual circumstances and contextual conditions evolve over time. Together, these features shape individuals' experiences of inclusion or exclusion, thereby affecting their capacity for civic engagement (Van Regenmortel et al., 2016). Overall, Burholt et al.'s (2020) adapted model highlights the interdependence of personal, social, environmental, and policy factors in shaping older adults' experiences of social exclusion.

Figure 1

Ecological framework for social exclusion by Burholt et al. (2020, p.5): Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1986)
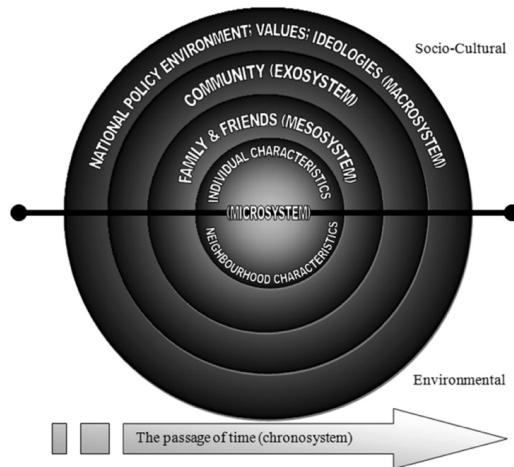
3.2.2. Ecological model of community gerontology

In contrast to the findings of Burholt et al. (2020), Greenfield et al. (2019) propose a community gerontology framework comprising only three levels (Figure 2). The micro level encompasses individuals and their immediate settings, such as homes and close relationships. The meso level includes neighbourhoods, local organisations, and informal networks, which can mediate between personal experience and wider systems. The macro level consists of national policies, economic systems, and cultural norms that shape both meso- and micro-level conditions. The framework focuses on the interrelations between these levels and incorporates time, or the chrono level, as a cross-cutting dimension. The community gerontology framework identifies the meso level as a unifying concept between individuals and broader societal structures. At this level, social, spatial and temporal processes intersect, shaping inclusion, exclusion, and thus civic engagement in later life.

Figure 2

Pathways of mutual influence between the meso level of context with more micro and macro contexts over time by Greenfield et al. (2019, p.805)
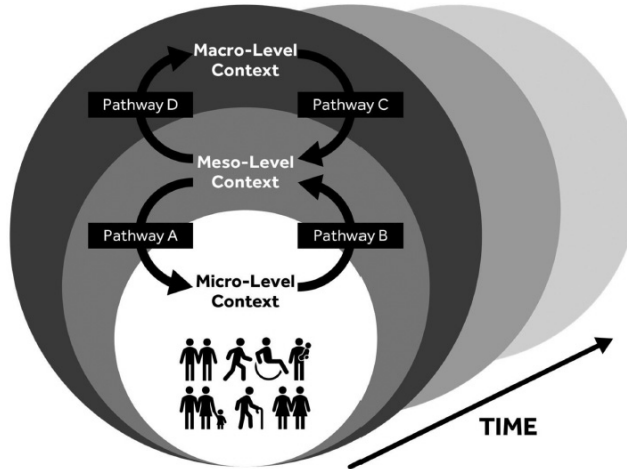
3.2.3. Ecological framework to study exclusion from civic engagement in later life

In Serrat et al.'s (2021) conceptual framework for exclusion from civic engagement in later life, four levels are identified (Figure 3). What Burholt et al. (2020) and Greenfield et al. (2019) describe as the micro context, emphasising individual characteristics, is aligned with the individual level in Serrat et al.'s ecological model. However, in Serrat et al.'s (2021) framework, the term 'micro level' denotes the influence of organisations on civic engagement. This shift in terminology introduces a conceptual challenge when attempting to account for informal forms of civic engagement, such as informal help and informal political participation, that occur outside formal institutions and organisations (Bherer et al., 2023; Martinez et al., 2011; Serrat et al., 2022). The meso level encompasses neighbourhood and community contexts that influence opportunities for engagement. According to this ecological model, micro-level organisations are often embedded within these meso-level settings, thereby reinforcing their influence (Serrat et al., 2021). At the macro level, civic engagement is influenced by national welfare regimes, policy frameworks, and cultural norms. This ecological framework accentuates the need to examine civic engagement as a culturally and structurally embedded process, shaped by interactions occurring across micro, meso, and macro levels. While not directly addressing the chrono level, Serrat et al. (2021) pose that civic engagement needs to be studied as a biographically embedded process. Life circumstances and personal trajectories

influence not only whether individuals engage civically, but also the manner and extent to which they do so, as older people's patterns of engagement may shift over time.

Figure 3

Proposed conceptual framework for studying exclusion from civic engagement in later life by Serrat et al. (2021, p.249)
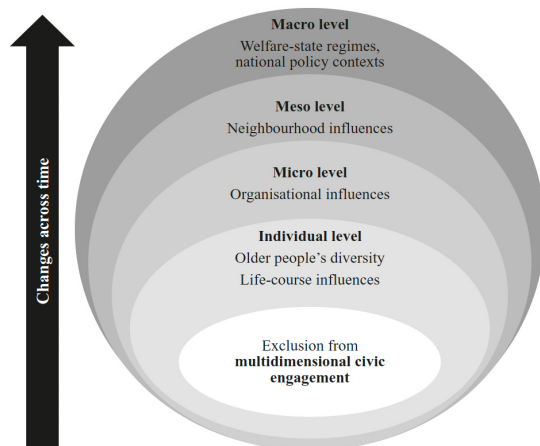
3.2.4. Theoretical framework for my doctoral research: integrating different ecological perspectives

Given the lack of uniformity in how ecological levels and their proximity to the individual are conceptualised, a decision was made to adopt a specific model for this dissertation. In Bronfenbrenner's (1994) well-known ecological model, the micro level is described as the immediate environmental influences surrounding an individual. However, alternative perspectives, such as those by Serrat et al. (2021) and Burholt et al. (2020), define the micro level differently, encompassing individual characteristics or even organisational and institutional influences. According to Bronfenbrenner, the meso level involves the interconnections between various microsystems. Conversely, alternative models interpret the meso level to include environmental, neighbourhood, and community influences (e.g., Serrat, 2021). The macro level is more consistently defined across models, typically representing broader cultural and structural contexts, including national policies and societal features.

These disparities between Bronfenbrenner's original conceptualisations of the ecological levels and the contemporary interpretations give rise to conceptual discrepancies and a non-demarcated field of study. In order to address this issue, this dissertation employs an integrated approach, drawing on recent research by Greenfield et al. (2019), Serrat et al. (2021) and

Burholt et al. (2020) to develop a framework that accommodates both traditional and evolving understandings of ecological levels. Consequently, the micro level is defined as the characteristics and socio-structural resources of older adults. The meso level includes neighbourhood, organisational and community features. The macro level encompasses societal structures and cultural influences. As illustrated in Figure 4, this framework provides a coherent basis for examining and understanding the multidimensional civic engagement of older individuals. While the time aspect is a main part of the aforementioned ecological models, this dissertation does not address this additional level, due to a lack of rich and relevant longitudinal data on the multidimensional civic engagement of older people (Näsman et al., 2025).

Figure 4

Ecological model of factors related to civic engagement in later life
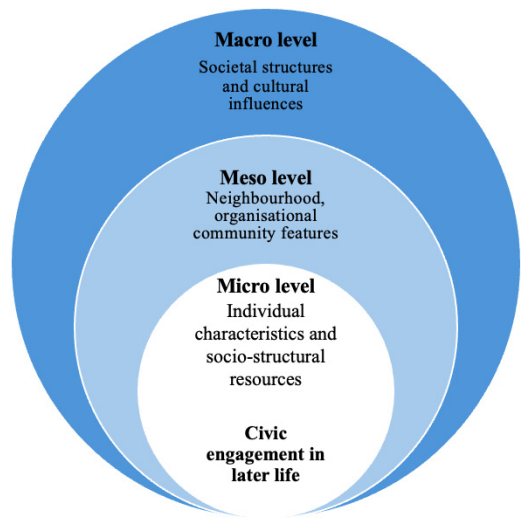
An ecological approach is particularly well-suited to understanding civic engagement in later life, as it captures the interplay between individual, community, and societal influences. Research has highlighted the role of community settings (Dury et al., 2016) and national conditions such as inequality and development (Perkins et al., 2021; Schröder & Neumayr, 2023) in shaping older adults' engagement. Recent studies have further emphasised the importance of examining how these contextual layers interact (Näsman et al., 2025; Nyqvist et al., 2024). By integrating multiple levels of analysis, an ecological perspective offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the factors that shape civic engagement and for informing more effective support strategies.

4. Research aims and outline of this dissertation

This dissertation explores how older Europeans engage in civic life and how that engagement is shaped by factors at the individual, neighbourhood, and national levels. Specifically, this study

1) maps the civic engagement profiles in later life;
2) identifies micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors that shape civic engagement among older people; and
3) integrates the three aforementioned levels to explain how individual and contextual (neighbourhood and national) factors shape civic engagement in later life and interact in complex ways.

The methodology employed in this dissertation is detailed in Chapter 2. The results of this study are presented in two main parts, spanning four chapters. These include one book chapter and three peer-reviewed papers (Table 1):

Part 1: Multidimensional civic engagement
The first part of this study explores the concept of multidimensional civic engagement in later life, with the aim of advancing understanding of how older Europeans participate in civic life. By examining the range and combinations of civic activities undertaken, *Chapter 3: Multidimensional Civic Engagement of Older Europeans: A Latent Class Analysis* identifies diverse engagement profiles and draws attention to dimensions of civic engagement that are often overlooked, most notably informal caregiving. The findings underscore the significance of recognising and valuing these contributions as integral components of civic engagement. Furthermore, they enhance our understanding of its complexity in later life, thereby laying the groundwork for the concept of multidimensional civic engagement, which is used in the subsequent chapters.

Part 2: Ecological factors shaping civic engagement in later life
The second part of this dissertation focuses on the factors of civic engagement of older people and encompasses three chapters. *Chapter 4: What characterises civic engagement in later life? Micro-, meso- and macro-level influences.* This chapter explores the existing knowledge on the factors that shape civic engagement in later life, framed through the lens of ecological models, focusing on micro, meso and macro factors. *Chapter 5: The Role of the Living Environment in*

the Multidimensional Civic Engagement of Older People: A Scoping Review is a review of the literature on the role of the living environment (meso level) in shaping civic engagement among older adults. *Chapter 6: Civic Engagement in Later Life: A Multilevel European Analysis* encompasses a multilevel approach to examine how perceived neighbourhood characteristics and national-level indicators of development and inequality relate to civic engagement in later life. By addressing the meso and macro levels of the ecological model, the second part of this dissertation underscores the importance of adopting an ecological perspective in studying civic engagement in later life, as it is shaped not only by individual resources but also by local environmental conditions and broader national contexts.

Table 1

Overview of the research questions and studies of this dissertation

Chapter	Research questions or aims	Method	Data	Publication status
Part 1: Multidimensional civic engagement in later life	Overview of methods and data used in this dissertation	-	-	-
Chapter 3: Multidimensional civic engagement of older Europeans: A latent class analysis	• What are the profiles of older Europeans regarding their multidimensional civic engagement? • How do these profiles relate to socio-structural and social capital variables?	Quantitative research: Latent Class Analysis	9,031 respondents aged 65+ from EQLS	Published in *Ageing & Society* (2024)
Part 2: Ecological factors of civic engagement in later life				
Chapter 4: What characterises civic engagement in later life? Micro-, meso- and macro-level influences	• Examining the micro-, meso- and macro-level factors that shape late-life civic engagement and elucidating their complex dynamics.	Literature review	-	Published in *Civic Engagement in Later Life* edited by Rodrigo Serrat (2025)
Chapter 5: The Role of the living environment in the multidimensional civic engagement of older People: A scoping review	• Exploring existing literature on the role of the living environment in the civic engagement of older adults. • Critically examining the factors of the living environment in older people's civic engagement in current research.	Scoping review	63 published research articles	Submitted to *European Journal of Ageing*
Chapter 6: Civic engagement in later life: A multilevel European analysis	• How do neighbourhood conditions (access to amenities, problems, safety and urbanisation) associate with civic engagement among older people? • How do national characteristics in terms of inequality (Gini index) and development (HDI), associate with civic engagement, while controlling for individual and perceived neighbourhood conditions? • How do neighbourhood conditions interact with national inequality and development variables to shape civic engagement among older people?	Quantitative research: Two-level binary logistic regression	9,468 respondents aged 65+ from EQLS	Submitted to *Journal of Applied Gerontology*

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CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

CHAPTER 2: Methodological approach

1. Research design and paradigm

This dissertation employs a multi-method approach to investigate profiles and determinants of multidimensional civic engagement in later life across various ecological levels. The study draws upon four distinct yet interrelated studies, each providing a unique lens on civic engagement in later life, explored through a multilevel and multidimensional framework. Quantitative studies, employing latent class analysis and multilevel analysis, are complemented by literature review methods to identify key ecological determinants across levels and to contextualise the empirical findings within the broader scholarly discourse.

This research is grounded in a combination of pragmatic and post-positivist paradigms, providing a robust yet flexible foundation for exploring civic engagement in later life. Rather than analysing data in just a quantitative or qualitative way, it embraces methodological plurality, thereby allowing different methods to illuminate distinct facets of civic engagement in later life. This pluralistic design supports a richer, more layered understanding of civic engagement by capturing both its measurable dimensions and the nuanced relationship between civic engagement and its ecological determinants.

Firstly, this dissertation is grounded in pragmatism, which emphasises the practical relevance of knowledge and the strategic use of available resources (Gillespie et al., 2024). In this case, the choice to use the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) reflects a pragmatic response to the realities of conducting cross-national research on civic engagement in later life. Whilst the EQLS does not offer a comprehensive or tailored set of variables on civic engagement or meso- and macro-level variables, it provides an opportunity to work with a large, representative sample of over 9,000 older adults across 33 countries, which would not be feasible through collecting data myself (Eurofound, 2017). This approach acknowledges the imperfections and inherent limitations of secondary data, using what is available to extract meaningful insights while maintaining a critical awareness of the data's limitations (which will be further discussed in *2.2. Data*). The pragmatic paradigm thus supports a flexible, question-driven analysis, making the best use of the available variables to explore civic engagement in later life and its contextual determinants, which can be used to inform policy and practice (Islam, 2022).

Secondly, from a post-positivist standpoint, the study acknowledges that civic engagement among older adults exists within an objective social reality, shaped by contextual determinants, that can be systematically examined (Sobayi, 2021). At the same time, it recognises that all observations are inherently fallible and influenced by the positionality of both researchers and participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This perspective is reflected in the use of structured methods, such as secondary survey data, while emphasising critical reflexivity, transparency, and rigour in data analysis and interpretation.

These two paradigms provide a foundation for the generation of insights that are not only theoretically sound but also actionable, thereby informing the design of policies that foster civic engagement for older adults. By integrating these paradigms, this dissertation aims to produce insights that are both credible and useful in understanding and promoting civic engagement in later life.

2. Data

The data sources used across this dissertation are exclusively secondary in nature. Chapters 3 and 6 employed the EQLS database. Chapter 5 uses a scoping review of 63 peer-reviewed articles. While each chapter provides a detailed account of its respective data and methods, a brief overview of the methodological approaches is presented here to contextualise the overall research design. Chapter 4 is not discussed separately, as it was published as a book chapter reviewing the state of the art on civic engagement and its ecological determinants. As it is a conceptual contribution, no empirical methodology was applied.

2.1. Secondary database European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) (Chapters 3 and 6)

For Chapters 3 and 6, secondary survey data were used. The database of choice was the European Quality of Life Survey (Eurofound, 2017). This dissertation utilised data from the most recent, fourth wave of the EQLS, collected by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in 2016–2017 (Eurofound, 2018b). The EQLS collects data on individuals' well-being, life satisfaction, and perceptions of societal and public service performance across 33 European countries, including all EU member states (the UK is still included) and five candidate countries. Data were gathered through face-to-face, computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI), using multi-stage, stratified random sampling. Ethical standards included informed consent and adherence to an interviewer's code of conduct. The survey targeted individuals aged 18 and older living in private households, with national samples ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 respondents per country (Eurofound, 2018b). Only respondents aged 65 and above were included in chapters 3 and 6, in line with common research definitions of older adults (Kafková et al., 2018; Siira et al., 2022). This resulted in a sample of 9,468 older Europeans aged 65 and above, with all individuals over 90 categorised as '90+' in the EQLS dataset (Eurofound, 2018a).

However, it should be noted that Chapter 3 draws on a final analytical sample of 9,031 older adults. To ensure the integrity of the data for the latent class analysis, respondents with missing data on any of the six components of multidimensional civic engagement were excluded (n = 437). In Chapter 6, the issue of missing data in the dimensions of civic engagement was more easily addressed through the use of a two-level logistic regression analysis conducted using the *melogit* command in STATA 18 (StataCorp, 2023). Since the *melogit* command automatically excludes cases with missing values in any of the variables used in the model, manual deletion

was unnecessary. This approach resulted in different sample sizes across models, depending on the outcome variable.

Although other datasets, such as the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) (SHARE-ERIC, 2024), were also considered for this dissertation, the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) was ultimately selected. Despite SHARE offering more frequent and more recent data waves, EQLS provided greater richness and depth in capturing the multidimensional aspects of civic engagement, making it a more suitable choice for this study's aim.

2.2. Research articles as part of a scoping review (Chapter 5)

For the scoping review examining the role of the living environment in older adults' civic engagement, four scientific databases (i.e. PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science, and Scopus) were searched between October and December 2023. The search strategy was developed in collaboration with a professional librarian and refined by the research team. This strategy incorporated keywords relating to older adults, civic engagement, and the living environment, and was tailored to each database's search algorithm. Only peer-reviewed, full-text articles in English were included. No restrictions were placed on publication date, country, or research method (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods). Older adults were defined as individuals aged 50 and above, in line with the age threshold used in major datasets such as SHARE (SHARE-ERIC, 2024). In conceptual papers where age was not specified, terms such as 'older', 'elder', or 'senior' were accepted. Civic engagement was operationalised broadly to include volunteering, informal helping behaviours and political, associational and digital engagement. The living environment was defined as the space between the household and broader community contexts (Greenfield et al., 2019).

The database search resulted in 6,663 articles. After removing duplicates (n = 2,350), a total of 4,313 records were screened by title and abstract. During this screening, 479 articles were selected for full-text review. Following full-text screening, 63 articles were included in the final review. The included articles were published between 1 January 1975 and 21 December 2023.

3. Positionality of the researcher

As a researcher, it is imperative to acknowledge my own positionality, since my social and personal context shapes my perspective and approach to the research process. It is evident that elements such as educational background, cultural identity, gender, religion, and personal values have the capacity to influence a researcher's assumptions, interpretations, and interactions (Castelló et al., 2021). These factors may operate both consciously and unconsciously, shaping how research questions are framed, how data is interpreted, and how findings are presented (Jamieson et al., 2023). Recognising this, I reflect here on my positionality concerning this study.

At the inception of this PhD, I had no prior academic experience in the field of ageing. My academic background was rooted in the field of education, and my interactions with older adults, such as grandparents, neighbours, and their acquaintances, were limited to informal, personal contexts. While these encounters were meaningful, they did not offer a scholarly understanding of the ageing process. I was also aware of a tendency to underestimate older people and to overlook their perspectives, both in society and within myself. At the outset of this research, I was 24 years old; I am now 28. This places me at a considerable distance from the age threshold commonly used to define older adults in this study, namely 65 years and above (Kafková et al., 2018; Siira et al., 2022). In this respect, I occupy the position of an 'outsider', i.e. someone without lived experience of later life and without direct familiarity with the realities of ageing (Jamieson et al., 2023).

Furthermore, this dissertation is entirely based on secondary data and literature and thus did not require direct engagement with older adults as part of its methodology. Nevertheless, I consider it both ethically and academically problematic to write about and for a group without making a genuine effort to understand their perspectives. To address this issue, I proactively sought opportunities to engage with older adults in both academic and personal settings. During the course of my doctoral studies, I had the opportunity to contribute to the CIVEX project, which investigates exclusion from civic engagement among a diverse older population in Belgium, Sweden, Spain, and Finland. While my primary contribution lay in the quantitative component, parts of which are included in this dissertation, I also participated in the collection of qualitative data in Belgium. Conducting in-depth interviews with care home residents about their civic engagement across their life course deepened my appreciation for the significance of this topic.

Despite the absence of this qualitative data in my dissertation, the experience shaped my perspective and strengthened my commitment to researching the topic. Additionally, dissemination activities in 'Ageing Policy Labs' provided a valuable opportunity to present my findings to older adults and policymakers. This interaction yielded critical feedback that challenged and refined my interpretations. Despite the fact that these activities were not incorporated within the formal methodology, they nevertheless significantly improved my comprehension and interpretation of the literature. These experiences have also helped me to cultivate a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of older people, which has informed and enriched the development of this dissertation.

As mentioned in *2.1. Research design and paradigm*, this dissertation is situated within a post-positivist paradigm. In line with this paradigm, I primarily employed quantitative methods, drawing on large-scale datasets and statistical analyses to examine profiles and determinants related to civic engagement in later life. My personal preference and interest in quantitative research strongly influenced this methodological orientation. This interest also led me to engage more with literature that emphasises measurable constructs and generalisable findings. While these approaches provided a structured and empirically grounded foundation for the study, I am aware that they may not fully capture the complexity and diversity of older adults' lived experiences in regard to their civic engagement. Despite the absence of qualitative methods in the analysis of my empirical chapters, I recognise their value in complementing quantitative insights and in challenging assumptions embedded in statistical models. This awareness has informed a more critical and reflective stance towards my interpretations and the limitations of this dissertation's findings.

4. Use of AI

During the writing stage of this dissertation, M365 Copilot (Microsoft, 2025) was used to assist with the writing process of the different chapters. Specifically, generative artificial intelligence was used to improve the structure, flow, spelling and grammatical accuracy of the text. These tools served as a support mechanism rather than a replacement for individual input or scientific judgment. Furthermore, Consensus (Consensus, 2025) was employed to identify sources, especially in Chapters 1, 2 and 7, when additional depth or theoretical development was required.

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CHAPTER 3: MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF OLDER EUROPEANS: A LATENT CLASS ANALYSIS

Toon Vercauteren, Sofie Van Regenmortel, Marina Näsman, Fredrica Nyqvist, Dorien Brosens, Rodrigo Serrat and Sarah Dury

CHAPTER 3: Multi-dimensional civic engagement of older Europeans: A latent class analysis

Abstract

Civic engagement is increasingly relevant for promoting healthy and active ageing as well as addressing social exclusion among older people. Current research focuses primarily on formal volunteering, neglecting the various other ways older people contribute to their families and communities. This study aims to address these gaps by recognising civic engagement as a multidimensional concept – including associational engagement, informal caregiving, formal volunteering, digital engagement, and formal and informal political engagement – and by exploring the combination of activities among older individuals. Using data from the 2016 European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) across 33 European countries, this study examines the civic engagement of 9,031 individuals aged 65 and older. Descriptive analysis maps multidimensional civic engagement, while latent class analysis identifies distinct profiles of engagement and explores which civic activities are combined within each profile. Socio-structural and social capital resources associated with each profile are also investigated. Findings reveal that 32 per cent of older individuals are not engaged in civic activities, while 32.2 per cent participate in only one activity. Among the civically engaged (68%) five distinct profiles emerge, illustrating varied engagement across multiple civic activities. A considerable number of older people (35.8%) combine several civic activities, albeit in different combinations across the created profiles. Informal caregiving can be found in all profiles, and for a large part of the population, it is their only activity involving civic engagement. In contrast, one profile displays older Europeans civically engaged in several activities simultaneously. Higher levels of socio-structural resources are associated with profiles of greater diversity in civic engagement in later life. Interventions and policies must therefore consider the diverse circumstances and preferences of older people and valorise and include all forms of multidimensional civic engagement in policymaking, including informal caregiving.

Keywords: Multidimensional Civic Engagement – Ageing – Latent Class Analysis – Diverse Older people – Profiles of Civic Engagement – Political Engagement – Volunteering – Associational Engagement – Informal Caregiving – Digital Engagement

1. Introduction

Civic engagement is an important pillar of social inclusion, encompassing a variety of activities including informal caregiving, associational engagement, political engagement, formal volunteering, and digital engagement (e.g. Putnam 2000b; Seifert & Rössel 2021; Serrat et al. 2021a). And yet, research on civic engagement of older people is limited (Serrat et al. 2021a), as it does not take into account its multidimensional features (e.g. Serrat et al. 2021b). To date, formal volunteering among older people has been relatively well-researched (e.g. Dury et al. 2020; Serrat et al. 2021a), whereas other dimensions, like informal caregiving, political engagement, associational engagement, and digital engagement have scarcely been addressed (Cutler et al. 2011; Serrat et al. 2021a). Furthermore, gerontological research has not considered whether and how people engage in multiple civic activities (Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al. 2015; Seifert & Rössel 2021; Serrat et al. 2021a; Smith 2013). Hence, this paper aims to fill this gap in knowledge by examining the multidimensional civic engagement of older people and the combinations of activities they engage in, to provide a more comprehensive picture of older Europeans' civic engagement. This literature review first discusses the multidimensionality of the concept of civic engagement and various theories, followed by an analysis of the predictors associated with the multidimensional civic engagement of older people. Last, role extension and overload in relation to the civic engagement of older people are explored.

1.1. Multidimensional civic engagement of older people

Research on the multidimensional civic engagement of older people is crucial, as it can promote healthy and fulfilling ageing processes while simultaneously benefiting and strengthening communities (Morrow-Howell et al., 2019; Beard et al., 2016). This form of engagement is also relevant to the concept of a participatory democracy and to the pursuit of active and/or healthy ageing (Beard et al., 2016; World Health Organisation, 2023). Civic engagement has the potential to address social exclusion by empowering older people to exercise agency, actively participate in community life, and contribute to collective decision-making processes, thereby ensuring that their voices are heard (Serrat et al., 2018). Although civic engagement has come more to the forefront of gerontological research in recent years, studies remain inconsistent when defining the term civic engagement and the activities it encompasses for older people (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Serrat et al., 2021a). The classic interpretation of the concept of civic engagement, coined by Adler and Goggin (2005, p. 239)

is "how an active citizen participates in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or help shape the community's future." More recently, Serrat et al. (2021a, p. 246) defined civic engagement in later life as "informal and formal activities aimed at seeking better benefits for others, the community or wider society, or influencing collective decision-making processes." In the literature, civic engagement is generally defined as volunteering and political engagement (e.g. Serrat et al., 2021b; Van Dijk et al., 2015). As different definitions are used to describe these indicators of civic engagement, this paper uses the taxonomy proposed by Serrat et al. (2021b), including political engagement and volunteering, while adding associational engagement and digital engagement. Political engagement is taking part in activities that impact decision-making processes. It can be formal or institutionalised (e.g. voting) or informal or non-institutionalised (e.g. protesting), with formal political participation taking place inside of, and informal political participation outside of, classical electoral democratic systems and organisations like political parties.

Volunteering can be both formal and informal (informal caregiving). Formal volunteering takes place collectively through organisations, whereas informal caregiving involves individual activities aimed at helping people inside and outside the family sphere (Serrat et al., 2021a). Complementing these indicators, this paper also includes associational engagement following the concept of civic engagement used by Putnam (2000), who describes civic engagement activities that build social capital, including engaging in organisational activities. Digital engagement is likewise included as an indicator of civic engagement, as civic engagement can take place in the digital space (Seifert & Rössel, 2021).

Although these descriptions imply a broad understanding of the concept, some studies only consider political engagement as part of civic engagement (e.g. Burr et al., 2002; van Deth, 2016), while others only consider formal volunteering (e.g. Doolittle & Faul, 2013; O'Neill et al., 2011). Other research has examined a range of activities that are traditionally included in the definition of civic engagement, including informal caregiving, participation in associations, and formal volunteering, without explicitly labelling these activities as civic engagement (Dury et al., 2021). Some civic activities have been studied more extensively, such as formal volunteering, while others have received much less attention, such as political engagement, informal caregiving, and associational engagement (e.g. Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al., 2015; Seifert & Rössel, 2021; Strauss, 2021). Digital engagement – in this instance being civically engaged in the digital spaces – has so far mostly been ignored as part of civic

engagement because it is a relatively new form that includes active involvement in society using modern technology, such as the internet (Seifert & Rössel, 2021).

1.2. Role extension and role overload

Despite the popularity of studies on civic engagement and especially the great diversity of interpretation of the term, substantial questions remain about the diversity of activities that older people engage in simultaneously. In the current literature, two theoretical insights might be relevant when addressing this issue: the role extension (Strauss, 2021) and role overload (Choi et al., 2007; Coverman, 1989; Goode, 1960) hypotheses. These two hypotheses can be traced back to role accumulation (Sieber, 1974), role enhancement (Moen et al., 1995), and role strain theory (Goode, 1960), all founded on role theory (Merton, 1957). Role theory refers to the behaviour that people exhibit based on their societal roles. Especially older people tend to lose more societal roles than they gain, such as parenthood, a spouse, or a professional occupation (Greenfield & Marks, 2004). However, this loss of societal roles can be replaced by pursuits like volunteering and informal caregiving (Aartsen & Hansen, 2019; Hämäläinen et al., 2023). As for the role enhancement and role strain hypotheses, additional roles can put a strain on people or, conversely, enhance people's levels of well-being by increasing power, prestige, resources, and emotional gratification (Goode, 1960; Moen et al., 1995; Rozario et al., 2004; Sieber, 1974).

Based on these role-related theories, the role extension hypothesis argues that older people who are engaged in one type of activity are also more likely to be engaged in other activities (Strauss, 2021). This echoes the findings of Musick and Wilson (2008), that being engaged in volunteer work prompts participation in other civic activities. Similarly, Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Brosens et al. (2015) and Dury et al. (2020) found that associational affiliations positively correlate with volunteering, as such activities provide social ties that generate volunteering opportunities. The role extension hypothesis is also illustrated by Serrat et al. (2015), who found that political engagement too has a positive correlation with volunteering.

Contrary to the role extension hypothesis, the role overload hypothesis states that limited resources or time keep people from engaging in civic activity (Choi et al., 2007; Strauss, 2021). To participate in a civic activity, like informal caregiving, people need to invest time and energy that cannot be used in other civic activities (Ackermann, 2019; Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Brosens et al., 2015). Resources that people have are limited – if they allocate them to one

activity, they will lack the resources to commit to other civic activities. Hence both the role extension and role overload hypotheses are potentially useful in explaining multidimensional civic engagement in later life.

In addition to the role enhancement and role overload hypotheses, it is crucial to acknowledge the fundamental distinction between informal caregiving and other forms of civic engagement. Older adults frequently assume informal caregiving roles due to familial obligations or external requests (Choi et al., 2007). Conversely, they may actively seek civic roles, such as voluntary, political, or associational engagement, to replace previous roles and maintain social connections (e.g., Le & Aartsen, 2022) including offering informal caregiving outside the household (Zhang & Bennett, 2024).

1.3. Predictors of civic engagement

Predictors that affect people's civic engagement are well-documented (e.g. Ackermann, 2019; Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al., 2015; Leedahl et al., 2017; Serrat et al., 2015). Two frequently used theories to explain why some older people engage in civic activities and others do not are socio-structural resources theory and social capital theory (Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al., 2015; Dury et al., 2020; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Leedahl et al., 2017; Serrat et al., 2023).

Socio-structural resources theory focuses on individual resources such as educational level, income and health that facilitate civic engagement, as they might provide assets that make it possible for people to participate in civic activities like volunteering (Wilson, 2012). In terms of physical health, research on civic engagement indicates that good health is associated with a higher likelihood of being civically engaged (Stopka et al., 2022). This is in line with the findings that age-related health problems can pose a barrier for older people to engage in civic activities (Serrat et al., 2017). Considering mental health, results point towards a negative association with volunteering (Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al., 2015). Studies indicate a mostly positive association between education and civic engagement. In particular, higher educational attainment correlates strongly with volunteering and political engagement, as evidenced by studies such as Ackermann (2019) and Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al. (2015). However, contradictory results have been reported for informal caregiving, with higher education showing both positive and negative correlations (Hämäläinen et al., 2023; Ramaekers

et al., 2022). Research on income tends to indicate that income is positively associated with participation in civic activities (Serrat et al., 2023).

For social capital theory, the focus lies on social connections and roles that facilitate civic engagement (Coleman, 1988; Principi et al., 2012; Putnam, 2000). In the civic engagement literature, these variables commonly include employment status and partner status (e.g. Boerio et al., 2021; Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Brosens et al., 2015; Dury et al., 2020; Serrat et al., 2023). The employment status of older people has ambivalent evidence of its promotion of civic engagement (Serrat et al., 2023). While some studies found a positive correlation between being employed and activities of civic engagement such as volunteering (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2017) and political engagement (Boerio et al., 2021), other results indicated a positive association between volunteering and retirement (Van Den Bogaard et al., 2014) or associational engagement and retirement (Van Den Bogaard et al., 2014). Research on social roles, such as partner status, often yields different results. On the one hand some studies found that partnered people, and especially women, were less likely to volunteer compared to non-partnered people (e.g. widowed or single) (Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al., 2015; Quaranta, 2015). On the other hand, research by Voorpostel and Coffé (2012) found that partnered women were more likely to volunteer. Additionally, Lancee and Radl (2014) discovered a decline in volunteering rates following divorce. Regarding political engagement, research found that married individuals were more likely to vote than their divorced, never married or widowed counterparts (Voorpostel & Coffé, 2012; Purdam & Taylor, 2023). Research on informal caregiving suggested that older partnered people were less likely to provide informal caregiving than non-partnered people unless one of the partners within this partnership needed help themselves (Bertogg & Strauss, 2020; Boerio et al., 2021; Dahlberg et al., 2018). These findings highlight the nuanced and multifaceted nature of how social roles can influence various forms of civic engagement.

The abovementioned socio-structural and social capital characteristics will be further compared between the various profiles of older people's civic engagement in this study.

1.4. Research questions

Civic engagement is a concept whose multidimensionality is often overlooked in gerontological research (Serrat et al., 2021a). Although socio-structural and social capital resources have been identified as critical in explaining various aspects of civic engagement, more research is needed on their importance for multidimensional civic engagement. Previous studies have investigated concepts akin to productive engagement and volunteering profiles. However, these studies either focussed on the US or other specific countries (e.g. Cheng et al., 2022; Hinterlong, 2008; Rojo-Perez et al., 2022), thus overlooking the unique context of the European population, which is characterized by distinct ageing trends, socioeconomic factors, policy approaches, historical context, and cultural values (Hank & Erlinghagen, 2009), or have not included essential components of civic engagement, such as associational and political engagement, in their analyses (e.g. Cheng et al., 2021; Hank & Stuck, 2008; van Hees et al., 2020).

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of older Europeans' civic engagement, their multidimensional civic engagement and the combinations of activities they engage in are examined; this is followed by an assessment of the resources associated with the civic engagement profiles identified. These objectives have been translated into two research questions:

1. What are the profiles of older Europeans according to their participation in multidimensional civic engagement?
2. How do these profiles relate to socio-structural and social capital variables?

2. Data and method

2.1. Data

For this research, secondary data analysis was conducted using data from the European Quality of Life Survey, or EQLS (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2023). EQLS examines issues such as people's levels of happiness, their degree of life satisfaction, and respondents' opinions on how well their societies and public services are run. The EQLS survey was conducted face-to-face using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) and the sample was drawn through multi-stage, stratified, random sampling (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2016) in 33 European countries (including the 28 EU member states and five candidate countries – Albania, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey) (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2017). Ethical considerations of the survey included voluntary informed consent and an interviewer code of conduct, which can be consulted on the EQLS website (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2018, p. 68-69). Per participating country, 1,000 to 2,000 respondents who lived in private households were interviewed (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2016). This research uses wave 4, which was collected in 2016 and is the last available wave of EQLS. All respondents were at least 18 years of age and there was no maximum age to participate (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2017). There were in total 36,908 respondents. Respondents younger than 65 were excluded (n = 27,440), as age 65 is commonly used in research to define older people (e.g. Kafková et al., 2018; Siira et al., 2022). Respondents who had missing values for at least one of the six components of multidimensional civic engagement used in this study were also excluded (n = 437), as missing values can yield deceptive results. This leaves us with 9,031 respondents in the final sample used. The characteristics of the sample are described in Table 2.

2.2. Indicators of multidimensional civic engagement

To identify profiles of multidimensional civic engagement of older people, six indicator variables were included. The selection of items representing each of these indicators was based on cited literature and the availability of items in EQLS (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2023). Work by Serrat et al. (2021b) and Di Gessa and Grundy (2017) was used to identify items for informal caregiving; by Serrat et al.

(2021b) to identify items for formal volunteering and informal and formal political engagement; by Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Brosens et al. (2015) and Putnam (2000) to identify items for associational engagement; and by Seifert and Rössel (2021) and Smith (2013) to identify the item for digital engagement.

For the first indicator, associational engagement, one general question was asked: 'How frequently do you do each of the following? Participate in social activities of a club, society, or association'. The answer was indicated on a Likert scale; if the respondents indicated that they participated, regardless of frequency, they were considered engaged. For the second indicator, digital engagement, the dichotomous question was asked: 'Have you commented on a political or social issue online in the last year?' The remaining indicators of multidimensional civic engagement – volunteering, informal caregiving, and formal and informal political engagement – were constructed using multiple items. If a person answered yes to one of these items, they were considered as engaged in the indicated activity. The third indicator, volunteering, was dichotomised using three items asking respondents: 'Did you do unpaid voluntary work in the following organisations in the last 12 months: a) community and social services (e.g. organisations helping the elderly, young people, the disabled, or others in need); b) educational, cultural, sports, or professional associations; c) other voluntary organisations.' The fourth indicator, informal caregiving, was constructed from three items from one question asking: 'In general, how often are you involved in any of the following activities outside of paid work?' The first of these items asks participants how often they do 'caring for and/or educating your grandchildren'. The other two items ask how often respondents do 'caring for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends under age 75' and 'caring for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends aged 75 or older'. Respondents could answer using a Likert scale with the options: every day, several days a week, once or twice a week, less often, never. The items were combined into one variable with four answer options: a) no informal caregiving; b) caring for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends; c) caring for grandchildren; d) caring for both. As fifth indicator, the informal political engagement variable was constructed using five dichotomous items based on the following questions: 'a) Did you do unpaid voluntary work through social movements (for example environmental, human rights) or charities (for example fundraising, campaigning) in the last 12 months? And over the last 12 months, have you done any of the following activities? b) attended a protest or demonstration; c) signed a petition, including an e-mail or online petition; d) contacted a politician or public official (other than routine contact arising from the use of public services);

e) boycotted certain products.' The sixth and last indicator of multidimensional civic engagement, formal political engagement, was measured using two dichotomous items: 'Did you do unpaid voluntary work through political parties or trade unions in the last 12 months?' and 'Did you attend a meeting of a trade union, political party or political action group over the last 12 months?' It is important to note that if the respondents took part in one subitem of the indicators for multidimensional civic engagement, they are considered as being engaged in that indicator.

2.3. Covariates

The descriptive statistics of the covariates are presented in Table 2. Age, gender, and migration background are used as control variables (Ackermann, 2019). Gender is dichotomous with female and male as options, while age is a self-made categorical variable with the following categories in years: 65-69, 70-74, 75-79, 80-84, 85-89, and 90+. Respondents' migration background was measured with the use of one variable: 'What country were you born in?' This variable was recoded into three answer profiles: native-born, foreign-born European, foreign-born non-European. For socio-structural resources, education was measured with the question: 'What is the highest level of education you completed?' Educational level was recoded from nine into three groups in EQLS based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011 codes: lower secondary or primary (ISCED 0-2), upper secondary or post-secondary (ISCED 3-4), and tertiary (ISCED 5-8) education (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2023; Eurostat, 2022). To measure respondents' perceived economic situation, the following question was asked: 'A household may have different sources of income and more than one household member may contribute to it. Thinking of your household's total monthly income: is your household able to make ends meet?' The six answer options were dichotomised into easily (very easily, easily, fairly easily) and with difficulty (with some difficulty, with difficulty, with great difficulty). To assess self-rated health, a five-point scale (very good, good, fair, poor, very poor) was used to answer the question: 'In general, how is your health?' The variable was dichotomised into good health (very good, good) and less than good health (fair, bad, very bad). For social capital covariates, the work situation was assessed by evaluating the economic status codes filled by respondents in the EQLS 2016 questionnaire ('Which of these profiles best describes your situation?'). The 12 response alternatives were recoded into three: retired, employed (or self-employed), and other (unemployed, permanently sick or disabled, homemaker, other). Respondents' partner

status had two answer options: the partner lives in the same household or there is no partner in the household.

2.4. Analytical strategy

Descriptive statistics were used to display the sample's characteristics and to identify their level of multidimensional civic engagement. To answer Research Questions 1 and 2, i.e., to determine whether unobserved and diverse groups of older people based on their diversity in participation in civic engagement exist, latent class analysis (LCA) was utilised (Weller et al., 2020). LCA is used in research that studies multidimensional concepts (e.g. social exclusion; Van Regenmortel et al., 2018) to keep the distinction between the different components. This study uses a three-step LCA (Weller et al., 2020) in the program Latent GOLD 6.0 (Vermunt and Magidson, 2021). First, a latent class model is built for a set of indicator variables. Second, the cases are assigned to latent classes. Third, the latent classification scores from step 2 are related to external variables of interest (Bakk and Vermunt, 2021). The three step-model is used, as it makes more intuitive sense to first construct a latent class model before connecting it to covariates or distant outcomes (Nylund-Gibson and Choi, 2018; Vermunt, 2010; Weller et al., 2020). Latent GOLD 6.0 corrects the classification error to avoid bias (Vermunt and Magidson, 2021). To account for the occurrence of local maxima, multiple starting points (500) and iterations (2000) were used throughout all steps of the analysis (Vermunt and Magidson, 2016). From these multiple starting points and iterations, Latent GOLD automatically shows the best-fitting model.

In step 1 of the three-step method, a latent class model was estimated for the indicators of multidimensional civic engagement. In this process, the fitting indicators and class sizes were determined. During this first step of the analysis a one-class model was estimated, and then classes were added until a model was found that best met the fit indices. As older people who do not engage in any civic activities are included in the LCA, the 'known class' function was used to group the non-engaged into one class. Multiple fit indices as well as the theoretical understanding of civic engagement were taken into account (Nylund-Gibson and Choi, 2018). Model fit was explored using the following statistical criteria: the BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion), with a lower BIC indicating better model fit (Nylund et al., 2007); the L^2 likelihood-ratio goodness-of-fit, with a non-significant Bootstrap p-value indicating whether a model is statistically worse than the model with one class less (Vermunt and Magidson, 2016); and the AIC (Akaike Information Criterion), where a lower value, just like the BIC, indicates a better

model fit (Akaike, 1974; Weller et al., 2020). Class size was also considered when choosing a fitting model. When class prevalence is substantially unequal, classes are typically difficult to recover, so more than 5 per cent of the sample is desirable per latent class (Nylund-Gibson and Choi, 2018). The sample can be considered large enough as the number of respondents is above 1,000, – which is the highest minimum found in the literature that accurately identifies correct models based on the information criteria (IC) and likelihood tests (Aflaki et al., 2022).

In step 2 the cases were allocated to their most fitting latent classes, based on inclusion probabilities, which is the likelihood that a random case in the sample will fall under any latent class (Naldi and Cazzaniga, 2020). The classes were saved and used in further analyses.

In step 3, covariates (age, migration background, educational level, perceived economic situation, subjective health, employment status, having a partner in the household) were related to the latent classification scores saved in step 2 (Vermunt and Magidson, 2020), through a multinominal logistic regression (Vermunt and Magidson, 2016). The findings of the pairwise Wald tests (created during the multinominal logistic regression in step 3) were used to see whether the profiles of multidimensional civic engagement differed significantly in terms of the covariates.

3. Results

3.1. Participation of older Europeans in multidimensional civic engagement

Within the entire sample (n = 9,031), one-third (32.0%) of the surveyed population did not participate in any civic activities. Roughly another third (32.2%) participated in one activity. This implies that 35.8 per cent of the sample was engaged in more than one civic activity. Table 2 shows that when more civic activities are combined, people are less likely to be in that group (e.g. only 0.7% were engaged in six different civic activities).

Informal caregiving was the most prevalent indicator of civic engagement, at 49.9 per cent: taking care of grandchildren was the most popular activity, displayed by 37.5 per cent of the sample. Formal political engagement was less common, with 7.2 per cent attending meetings or working or volunteering for a union or political party. As for digital engagement, 4.0 per cent commented on political or social issues online.

Table 2

Sample characteristics of older people (aged 65+) in Europe (n = 9,031)

Indicators of multidimensional civic engagement		% (*n*)
Informal caregiving	Cared for both grandchildren and disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends	10.7 (967)
	Cared for grandchildren	26.8 (2,418)
	Cared for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends	12.4 (1,122)
Associational engagement	Participated in social activities of a club, society, or association	34.6 (3,126)
Informal political engagement	Engaged in informal political activity in the last 12 months (unpaid voluntary work through social movements or charities, attended a demonstration, signed a petition, contacted a politician or public official, boycotted certain products)	22.0 (1,986)
Volunteering	Did voluntary work in community and social services or in educational, cultural, sports, professional, or other associations in the last 12 months	21.4 (1,935)
Formal political engagement	Did formal political activity in the last 12 months (attending meetings, working or unpaid volunteering for/through a union or political party)	7.2 (650)
Digital engagement	Commented on a political or social issue online	4.0 (360)
Covariates		% (*n*)
Gender	Male	42.8 (3,864)
	Female	57.2 (5,167)
Age (years)	65-69	34.9 (3,156)
	70-74	25.3 (2,282)
	75-79	20.5 (1,847)
	80-84	12.3 (1,111)
	85-89	5.5 (497)
	90+	1.5 (138)

Migration background	Native-born	93.0 (8,403)
	Foreign-born European	3.1 (276)
	Foreign-born non-European	3.9 (352)
Socio-structural resources		
Education	Lower secondary or primary	50.4 (4,555)
	Upper secondary or post-secondary	31.1 (2,808)
	Tertiary	18.5 (1,668)
Perceived economic situation	No problems making ends meet	54.5 (4,918)
	Problems making ends meet	45.5 (4,113)
Self-rated health	Good	38.3 (3,457)
	Less than good	61.7 (5,574)
Social capital resources		
Employment	Retired	90.5 (8,175)
	Employed/self-employed	4.5 (408)
	Other	5.0 (448)
Partner in the household/	Yes	50.0 (4,516)
living together	No	50.0 (4,515)

Number of civic activities per respondent	% (n)
No civic activities	32.0 (2,889)
1 civic activity	32.2 (2,910)
2 civic activities	15.2 (1,371)
3 civic activities	10.3 (933)
4 civic activities	6.5 (588)
5 civic activities	3.0 (279)
6 civic activities	0.7 (61)

Rounding up the percentages might yield added percentages slightly higher than 100%

3.2. Profiles of older people based on their multidimensional civic engagement

An LCA was performed and based on the lowest BIC indicator, the six-class model was selected ($L^2 = 228.870$; $p < 0.001$; $df = 201$; AIC = 53729.289; BIC = 54106.035) (Nylund-Gibson and Choi 2018; Weller et al. 2020). It is important to note that none of the other fit criteria pointed towards a six-class model (Table 3). Inconsistent findings across fit indicators are common in LCA models (Weller et al. 2020). The six-class model was preferred over the seven-class model, not only because the six-class model had a lower BIC value, but also because the seven-class model had a profile representing less than 3 per cent of the population. This is not desirable, as classes are typically difficult to recover when class prevalence is substantially unequal (Nylund-Gibson and Choi 2018).

Table 3

Model fit indicators of latent class analysis on multidimensional civic engagement (n= 9,031)

	BIC (LL)	AIC (LL)	Npar	L²	Bootstrap p	Class.Err.	Entropy R²
1-Class	59948.833	59891.966	8	17802.676	0.000	0.000	1.000
2-Class	58490.678	58369.835	17	4941.416	0.000	0.000	1.000
3-Class	55245.076	55060.257	26	1613.839	0.000	0.051	0.891
4-Class	54588.747	54339.952	35	875.534	0.000	0.096	0.821
5-Class	54240.220	53927.450	44	445.031	0.000	0.084	0.845
6-Class	**54106.035**	53729.289	53	228.870	0.000	0.051	0.910
7-Class	54154.535	53713.813	62	156.468	0.000	0.081	0.882
8-Class	54147.881	53643.183	71	106.765	0.000	0.055	0.923

Lowest BIC is bolded.

BIC: Bayesian information criterion; AIC: Akaike information criterion; LL (log likelihood); Npar: number of parameters; L²: The likelihood-ratio goodness-of-fit value.: classification error; Entropy R²: entropy coefficient of determination

The LCA identified the following six distinct profiles of civic engagement among older people:

1. *Non-Engaged* (Profile 0)

2. *Informal Caregivers* (Profile 1)

3. *Association-Engaged* (Profile 2)

4. *Volunteers* (Profile 3)

5. *Politically Engaged* (Profile 4)

6. *Diversely Engaged* (Profile 5)

Table 4 shows the profiles of multidimensional civic engagement and the likelihood of being engaged in multidimensional civic activities per profile as well as the overall likelihood of engagement of the sample.

As noted before in the descriptives, 32.0% of older European people did not participate in any form of civic engagement. They can be found in Profile 0, the Non-Engaged. The first profile, the Informal Caregivers, comprised 22.9 per cent of the sample. They had a low likelihood of participating in civic activities other than informal caregiving: 0.9 per cent in associational activities, 0.1 per cent in informal political engagement, 1.2 per cent in formal political engagement, 0.1 per cent in volunteering, and 0.3 per cent in digital engagement. However, there was a high likelihood of caring for grandchildren (62.2%); caring for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends (21.2%); or both (16.6%). Especially the likelihood of caring for grandchildren was twice as high compared to the other profiles (see Table 4).

The second profile, the Association-Engaged, represented 12.3 per cent of the sample and was characterised by a strong emphasis on associational engagement (100% likelihood; overall 34.6% likelihood). However, this profile had lower engagement in other civic activities, with a 30.4 per cent likelihood of being engaged in caring for grandchildren; 10.9 per cent likelihood of caring for a disabled or infirm family member, neighbour, or friend; and 10.2 per cent likelihood of doing both. Participation in other civic activities was very unlikely, with only 0.1 per cent volunteering, 0.8 per cent digital engagement, 2.9 per cent formal political engagement, and 0.1 per cent informal political engagement.

The third profile is identified as the *Volunteers* and comprised 11.7 per cent of the sample, focusing primarily on volunteering activities. There was a high likelihood (99.8%) of volunteering within this profile. Compared to the first two profiles, individuals in this profile were more active in other civic activities. Associational engagement was prevalent, with a 69.8 per cent likelihood of engagement. informal caregiving was also common, with a 61.3 per cent likelihood. While digital engagement (1.3% likelihood) and formal political engagement (6.4% likelihood) were still not common, informal political engagement (25.4%) was more likely, even higher than the sample's overall likelihood of engagement in informal political activities (22.0% likelihood).

The fourth profile, the Politically Engaged, represented 11.5 per cent of the sample. People in this profile had a relatively high likelihood of engaging in both formal (14.8% likelihood; overall 7.2 per cent likelihood) and informal (86.6% likelihood; overall 22.0% likelihood) political activities. There was a 46.2 per cent likelihood of participating in associational activities, while volunteering had only a 3.1 per cent likelihood. This profile also had a 29.1 per cent likelihood of being engaged in caring for grandchildren and a 13.1 per cent likelihood of caring for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends. The likelihood of providing care for both grandchildren and disabled or infirm individuals was also 13.1 per cent.

The fifth and last profile is the Diversely Engaged, representing 9.6 per cent of the sample. Older people in this sample showed a relatively high likelihood of engagement in all indicators. Volunteering (97.7% likelihood), associational engagement (90.0% likelihood), and informal political engagement (93.6% likelihood) were particularly prominent in this profile. Additionally, digital engagement had a 22.4 per cent likelihood, and formal political engagement had a 42.9 per cent likelihood – the highest among all profiles, surpassing even

Political Engagement (14.8% likelihood; overall 7.2% likelihood). Despite their high likelihood of being involved in multiple indicators of civic engagement, the older people in this profile also had a high likelihood of informal caregiving. They were less likely to care solely for grandchildren (21.0% likelihood), but more likely to care for both grandchildren and disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends (26.7% likelihood; overall: 10.7% likelihood).

The findings also demonstrate the diversity observed across countries, with notable differences observed between the *Non-Engaged* group (5.5% in Sweden to 58.5% in Bulgaria) and the less diverse patterns seen within the *Association-Engaged* and *Volunteers* profiles (respectively 1.6% in Turkey to 22.2% in Denmark and 1.2% in Turkey to 21.2% in the Netherlands). It is noteworthy that Sweden showed a 30.0 per cent likelihood of being part of the *Politically Engaged* profile and a 32.6 per cent likelihood of being part of the *Diversely Engaged* profile, while only showing a 5.5 per cent likelihood of being Non-engaged.

Table 4

Likelihood of being involved in multidimensional civic engagement: Profiles from the latent class analysis (n = 9,031; in %)

	Profile 0	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3	Profile 4	Profile 5	Overall
Class Size	32.0	22.9	12.3	11.7	11.5	9.6	
Informal caregiving							
No informal cargiving	100.0	0.0	48.5	38.7	44.8	25.8	50.1
Cared for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends	0.0	21.2	10.9	18.7	13.1	26.5	12.4
Cared for grandchildren	0.0	62.2	30.4	29.3	29.1	21.0	26.8
Cared for both grandchildren and disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends	0.0	16.6	10.2	13.4	13.1	26.7	10.7
Associational engagement							
No	100.0	99.1	0.0	30.2	53.8	10.1	65.4
Yes	0.0	0.9	100.0	69.8	46.2	90.0	34.6
Informal political engagement							
No	100.0	99.9	99.9	74.6	13.4	6.4	78.0
Yes	0.0	0.1	0.1	25.4	86.6	93.6	22.0
Volunteering							
No	100.0	99.9	99.9	0.3	97.0	2.3	78.6
Yes	0.0	0.1	0.1	99.8	3.1	97.7	21.4
Formal political engagement							
No	100.0	98.8	97.2	93.6	85.2	57.1	92.8
Yes	0.0	1.2	2.9	6.4	14.8	42.9	7.2
Digital engagement							
No	100.0	99.7	99.2	98.7	86.9	77.6	96.0
Yes	0.0	0.3	0.8	1.3	13.1	22.4	4.0
Country range in class-membership	5.5[1]-58,5[2]	5.8[3]-47,6[4]	1.6[5]-22.2[6]	1.2[5]-21.2[7]	1.4[8]-30.0[1]	0.4[9]-32.6[1]	

Rounding up the percentages might yield percentages slightly higher than 100%

Profile 0: Non-Engaged, Profile 1: Informal Caregivers; Profile 2: Association-Engaged; Profile 3: Volunteers; Profile 4: Politically Engaged; Profile 5: Diversely Engaged.

[1]*Sweden,* [2]*Bulgaria,* [3]*Germany,* [4]*Serbia,* [5]*Turkey,* [6]*Denmark,* [7]*Netherlands,* [8]*Romania,* [9]*Slovakia*

Table 5

Probabilities of covariates of socio-structural resources on multidimensional civic engagement: latent class analysis (n = 9,031; in %)

	Profile 0	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3	Profile 4	Profile 5	Overall
Class Size	32.0	22.9	12.3	11.7	11.5	9.6	
*Gender**							
Male	40.1	37.5	45.1	44.9	49.8	50.3	42.8
Female	59.9	62.5	54.9	55.1	50.2	49.7	57.2
*Age (years)**							
65-69	25.6	38.5	35.0	39.6	42.9	42.4	35.0
70-74	22.4	28.1	21.6	24.8	28.1	30.0	25.3
75-79	22.4	19.9	22.0	20.6	16.4	18.1	20.5
80-84	17.7	9.9	12.6	10.0	8.1	7.5	12.3
85-89	9.7	2.9	5.5	3.5	4.0	1.9	5.5
90+	2.3	0.7	3.3	1.5	0.5	0.2	1.5
*Migration background****							
Native-born	92.6	92.8	94.6	93.5	93.1	92.6	93.1
Foreign-born European	2.8	2.3	2.7	3.0	4.1	4.8	3.1
Foreign-born non-European	4.5	4.9	2.7	3.5	2.8	2.7	3.9
Socio-structural resources							
*Education**							
Lower secondary or primary	62.6	58.8	46.3	45.3	33.7	21.7	50.4
Upper secondary or post-secondary	27.8	30.7	34.8	33.7	35.4	30.3	31.1
Tertiary	9.6	10.6	19.0	21.0	31.0	47.9	18.5
*Perceived economic situation**							
No problems making ends meet	41.3	42.8	64.8	66.4	70.0	79.6	54.5
Problems making ends meet	58.7	57.2	35.2	33.6	30.0	20.4	45.5
*Self-rated health**							
Good health	25.5	31.4	46.0	48.5	50.6	60.0	38.3
Less than good health	74.5	68.6	54.0	51.5	49.4	40.0	61.7
Social capital resources							
*Employment**							
Employed	2.7	2.9	5.8	4.0	7.3	10.1	4.5
Retired	91.7	89.5	91.1	92.7	89.4	86.8	90.5
Other	5.6	7.6	3.1	3.3	3.3	3.0	5.0
*Partner in household**							
No	61.3	42.5	52.1	48.3	43.1	38.2	50.0
Yes	38.7	57.5	47.9	51.8	56.9	61.8	50.0

*$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.05$

Rounding up the percentages might yield percentages slightly higher than 100%.

All covariates are included simultaneously.

Profile 0: Non-Engaged, Profile 1: Informal Caregivers; Profile 2: Association-Engaged; Profile 3: Volunteers; Profile 4: Politically Engaged; Profile 5: Diversely Engaged

3.3. Comparing profiles on covariates

Table 5 shows the relation between the profiles and covariates. According to the Wald tests, fitting into the six civic engagement profiles was significantly associated with gender (Wald = 37.19; $p < 0.001$), age (Wald = 269.21; $p < 0.001$), migration background (Wald = 22.99; $p < 0.05$), educational level (Wald = 431.27; $p < 0.001$), perceived economic situation (Wald = 286.23; $p < 0.001$), self-rated health (Wald = 157.35; $p < 0.001$), employment status (Wald = 29.84; $p < 0.001$), and whether the partner lives in the household (Wald = 117.84; $p < 0.001$).

Both the *Non-Engaged* (62.6%) and the *Informal Caregivers* (58.8%) exhibited a higher percentage of individuals with lower secondary or primary education compared to the overall percentage (50.4%). By contrast, the *Association-Engaged* (46.3%) and *Volunteers* profiles (45.3%) had a lower percentage of individuals with lower secondary or primary education, and the *Politically Engaged* (33.7%) and *Diversely Engaged* (21.7%) profiles had an even lower percentage. Higher educated individuals were more prevalent in the *Diversely Engaged* group (47.9%) and among the *Politically Engaged* (31.0%) compared to the overall likelihood (18.5%). For perceived economic situation, *Non-Engaged* (58.7%) and *Informal Caregivers* (57.2%) were more likely to experience financial difficulties compared to the other profiles. Conversely, the *Diversely Engaged* had the highest likelihood of having no financial difficulties, with 79.6 per cent of the profile reporting no financial hardships, exceeding the overall percentage (54.5%). For health, the *Non-Engaged* had a higher likelihood of belonging to the group with less-than-good health (74.5%) compared to the overall percentage (61.7%) as well as *Informal Caregivers* (68.6%). Conversely, the *Association-Engaged* (46.0%), Volunteer (48.5%), and *Politically Engaged* (50.6%) profiles were relatively more likely to not have less than good health. The *Diversely Engaged* profile stood out with the highest likelihood of having good health, at a self-reported 60.0 per cent.

In terms of social capital resources and employment, the *Non-Engaged* had the lowest employment rate, at 2.7 per cent, followed by the *Informal Caregivers* with 2.9 per cent. The *Politically Engaged* profile (7.3%) and the *Diversely Engaged* profile (10.2%) had relatively higher employment rates compared to the overall likelihood of 5.4 per cent. *Informal Caregivers* were most likely to belong to the 'other' category, at 7.6 per cent (overall: 5.0%). The 'other' category included individuals who are not retired but are also not employed due to various reasons such as being a homemaker or being unable to work. The remaining profiles had a lower likelihood of belonging to this 'other' employment group: *Non-Engaged* (5.6%),

Association-Engaged (3.1%), *Volunteers* (3.3%), *Politically Engaged* (3.3%), and *Diversely Engaged* (3.0%). Additionally, compared to the overall percentage of 50.0 per cent the *Non-Engaged* (61.6%) and the *Association-Engaged* (52.1%) were more likely not to have a partner in the household. On the other hand, the other three profiles were more likely to have a partner in the same household: *Informal Caregivers* (57.5%), *Volunteers* (51.8%), *Politically Engaged* (56.9%) and *Diversely Engaged* (61.8%).

4. Discussion

To gain insight into whether older people engage in multiple civic activities simultaneously, this paper studied profiles of their civic engagement to determine which civic activities are combined and identified the socio-structural and social capital characteristics of older people who belong to these created profiles.

Six distinct profiles were identified among the older European sample. The biggest engaged profile, the Informal Caregivers, participated mostly in only one activity, namely, informal caregiving. The *Association-Engaged* had a high likelihood of associational engagement but still showed more than a 50 per cent likelihood of participating in informal caregiving too. Both these profiles had a low likelihood of participating in any other type of civic engagement. Although the share of informal caregiving was high in this study, research suggests that helping behaviour might be underestimated since some people do not recognise or acknowledge their role as informal caregivers (Verbakel, 2018). Furthermore, due to the data at hand, informal caregiving was studied in this research, thus overlooking other forms of informal helping behaviours such as giving financial or emotional support, and other prosocial behaviours (e.g. Dury et al., 2023; Pego & Nunes, 2018; Serrat et al., 2021a). Future gerontological research on informal helping behaviours should acknowledge other types of contributions made by older people themselves, an issue that is still relatively unexplored.

The Volunteer, *Politically Engaged* and *Diversely Engaged* profiles evidenced involvement in multiple civic activities simultaneously, but in accordance with their profile name each with a focus on different aspects of civic engagement. The people in these three more diversely engaged profiles all still showed a relatively high likelihood of engagement in informal caregiving, reiterating the importance of this dimension when studying the civic engagement of older people. The profile that stood out the most in terms of simultaneous engagement was

the Diversely Engaged. With 9.6 per cent of the sample belonging in this 'super-engaged' profile, a considerable number of older Europeans are civically engaged in several activities simultaneously.

The more diversely engaged profiles support the extension theory (Strauss, 2021), which may be explained by the fact that older people involved in volunteering and political engagement are more likely to be involved in other civic activities as well – or as Musick and Wilson (2008, p.460) put it, 'participation breeds participation'. Moreover, older people who actively participate in these civic activities appear likely to develop social networks that might encourage their engagement in additional civic activities (Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995).

Nevertheless, informal caregiving and associational engagement do not necessarily result in engagement in other civic activities, as evidenced by the *Informal Caregivers* and the *Association-Engaged* profiles. The results from the *Informal Caregivers* profile, specifically, are consistent with the role overload theory as these older people are mainly engaged in one activity. It is plausible that the intensity of caregiving is high, which may prevent informal caregivers from engaging in other forms of civic activities (e.g. Bertogg & Strauss, 2020; Strauss, 2021). This is in line with Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Brosens et al. (2015), who found informal caregiving to have a negative relationship with endeavours like formal volunteering and associational activities. As informal caregiving is often done out of a feeling of responsibility or are demand-based, they can cause caregiving burdens because of stressors and perceptual factors (Hermansen, 2016; Lai, 2010). Nevertheless, it is intriguing that the Associational-Engaged profile did not show involvement in activities beyond associational engagement or informal caregiving, contrary to Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Brosens and colleagues (2015) conclusions, who suggested a correlation between associational engagement and volunteering, albeit in a study focussed on Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. Additional research is warranted to explore this discrepancy. Considering this variety in simultaneous engagement of older people, formal political engagement (7.2%) and digital engagement (4.0%) stood out as the least practised activities. The low percentage of political engagement may be attributed to the measurement used, which did not include voting, a common form of civic engagement for older people (Melo & Stockemer, 2014). Serrat et al. (2017) identified obstacles to retaining older people in political organisations, including lower means to participate (health, age, time availability), motive-related hindrances (losing interest in the organisation's mission, shifting priorities, fulfilling initial goals), organisational problems

(change in philosophy), and the perception of non-necessity of their contribution. This might explain the low percentage of formal political engagement in this study.

Regarding digital engagement, older people appeared less active compared to younger age groups (65-69: 7.8%; 90+: 1.3%). The data for this study was collected in 2016 though, and more recent data could yield different results due to increasing digital use among older individuals. Additionally, the study's measurement of digital engagement was limited to one item, whereas recent studies assess multiple forms of digital engagement, such as forwarding tweets/emails and participation in online political discussions (Rudnik et al., 2020).

Out of all the profiles, the *Non-Engaged* had fewer resources compared to the other profiles such as lower education, lower perceived economic situation, poorer health, and older age. This strengthens the notion that having fewer socio-structural and social capital resources can be an obstacle to being civically engaged. However, after the *Non-Engaged* profile, the *Informal Caregivers* showed to have the least resources. This aligns with other research suggesting that informal caregiving is less dependent on income and socio-economic status, as it is often in response to specific requests for assistance (Hermansen, 2016). On the other hand, the *Volunteers*, *Politically Engaged* and *Diversely Engaged* profiles evidenced higher levels of socio-structural resources. The *Politically Engaged* and *Diversely Engaged* showed higher educational level and younger age, in line with studies linking education to political engagement, volunteering, and informal caregiving (e.g. Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Buffel et al., 2015; Hämäläinen et al., 2023; Nie & Hillygus, 1996; Verba et al., 1995). The causal mechanisms between educational level and political engagement and volunteering have been extensively studied, including the meaning of higher status, political socialisation, and skills acquisition (Musick and Wilson, 2008; Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). The *Diversely Engaged* reported even better health, income, and educational levels than the Politically Engaged, which could explain their higher likelihood of being digitally engaged, as research suggests that the resources of older individuals are crucial factors in predicting their digital engagement (Kebede et al., 2022)

Older people in the *Politically Engaged* and *Diversely Engaged* profiles were also more likely to be employed, which is consistent with findings suggesting a positive correlation between employment and political engagement in older people (Boerio et al., 2021). An important note to the current study is that the measurement of formal political engagement included trade union

activities, which are typically more prevalent among employed individuals. By contrast, the study found that volunteering and working may have a substitution effect, with volunteering requiring more time investment than certain forms of political engagement (Bertogg & Strauss, 2020).

4.1. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. Parallel to previous research, the choice was made to examine engagement versus non-engagement instead of time invested, which prevents us from making conclusions about the intensity of respondents' civic engagement (e.g. Dury, De Donder, De Witte, Brosens et al., 2015; Serrat et al., 2023). This decision was made as not all items were documented with a measurement of intensity (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2023). Another limitation is that there might be a potential overlap between the six indicators of multidimensional civic engagement. The overlap was allowed to accentuate the multidimensionality of older people's activities (Leedahl et al., 2017). An example of overlap is the distinction between digital and informal political engagement. Digital engagement might also be considered a part of informal political engagement, although in this study the indicators were considered separately.

Regarding the generalisability of the current paper, it is important to consider the measurement of the indicators of civic engagement described in the methodological section, as levels of engagement might be affected by the way they are measured. For instance, informal caregiving includes various forms of care, including the provision of care to disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends, as well as the care of grandchildren. While separating these forms of informal caregiving might produce different profiles, we chose to combine them as they all respond to a request for caregiving. The authors also were not able to separate caregiving within and outside the household, making it redundant to separate the types of caregiving in general (Di Gessa & Grundy, 2017; Schmidt et al., 2016; Serrat et al., 2021a). This distinction of informal caregiving is important, as caregiving within the household is often less voluntary (Choi et al., 2007) and less frequently combined with other civic activities (Strauss, 2021) compared to caregiving outside the household.

In addition, a study by Abraham et al. (2009), found that surveys on topics such as volunteering tend to overestimate other prosocial activities due to a strong link between the reasons for volunteering and the reasons for taking part in the survey, which can lead to response bias. It is

also worth reiterating that the data presented in this study were published in 2016, and that the level of civic engagement among older people may have changed since then. The selection of this dataset over similar databases was based on the inclusion of multidimensional civic engagement variables.

The use of LCA analysis appears to be advantageous in identifying different profiles of civic engagement of an older population. However, forthcoming research could broaden its scope by incorporating additional resource covariates like available time and energy to identify supplementary resources and their influence on multidimensional civic engagement. Not only including micro-level, but also meso-level (living environment) and macro-level (socio-political context) resources may add valuable insights (Serrat et al., 2020). Given the significant variations observed across European countries in this study, alongside the well-documented diversity in political cultures within Europe (e.g. Hank & Erlinghagen, 2009), future investigations could examine the nuanced differences across Europe to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

5. Conclusion

Papers such as the present study play a vital role in broadcasting the contributions of older European individuals in civic engagement, revealing diverse profiles and identifying associated resources diversifying civic engagement. The main finding of this study emphasised how varied civic engagement is among this sample of older people. The study specifically showed that a subset of older people evidences high levels of civic engagement by taking part in a variety of activities simultaneously. It is noteworthy that a sizeable section of the sample participated in a smaller number of civic activities simultaneously. Remarkably, even among those engaged in fewer civic activities, there is substantiated engagement in informal caregiving. This study suggests the possibility that some older people may experience role overload, where their commitment to intense helpful behaviours may cause them to scale back on other civic activities. The discovery of these unique profiles highlighted the complex interactions between diverse civic engagement strategies and deepens our knowledge of older people's civic engagement. These results suggest targeted interventions to foster civic engagement among older adults, taking into account the circumstances and preferences of the diverse older population.

The profiles evidenced that less-explored aspects in the civic engagement literature such as informal caregiving constitute a significant part of older people's societal engagement, indicating that both researchers and policymakers need to value and include informal caregiving when studying or promoting civic engagement among older people. Digital engagement also necessitates further attention as future research and practice should consider barriers to older people's digital engagement, by developing interventions tailored to the older population towards ensuring opportunities to engage digitally – given that digitalisation is increasingly influencing civic engagement among older adults.

Additionally, this study contributed to the existing literature on identifying socio-structural and social capital resources linked to specific civic engagement profiles. Policymakers and political and other civic organisations should dedicate additional efforts to reach groups that are less touched by certain civic activities and are thus underrepresented in aspects like the political sphere. Especially older people with lower educational levels, poorer subjective health and lower perceived economic situation - while their efforts in associational engagement and informal caregiving should not be underestimated - need to be approached in alternative ways for other civic activities, as the current endeavours do not seem to favour their inclusion in activities beyond those they already perform.

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CHAPTER 4: WHAT CHARACTERISES CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN LATER LIFE? MICRO-, MESO- AND MACRO-LEVEL INFLUENCES

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CHAPTER 4: What characterises civic engagement in later life? Micro-, meso- and macro-level influences

Abstract

Civic engagement in later life is affected by an array of factors on the micro, meso and macro levels that constitute key issues in understanding why individuals are included or excluded from these activities. Another layer of complexity is added by the multidimensional nature of civic engagement, suggesting there can be similarities as well as variations in the factors influencing different types of engagement. In an attempt to unravel such complexity, this chapter provides an overview of existing knowledge on characteristics influencing civic engagement among older adults, portrayed through the idea of ecological models. To understand micro-level influences on civic engagement in later life, here foremostly understood as individual characteristics and resources, different commonly adopted theoretical perspectives from the civic engagement literature are used as frames of reference. Since civic engagement is affected by the context in which it occurs, influences outside of the individual sphere are presented through the meso and macro levels. The meso level presented in this chapter includes environmental characteristics related to neighbourhood and communities, including relational and organisational factors of the social environment and the age-friendliness of the physical environment. The macro level includes broader societal patterns and structures such as culture and the welfare state. The chapter is tied together through a discussion on the intricate interplay of all three levels and by providing considerations for future research. To conclude, the utilisation of an ecological approach to the study of civic engagement in later life can expand the existing knowledge base and provide valuable insights for policy and practice.

1. Introduction

Given the demographic phenomenon of an ageing population and its far-reaching implications for societal structures, this chapter delves into the nuanced and multidimensional character of civic engagement among older adults, exploring fostering or hindering aspects such as the intricate associations between individual characteristics and resources (micro), environmental (neighbourhood and community) characteristics (meso), and more overarching structural and cultural characteristics (macro). There remains a significant gap in conceptualising the complex interplays and connections among various levels of influence. The chapter aims to fill this gap by systematically examining the micro-, meso- and macro-level factors that shape late-life civic engagement and by elucidating their complex dynamics.

Enhancing our understanding of multidimensional civic engagement requires a comprehensive examination across levels – specifically micro, meso and macro – utilising what is commonly referred to as ecological models. A rich array of ecological models is available in the realm of research (Sallis et al., 2008; Serrat et al., 2021), offering valuable insights and contributing significantly to our understanding of human behaviour within various contexts, including civic engagement. Sallis et al.'s (2008) review illuminates the diversity of interpretations surrounding ecological models and the different behaviours to which they can apply. Still, the main point of these models is to demonstrate that: "(1) different levels influence an individual and its behaviours; (2) influences interact across these levels; (3) ecological models should be behaviour-specific; (4) multi-level interventions are most effective in behaviour change" (p 466).

The different levels' conceptualisation and distance to the individual are inconsistent. While in one of the more known ecological models, Bronfenbrenner (2000) defines the micro level as the influences in an individual's immediate environment, some alternative perspectives consider it as encompassing an individual's characteristics (Hansen et al., 2021) or organisational and institutional influences (e.g., Serrat et al., 2021). The meso level, as defined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, involves connections between microsystems. By contrast, other models perceive it as a person's environment or neighbourhood and community influences (e.g., Serrat et al., 2021). Notably, the macro level consistently represents the broader cultural and structural contexts, which are frequently manifested in national-level policies and features. This discrepancy in the original terms coined by Bronfenbrenner and their current interpretations introduces significant variations. While acknowledging these

diverse perspectives, in this chapter we choose to align with recent research on the use of micro, meso and macro levels as utilised in the social exclusion and civic engagement literature (e.g., Greenfield et al., 2019; Serrat et al., 2021). Hence, the micro level is construed as the characteristics and individual resources of older individuals, the meso level encompasses neighbourhood and community features, and the macro level incorporates influences from societal structures and culture at large. This approach provides a coherent framework for examining and understanding older persons' multidimensional civic engagement.

Various theoretical perspectives can be employed to understand civic engagement in later life. General sociological theories like socio-structural resources theory (e.g., Wilson, 2012; Dury et al., 2025), social capital theory (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Nyqvist et al., 2025), role theory (Merton, 1957; Torres & Serrat, 2025) and life-course theory (Giele & Elder, 1998; Torres & Serrat, 2025) provide valuable insights into the dynamics of civic engagement among older individuals. Additionally, gerontological theories such as disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), activity theory (Havighurst, 1961), continuity theory (Atchley, 1989), productive ageing (e.g., Foster & Walker, 2015), successful ageing (Rowe & Kahn, 1997) and the Active Ageing framework (World Health Organization, 2002) offer further perspectives on civic engagement among older adults (e.g., Dury et al., 2025; Nyqvist et al., 2025). Moreover, specific theories focused on volunteering and civic engagement, such as the integrated theory of volunteering by Wilson and Musick (1997), the hybrid theory by Einolf and Chambré (2011), and the civic voluntarism model of Verba et al. (1995; Schlozman et al., 2018), are highly useful towards comprehensively understanding older adults' engagement in civic activities (e.g., Dury et al., 2025; Serrat & Tesch-Römer, 2025). While some of these theories are commonly

applied at the individual level (e.g., socio-structural theory), others have broader implications across various levels, as exemplified by social capital theory (Nyqvist et al., 2025) and life-course theory (Dikmans et al., 2025; Torres & Serrat, 2025). Later, we delve deeper into some of the theories that have proven especially useful in the literature with their insights into the influence of individual resources on civic engagement.

2. The role of micro-level features

When considering the personal resources of an individual, two commonly employed theories to elucidate why some older individuals engage in civic pursuits while others do not are socio-structural resources theory and social capital theory (e.g., Dury et al., 2015; Dury et al., 2025; Serrat & Tesch-Römer, 2025). This section will also cover the connection between older

people's civic engagement and their social roles (e.g., Strauss, 2021) and their motivations and values (e.g., Einolf & Chambré, 2011).

Socio-structural resources theory concentrates on personal resources such as health, educational attainment and income that enable civic engagement, providing the means for individuals to participate in activities like formal volunteering (Wilson, 2012). These types of resources are demonstrated to significantly influence the engagement of older people in civic endeavours (Dury et al., 2015; Serrat et al., 2022). Concerning physical health, overall research on civic engagement suggests that good health is often associated with a higher likelihood of participating in civic activities (Stopka et al., 2022). This corresponds with the observation that age-related health issues can act as a barrier for older individuals to engage in civic activities (Serrat et al., 2017). These issues partly explain the findings from a myriad of studies indicating that age often presents a significant barrier to civic engagement among older individuals, resulting in lower levels of engagement compared to their younger counterparts (e.g., Dury et al., 2015). As for mental health, the findings suggest that older adults with poor mental health are less likely to be civically engaged (e.g., Dury et al., 2015; Serrat et al., 2020). Studies on educational attainment indicate a positive link to civic activities; particularly formal volunteering and political participation, as well as informal helping behaviours are strongly linked to higher educational levels (e.g., Ackermann, 2019). Income research tends to suggest that higher income is positively associated with civic engagement (Serrat et al., 2022). So, older people with higher socioeconomic status, influenced by educational level and income, are more likely to participate in civic engagement. They also pass these advantages to future generations (Schlozman et al., 2018). However, not all dimensions of civic engagement are as dependent on these resources. Studies suggest that informal helping behaviour is less dependent on socioeconomic status and other socio-demographic features because it responds to concrete requests or demands for help (Hermansen, 2016; Näsman et al., 2025).

In addition to socio-structural resources, personal characteristics, like migration background and gender, are relevant and should be considered when studying older people's civic engagement. Demographic transitions contributing to more ethno-culturally diverse societies denote the need of research focusing on civic engagement in later life among those with migrational background, which has so far been scarce (Torres & Serrat, 2019; Serrat et al., 2020). For example, recent research by Serrat et al. (2023) highlights differences in civic engagement between older immigrants and natives, emphasising the importance of studying how migrational background affects engagement.

Research on gender differences in civic engagement reveals a complex and nuanced picture. Gender expectations influence civic engagement, with women often seen as more selfless and therefore more likely to volunteer (Nesteruk & Price, 2011). Some studies, like Principi et al. (2011), support this by showing that women volunteer more than men, while others, such as Avital (2017), suggest men are more active in volunteering and associational engagement. However, the difficulty in separating gender from other factors such as employment status, income levels and social roles complicates the analysis. Thus, generalisations about the relationship between gender and older adults' civic engagement should be approached with caution (Principi et al., 2011; Avital, 2017). Additionally, applying an intersectional perspective where aspects such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability and sexual orientation in addition to gender, are considered would be crucial for the advancement of knowledge when it comes to micro-level influences on civic engagement in later life (Serrat et al., 2020).

Characteristics such as personal motivation and values are also connected to civic engagement (Einolf & Chambré, 2011). Serrat and Villar (2016) identified growth-oriented motivations that seek to foster personal development and improvement through civic engagement in, for instance, political organisations. Additionally, self-protective motivations for civic engagement, arising from the need to cope with difficult life transitions or negative events, often serve as a means of resilience, helping older people navigate adversity and maintain psychological well-being. These intrinsic desires fuel individuals' engagement in activities that bring fulfilment and meaning to their lives, transcending mere self-interest to encompass broader personal fulfilment and well-being (Martins et al., 2021). Moreover, civic engagement is often driven by altruistic motives, as highlighted by the desire to contribute to the community and help others (Serrat & Villar, 2016). Individuals find fulfilment in actively participating in initiatives that benefit society at large. For some, the motivation lies in addressing communal needs and fostering a sense of belonging and unity within their community.

In the case of social capital theory, the emphasis lies on social connections that facilitate civic engagement (Principi et al., 2012; Putnam, 2000; Nyqvist et al., 2025). In the civic engagement literature, variables such as employment status and partner status have been used as indicators of social capital (e.g., Serrat et al., 2022; Torres & Serrat, 2025). Studies on the link between older individuals' employment status and their civic engagement provide mixed evidence (Serrat et al., 2022): results range from finding a positive association between being employed and engaging in civic activities such as formal volunteering (Eurofound, 2017) and political

participation (Boerio et al., 2021) to one between formal volunteering and retirement or associational memberships and retirement (Van Den Bogaard et al., 2014).

According to social roles theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), individuals' engagement in civic activities can be influenced by their social roles, such as partner status. Research indicates that unpartnered older individuals, like those widowed or single, tend to volunteer more frequently than those with partners (Dury et al., 2015). Additionally, cohabiting partners may exhibit less inclination for informal caregiving than single older adults. However, the presence of a dependent partner in the household positively influences caregiving behaviours (Boerio et al., 2021). This highlights how social roles within relationships can impact older adults' engagement in civic activities and caregiving responsibilities.

The role extension and role overload theories offer additional insights into how various resources relate to older adults' engagement in different civic activities (e.g., Torres & Serrat, 2025). The role extension hypothesis proposes that older individuals participating in one activity are likely to be engaged in additional activities, as it connects them with people and organisations that offer more engagement opportunities (Strauss, 2021). By contrast, the role overload hypothesis argues that limited resources or time hinder civic engagement (Choi et al., 2007; Strauss, 2021). Civic activities like informal helping require time and energy investments, limiting resources for other activities (Dury et al., 2015; Celdrán & Chacur-Kiss, 2025). However, given that older adults' engagement in civic activities is not solely determined by individual characteristics and resources, delving into contextual factors surrounding their engagement becomes essential, leading us to consider the influence of the meso level.

3. The role of meso-level features

This part of the chapter emphasises the conceptual frameworks of environmental gerontology and community gerontology. Whereas environmental gerontology has been dedicated to examining, elucidating and enhancing the interaction between older adults and their socio-physical environments such as housing and transportation (e.g., Wahl & Weisman, 2003), community gerontology focuses more broadly on the role of communities and societal structures in shaping the experiences of ageing individuals (Greenfield et al., 2019). While both subfields of gerontology focus on the environment, they do so within different scopes. The meso level has been described in community gerontology as "all that which exists between very immediate, or microlevel, and more distal, or macrolevel, settings in which individuals engage" (Greenfield et al., 2019, p 2), which can be further divided into the physical and the social environment. These interactions can be realised within physical communities as well as virtual communities formed through digital platforms and social media.

3.1. Social and physical environments

The physical as well as the social environments play an important role in shaping individuals' decisions to engage in various civic activities (Cheung & Mui, 2023). Although sometimes studied separately, according to the environmental gerontology framework, the physical and social environments are inseparable (Hoh et al., 2021). The physical environment encompasses the built and natural environments, while the social environment encompasses interpersonal relationships, social networks and community dynamics. (Greenfield et al., 2019). Regarding the physical environment, the literature points out the importance of accessibility, safety and infrastructure to enable the civic engagement of older people (Buffel et al., 2014). The availability of transportation options, well-maintained sidewalks, public facilities and community venues all play a crucial role in determining whether older adults can easily engage in civic activities. If the neighbourhood is perceived as non-accessible, unsafe or having subpar infrastructure, older people might be deterred from engaging in civic activities there. Lack of public toilets, amenities and services, and places to rest, plus disruptive traffic situations, are also linked to lower civic engagement (e.g., Lu et al., 2021). Safety factors such as crime can put negative environmental pressure on older people – they may feel unsafe going out and consequently not engage in civic activities (De Donder et al., 2012). While these physical

attributes of the environment can be observed objectively, the social environment presents more of a challenge.

The social environment reflects the relationships, support networks and social norms that older individuals encounter within their communities. Social networks, family relationships, organisational structures and peer support systems can either motivate or discourage older people from engaging in various forms of civic activities (Cheung & Mui, 2023). Societal norms and expectations can set the tone for what is deemed acceptable or encouraged within a community. Previous research has mainly concentrated on formal volunteering (Dury et al., 2015, 2016), leaving some dimensions of multidimensional civic engagement underexplored in terms of their association with the meso level. In their review, Lu et al., (2021) identified older people's social network, sense of community, age-friendly environments in the community and residential stability as enablers for volunteering. Feeling attached to the neighbourhood and having a sense of civic responsibility mediated this relationship. Trust among neighbours can create a belief that community matters will be taken care of by others, potentially reducing personal civic engagement. However, a strong emotional connection to the neighbourhood, as highlighted by Dang et al. (2022), boosts civic responsibility and increases willingness to participate in civic activities. This aligns with findings by Forsyth et al. (2015), showing that individuals who identify with their neighbourhood are more likely to engage in voluntary actions for the community.

However, the meso level also encompasses more systemic relations and structures. For instance, organisational structures, resembling small communities in themselves, can constitute an important barrier or enabler for older people's civic engagement. Martins et al. (2021) identified interpersonal relationships within an organisation and recognition from others as an enabler for older people's civic engagement. Interpersonal relationships are also noticed by Serrat et al. (2018): their respondents stated that they followed the recommendations of others to participate in political organisations, confirming the mobilising effects of social networks on political participation (Verba et al., 1995). Another enabler for older people's engagement is the bonds built with the organisation, through assuming responsibilities within an organisation or through developing a sense of belonging (Martins et al., 2021). In line with this, Serrat et al. (2016) observed identification with a political organisation as an enabler, linking this to politicised collective identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Generativity, or the willingness to contribute to society to help future generations, is also considered an enabler for older people's civic engagement at the meso level (Martins et al., 2021).

Older people may decide to step away from political organisations to promote a generational shift, thereby allowing for the creation of new organisational voices and perspectives (Serrat et al., 2018). This renewal rationale might, however, suggest internalised ageism, according to Martins et al. (2021), making older people feel like their contributions are no longer needed and prompting them to leave organisations. Additionally, older people may encounter barriers to civic engagement if they perceive that the organisation they belong to no longer reflects their convictions (Martins et al., 2021).

Dury et al. (2016) underscore the significance of considering the broader context of neighbourhoods and communities to gain a comprehensive understanding of civic exclusion in later life. This perspective highlights the pivotal role of environmental and community gerontology, not just as a theoretical concept but as a practical approach. Consequently, age-friendly initiatives embracing the principles have emerged worldwide (World Health Organization, 2007). Communities are designing public spaces, transportation systems and housing with the needs of older individuals in mind. These initiatives aim to create environments that promote civic engagement, social inclusion and a high quality of life for older people. Through the lens of environmental and community gerontology, civic engagement becomes intrinsically linked to the surroundings in which older adults live. The field offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the nuanced interactions between the physical and social environments and their interdependence, demonstrating their vital role in shaping older people's civic engagement (Schwarz, 2013).

Most research on the link between the meso level and the civic engagement of older people, while still limited, focuses on urban environments (e.g., Dikmans et al., 2025). The challenges of the rural environment do remain understudied in a European context (Serrat et al., 2022), even though rural environments pose their own unique obstacles (Warburton & Winterton, 2017; Winterton et al., 2025). Rural areas tend to offer fewer and less accessible services, amenities and neighbours conducive to such civic engagement. This underscores the pressing need for further research to investigate how diverse urban and rural contexts influence the opportunities for engagement in various types of civic activities in later life.

4. The role of macro-level features

As opposed to micro- and meso-level analysis, macro-level analysis directs its attention towards the broader structural and cultural systems at play. This section discusses in more detail the societal influences on civic engagement in later life, exploring potential hypotheses and arguments. We start with a brief overview of cross-country differences in civic engagement, with a particular emphasis on European countries.

Volunteering patterns among individuals aged 50 and older in Western Europe show distinct regional differences, with Northern European countries exhibiting higher participation rates than Southern European countries (Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006). Lower participation rates in Eastern Europe have also been subsequently reported (Hank & Erlinghagen, 2010a, 2010b; Morawski et al., 2020; Lee, 2024). Morawski et al. (2020) establish a clear linear association between a country's economic wealth (gross domestic product (GDP) per capita purchasing power parity (PPP)) and volunteering rates, supporting the hypothesis of a higher prevalence of volunteering in more developed countries. The geographical variations in volunteering appear consistent over time, as evidenced by research spanning different time periods (e.g., Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Haski-Leventhal., 2009; Hank & Erlinghagen, 2010b; Morawski et al., 2020).

Political participation has been less studied in older adults (Serrat et al., 2022), especially from a cross-country perspective. Limited research in this area reveals that the participation patterns of older individuals, in both institutionalised (e.g., voting) and non-institutionalised political activities (e.g., protesting), are significantly shaped by their country's specific socio-political context (Goerres, 2009; Nygård & Jakobsson, 2013; Melo & Stockemer, 2014; Serrat et al., 2017). A recent study suggests that older adults in Northern and Western European countries are more active in non-institutionalised activities compared to those in Southern and Eastern European countries (Nyqvist et al., 2024). However, institutionalised activities follow a different pattern, with a more even distribution across Europe.

An important aspect of informal helping behaviour is informal caregiving. Information from three large European data sets shows that informal care increases with age and varies between 13 per cent (in Portugal) and 29 per cent (in Denmark) (Tur-Sinai et al., 2020). Worth noting is that even in high-income countries with similar markers of gender equality, informal carers are more likely to be women. For instance, the share of unpaid, informal female carers aged 50 or

older ranged from 53 per cent in Austria to 76 per cent in Spain (OECD, 2021). Although some explanations for several observed cross-country differences in civic engagement have already briefly been touched upon, in the next section we explore additional explanations in more detail.

4.1. Macro-level explanations for cross-country differences in civic engagement in later life

As a starting point, two distinct hypotheses offer valuable insights into the factors behind variations in civic engagement between countries. The first hypothesis, known as the 'crowding-in' theory, posits that countries with robust welfare systems and significant social expenditures foster higher levels of civic engagement (e.g., Van Oorschot & Arts, 2005). This might be achieved through various interventions, such as incentive programmes designed to encourage volunteering, investments in education aimed at preparing older individuals for active roles in ageing societies, or the development of infrastructure that provides opportunities for civic engagement (e.g., Hank, 2011; Walker & Zaidi, 2018). Conversely, the 'crowding-out' hypothesis presents a different perspective, suggesting that extensive welfare state involvement may hinder civic engagement by eroding interpersonal helping behaviour and reciprocity. Of these two hypotheses, the crowding-in theory has generated greater empirical support (Hank, 2011; Baer et al., 2016; Avital, 2017), although there is also evidence suggesting a crowding-out effect (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011). Verbakel (2018) supports both crowding hypotheses, indicating that a generous welfare system can stimulate individuals to engage in caregiving roles (crowding-in) while simultaneously reducing the need for intensive caregiving (crowding-out); this shifts responsibility for demanding care to the state in societies with more generous welfare support.

To provide a theoretical framework and context for civic engagement across societies, a model of welfare regime types, with Esping-Andersen's (1990) as starting point, has been proven useful in empirical research (e.g., Brandt et al., 2009). The Esping-Andersen model (1990) argues that countries can be clustered based on certain commonalities in terms of their welfare-institutional configurations and outcomes (e.g., Arts & Gelissen, 2002). While Esping-Andersen (1990) initially operated with three European regimes – Social-Democratic, Conservative and Liberal – later work added Eastern European and Southern European regimes (Hemerijck, 2013). Research based on welfare regime typologies confirms significant

differences in civic engagement of older adults (e.g., Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Henriksen et al., 2019).

For example, volunteering may be seen as an important form of social service in more liberal-oriented regimes to fill gaps in the welfare system, whereas in more generous welfare regimes, such as the Social-Democratic, the purpose of volunteering can complement state-provided services and may also be seen as a means to strengthen social cohesion and social capital in society. Gender differences in volunteering, often shaped by factors like age, employment status and income, are also influenced by government spending on culture and recreation, which creates more opportunities for women to engage in activities where they are traditionally underrepresented (Avital, 2017).

Further, cultural norms and values within a society, including religion, can shape individuals' willingness to engage in civic activities. Some cultures may place a higher emphasis on community involvement and participation than others (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Ruiter & De Graaf, 2006; Morrow- Howell & Wang, 2013). For example, cultural orientations towards familialism can have a significant impact on the provision of and reliance on informal help, which refers to assistance and support that individuals receive from family members, friends and social networks rather than formal institutions or services (Mair et al., 2016; Strauss, 2021). In highly familialistic countries there is a strong emphasis on close-knit family networks to provide care for family members (Strauss, 2021). Levels of familialism and individualism vary within Europe, and many Southern and some Central and Eastern European countries are often associated with higher levels of familialism. By contrast, Northern European countries are typically characterised by more individualistic cultural traits (e.g., Dykstra, 2018). Collectivism, another crucial cultural dimension, also seems to play a role (Pancer, 2015). Collectivist cultures prioritise the group over the individual, fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility (Hofstede, 2001). The concept of individualism versus collectivism has been a focal point in cross-cultural research over the past decades.

Barrett and Brunton-Smith (2014) discuss how various macro-level features are interconnected in different ways as they collectively shape overall civic engagement in a society. First, they provide a summary of different macro-level features that might be relevant in explaining civic engagement. They distinguish the design of the electoral system (e.g., compulsory vs optional voting), the structure of the political institutions (e.g., decentralised vs centralised political design), the country's population characteristics (e.g., stability), and its historical, economic

and cultural characteristics (e.g., economically developed vs less well-developed). Second, in their integrative model of civic engagement, the first two sets of macro-level features – electoral system and political institutions – mutually influence the latter two, such as population and cultural characteristics. Further, they emphasise various macro-level features that might specifically influence engagement among minority and migrant groups. These factors include granting or denying voting rights and rules for obtaining citizenship.

Based on the information provided, it is evident that the promotion of older adults' civic engagement is influenced by a combination of cultural and structural characteristics. Whereas the latter encompasses a nation's political system, economic development and type of welfare system, cultural characteristics such as individualism and religiosity also play a significant role in shaping civic engagement (Grönlund, 2013; Pancer, 2015; Schröder & Neumayr, 2023). These elements collectively contribute to creating an environment that either encourages or hinders active engagement in society, thus making it difficult to disentangle their effects. However, it is worth noting that the utilisation of nations or welfare regimes as units of analysis has drawn criticism mainly due to their lack of homogeneity: cultural and structural diversity may be substantial within a nation or welfare regime type, challenging the perception of it as a singular entity (Hemerijck, 2013; Pancer, 2015). Lastly, though ageist attitudes and structures within a society have also been put forward as potential barriers to civic engagement in later life (Hank, 2011), they remain so far relatively unexplored from a macro- level perspective, highlighting the need for further research.

5. Interplay between the levels

The micro, meso and macro levels are connected (Bronfenbrenner, 2000; Serrat et al., 2018; Greenfield et al., 2019). The meso level influences and is influenced by the macro and micro levels. This means that the immediate community contexts impact individuals and are in turn shaped by broader societal conditions. Conversely, individual actions and behaviours at the micro level can also influence and shape the meso- and macro-level contexts. It is crucial here to understand the multidirectional nature of the features of the different ecological models. For instance, an older person's educational background (micro) may influence their ability to navigate community organisations and local initiatives (meso). To illustrate this interplay, let us consider an example: an older person with a strong sense of engagement (micro)

enthusiastically participates in a neighbourhood-focused volunteering programme (meso). However, this person's engagement is made possible by a larger social framework (macro) that supports and finances neighbourhood-based projects. Moreover, the older person is in good health (micro) and the neighbourhood's well-organised public transport system (meso) enables easy access to the volunteering programme.

While there have been some efforts in connecting the micro and meso levels (e.g., Dury et al., 2016; Cheung & Mui, 2023) and the micro and macro levels (e.g., Näsman et al., 2025) in relation to civic engagement in later life, research including all three levels remains extremely rare (Seifert & König, 2019). Therefore, more research is needed to comprehensively understand the dynamics of this association. Large-scale European survey data, including sources like Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), European Values Study (EVS) and European Social Survey (ESS) pose challenges in this respect. One primary limitation is the absence of data on multidimensional civic engagement. As stated before, although these surveys may capture information on volunteering and associational engagement, critical dimensions such as digital engagement and political participation are often scarce or omitted. Additionally, meso-level features like neighbourhood or community characteristics in these surveys are either limited or entirely absent. This deficiency hinders the inclusion of meso-level variables crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing civic engagement. Addressing these limitations is vital to advancing our understanding of civic engagement across ecological levels and dimensions. The limited research on the connection between meso-level features and older people's civic engagement mainly focuses on situations within single countries. This lack of comparable national features makes it difficult to incorporate macro-level features when examining the association between meso- and micro-level features.

An often-overlooked aspect of ecological models in research pertains to the diverse systems of time cutting across all three ecological levels (Serrat et al., 2021), also known as the chronosystem in the ecological model as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (2000). Time is organised and interpreted differently across the levels, which implies that these should be considered as dynamic in nature. At the micro level time is often understood as individual experiences and interactions and includes routines that directly affect individuals on a personal level. An example at the meso level is how neighbourhood gentrification over time influences individuals' experiences of ageing, whereas at the macro level time is understood in terms of

broader societal trends and historical processes such as changing societal attitudes towards ageing.

6. Conclusions

Our chapter provides valuable insights into the dynamics of multidimensional civic engagement by examining the micro, meso and macro levels. We explored how individual, environmental and societal factors influence civic engagement in later life, considering personal resources, physical, social and virtual resources in the neighbourhood and community, as well as broader societal and cultural influences.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this chapter is that civic engagement in later life is not solely dependent on individual characteristics and resources such as personal motivation and health but also highly influenced by environmental and societal factors. These include the neighbourhood's physical infrastructure, supportive networks, and the cultural and policy frameworks that either encourage or limit engagement.

Despite some advancements, knowledge gaps remain in understanding civic engagement across all three levels. Micro-level resources, such as personal factors, have been more extensively studied, while broader environmental and societal influences are less explored. Studies that integrate all three levels remain limited, making it difficult to capture the full complexity of civic engagement in later life. Additionally, as suggested by Greenfield et al. (2019), there should be a greater emphasis on research at the meso level, as it might serve as a unifying construct between individual resources and society at large. Notably, the neighbourhood or community context is among the least studied aspects in the civic engagement literature, particularly concerning older adults. Exploring these ecological levels and their interplay offers a comprehensive understanding of civic engagement dynamics, presenting opportunities for future research, tailored interventions and policy initiatives that promote the active civic engagement of older adults and contribute to the overall well-being of society.

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CHAPTER 5: THE ROLE OF THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT IN THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF OLDER ADULTS: A SCOPING REVIEW

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Chapter 5: The role of the living environment in the multidimensional civic engagement of older adults: A scoping review

Abstract

While research on civic engagement in later life has predominantly focused on personal characteristics, the broader environmental context, and more particularly the living environment, has received less attention. As older adults often engage within their local communities, the living environment can play a decisive enabling or constraining role. This scoping review investigates the role of the living environment in the civic engagement of older adults. Drawing on 63 peer-reviewed articles, the study employs descriptive methods and content analysis to map current research and identify key determinants of the living environment related to civic engagement. The findings reveal that both social and physical determinants of the living environment shape civic engagement. Enabling environments, characterised by strong social networks, accessible infrastructure, and inclusive community structures, can foster engagement, while barriers such as social isolation, poor accessibility, and fragmented communities may inhibit it. These determinants are deeply interconnected, underscoring the importance of viewing the living environment as a dynamic, socio-physical whole. Environmental determinants in the living environment are neither inherently enabling nor inherently constraining. Their influence depends entirely on the specific context and the dimension of civic engagement that is considered. Our scoping review reveals two major research gaps. First, most studies adopt a narrow view of civic engagement, often neglecting informal and digital forms. Second, the dynamic nature, like changing physical environments or social networks of the living environment, is rarely considered. Investing in social and physical infrastructure can foster a more inclusive civic engagement for older adults.

1. Introduction

While research on civic engagement in later life has predominantly focused on individual determinants such as motivation, health, and other personal characteristics (Vercauteren et al., 2025), it is equally important to consider the role of broader environmental contexts, particularly the living environment (Serrat et al., 2020; Hoh et al., 2021). As older adults often engage within their local communities, the living environment can either enable or impede their civic engagement (Serrat et al., 2020). This review addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining how various determinants of the living environment play a role in civic engagement in later life. In light of this background, this scoping review has been conducted for two purposes: first, to gain insight into the extant studies that are available on the role of the living environment in older adults' civic engagement, and second, to examine the determinants of the living environment related to older adults' civic engagement.

1.1. Civic engagement in later life

The definition of civic engagement in later life remains a subject of debate within current research. Civic engagement is defined as the participation of individuals in their community through actions such as volunteering or actively engaging in political processes. This concept may also encompass a combination of these activities (e.g., Martins et al., 2021; Serrat et al., 2022). Martinson and Minkler (2006, p. 319) define it from a broader perspective by including "a wide variety of activities, including voting, being involved in political campaigns, participating in paid and unpaid community work, staying up to date on news and public affairs, and helping one's neighbour." However, recent research emphasises the necessity of conceptualising civic engagement in later life as a multidimensional phenomenon (Serrat et al., 2021, 2022; Serrat, 2025). This paper adopts such an approach, encompassing various forms of civic engagement, including volunteering, informal helping behaviours, associational engagement, political engagement, and digital engagement.

According to the extant research, civic engagement generates a wide range of benefits for both individuals and society as a whole. Specifically for older adults, studies have highlighted several advantages, such as enhanced mental health fostered by a sense of purpose, increased life satisfaction, and feelings of usefulness (Gruenewald et al., 2016; Ghiglieri et al., 2021; Yen et al., 2022). Engagement in such activities has been shown to act as a buffer against, for instance, loneliness and depressive symptoms while also facilitating the development and

maintenance of social networks and support relationships (Suragarn et al., 2021; Yen et al., 2022). Consequently, research has demonstrated that older adults who are civically engaged often experience a higher quality of life and improved physical health (Owen et al., 2022).

Beyond the individual benefits, civic engagement contributes to the broader living environment. It plays a role in strengthening communities by fostering cohesion and mutual support (Morrow-Howell et al., 2019). Moreover, it fosters intergenerational relationships, thereby enhancing understanding and cooperation between different age groups (Hossen et al., 2023). The economic and social contributions of older adults through civic engagement are also beneficial, providing essential support and resources to their living environment (Gonzales et al., 2015).

1.2. Socio-ecological perspective on civic engagement in later life

from the perspective of environmental gerontology, civic engagement is seen as inherently intertwined with the environment in which older adults reside (Cheung & Mui, 2023). Socio-ecological models, which are employed in the field of environmental gerontology, posit that civic engagement among older adults does not occur in isolation but is related to both immediate surroundings and broader societal structures (Caperon et al., 2022). The socio-ecological approach comprises three main levels, with the addition of the dimension of time. The first is the micro level, where personal characteristics, such as socio-economic status, health, attitudes, knowledge, and motivation. Previous research has focused on the fundamental role of such personal characteristics in civic engagement in later life (Hansen et al., 2021).

Second, the meso level, which bridges the micro level of individual resources (Greenfield et al., 2019). The living environment, which is part of the meso level, plays a central role in shaping older adults' civic engagement. It encompasses the spectrum of social entities ranging from the household to the larger community areas, including metropolitan areas (Greenfield et al., 2019). Additionally, it can also refer to broader social networks involving individuals or organisations, such as geographically dispersed extended families or large online communities (Greenfield et al., 2019). Furthermore, the concept can be extended to encompass more systemic relations and structures. For instance, organisational settings may function as small-scale living environments (Martins et al., 2021). Broadly, the living environment encompasses both physical (e.g. green spaces, walkability) and social dimensions (e.g. social network, community cohesion). While often examined independently, environmental gerontology views

the physical and social environment as inherently interconnected (Hoh et al., 2021). Physical environments often serve as the backdrop for social interactions, emphasising the importance of a socio-physical environment (Wahl & Gitlin, 2019). Studying the meso level and the living environment holds considerable potential as a unifying construct that links individual-level resources with broader societal structures (Greenfield et al., 2019). Despite its significance, the meso level remains an often-overlooked dimension in research on older adults' civic engagement (Serrat et al., 2020). Emphasising this level allows for a more nuanced understanding of how physical and social environments interact to shape civic engagement in later life (Schwarz, 2013).

Thirdly, at the macro level, broader societal and policy influences shape the context in which civic engagement occurs (Greenfield et al., 2019; Serrat et al., 2021). For instance, national policies, resource allocation, and governance structures directly influence a community's ability to create opportunities for civic engagement and provide individuals with the resources needed to participate in civic engagement in later life (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Näsman et al., 2025).

The dimension of time, explored through the chronosystem, offers valuable insights into the way temporal changes influence older adults' civic engagement (Serrat et al., 2021). Examining this level reveals how earlier life experiences, key transitions, and evolving personal and societal contexts, like neighbourhood changes (Dikmans et al., 2025), influence civic engagement in later life. These determinants shape not only whether older adults engage, but also how they engage and the depth of their involvement (Quaranta, 2015; Serrat & Villar, 2020). The chrono level includes both the individual life course and the life course of place (Lekkas et al., 2017), as personal trajectories, living environments and civic engagement co-evolve over time (Oswald et al., 2024; Dikmans et al., 2025).

1.3. Research Goals

While all ecological levels are essential to understanding civic engagement in later life and should ultimately be examined in an integrated manner, this study focuses on the meso level, as it serves as a unifying construct between the micro and macro levels (Greenfield et al., 2019). At the meso level, research on the role of the living environment in older people's civic engagement remains fragmented (Serrat et al., 2020; Vercauteren et al., 2025). This scoping review aims to examine the existing literature on the role of the living environment in the civic engagement of older adults. Specifically, it examines how both the physical and social determinants of the living environment shape civic engagement. The review also aims to critically examine the determinants of the living environment in older people's civic engagement in current research. This culminates in a discussion of existing knowledge gaps for future research.

2. Methods

Scoping reviews are particularly useful for mapping broad research areas such as older adults' civic engagement, summarising their evidence, and identifying gaps in the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018). This review followed the five-phase framework recommended when conducting a scoping review (Levac et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2020). Additionally, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR) guidelines were applied to ensure transparency and methodological rigour. A research protocol was created and registered at OSF Registries (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CJYQW) (Vercauteren et al., 2023).

In step one, **the research questions were defined** (Munn et al., 2022). This scoping review explored two key research questions, as mentioned in the 'Research goals' section of this paper.

In the second step, **potential studies to include in the scoping review were identified**. A professional librarian (JP-V) created search strategies in collaboration with researchers (RS, TV), identifying search terms and databases through a process of refinement. The search utilised keywords associated with the living environment and older adults' civic engagement (see Table 6). Between October and December 2023, four databases were searched: PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science, and Scopus. The search term was adjusted to match the specific search algorithms used by each database. Only peer-reviewed full-text English-language articles were considered for practical reasons, but no restrictions were placed on the type of paper (e.g., empirical, theoretical), the methods used (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), the country, or the publication date.

Table 6

Example search combinations for the scoping review

(civi* OR citizen* OR commun* OR politic* OR public OR associati* OR formal OR informal OR online OR digital OR "social media" OR organisation OR organization* OR societal OR democratic) PRE/0 (engagement OR participa* OR involvement OR activis* OR service OR society OR action) OR ("informal help" OR "informal care" OR "helping behavior" OR nonprofit OR volunt* OR "prosocial behavior" OR "taking care" OR caregiv* OR "providing care" OR "care contribution" OR citizenship)
AND

("living environment*" OR "physical environment*" OR "environmental gerontology" OR surrounding* OR "living space*" OR neighbour* OR neighbour OR "social cohesion" OR "social relation*" OR mezzolevel OR mesolevel OR mezolevel OR "social environment" OR "built environment" OR municipality)
AND
(older OR aging OR elder* OR geriatric* OR senior* OR pensioner* OR "late* life" OR retire* OR "third age" OR "fourth age")

In step three, **the relevant studies were selected** based on one inclusion criterion: as the study centres around the role of the living environment in civic engagement carried out by older adults, studies that used an area as a sample context, but without further exploration of the living environment, were excluded.

Older adults were defined as individuals aged 50 or older, as prominent databases on older adults' civic engagement, like SHARE, use this age as a cutoff (SHARE-ERIC, 2024). In cases where age was unspecified, like in conceptual papers, terms like 'older', 'elder', 'senior' or corresponding terms were considered. Civic engagement was operationalised multidimensionally, including volunteering, informal helping behaviours, political engagement, associational engagement and digital engagement. The living environment was defined as everything that falls between the household and larger community contexts, such as metropolitan areas (Greenfield et al., 2019).

After removing duplicates, each co-author (BD, DB, FN, SD, SVR, and RS) screened 50 records based on titles and abstracts. If an abstract lacked sufficient detail, the full text was reviewed. Following this initial screening, the team held a discussion round. Each co-author then screened an additional 200 records, while one author (TV) reviewed the remaining ones. Regular meetings were held throughout the process to address uncertainties and ensure consistency in decision-making. After title and abstract screening, a total of 479 articles were deemed fitting to proceed to full-text screening. A total of 140 records (29.2%) of the records that were deemed eligible for full-text review were read by at least two authors, with discussions held to resolve any uncertainties. These overlapping reviews and group discussions helped align the selection process (Pollock et al., 2023). After full-text screening, a final sample of 63 articles remained.

Step four entailed **data extraction from the articles** (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) into an Excel file to collect bibliographic and other key information related to the three central concepts (i.e. older adults, the living environment and civic engagement). The Excel file also included conceptual elements (different dimensions of civic engagement, different interpretations of the living environment), methodology (research design, aim, data collection methods), sample characteristics (age variables, country, year the study was conducted, special attention to diversity, data source, gender balance, sample size), as well as key findings and conclusions. The Excel file was collaboratively developed, with the main author doing all the coding to ensure coding consistency. Adjustments were made based on co-author feedback, and second opinions were sought among the group of co-authors when doubts arose about the inclusion of a record.

In the fifth and last step, **the results were collated, summarised and reported**. First, we created a descriptive summary of the selected articles, outlining key features and distribution across various types of civic engagement (Peters et al., 2020). Next, a qualitative content analysis was carried out (Elo et al., 2014).

Figure 5

Flow chart of article sampling
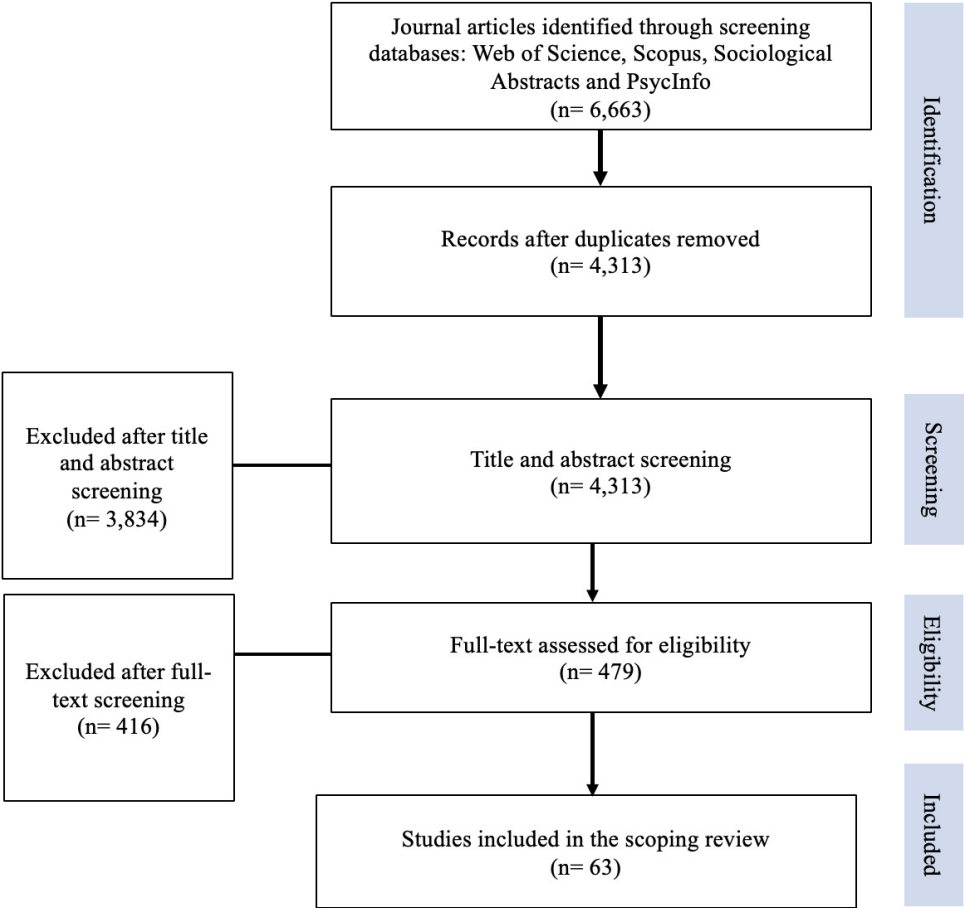
3. Results

The 63 studies included in the scoping review span from 1975 to 2023, with a significant increase in publications from 2016 onward; 73.0% (n=46) of the papers were published after 2016 (see Figure 6). All articles were classified into three categories: theoretical articles, reviews and empirical articles. Theoretical articles comprised 7.9% (n=5) of the studies, and only one paper (1.6%) was a review article. Empirical studies represented 90.5% of the total (n=57) and were primarily conducted in the United States, Canada, Japan, and European countries (see Table 7).

Figure 6

Number of publications on the role of living environment in older adults' civic engagement per year of publication (N=63)
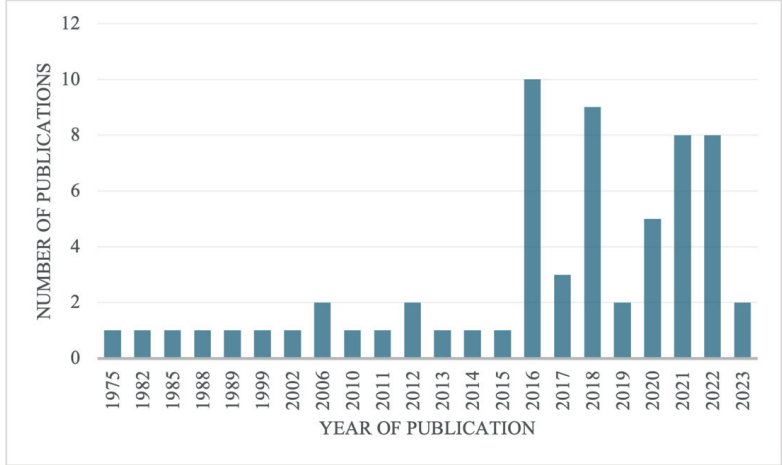
Table 7

Empirical papers (n=57) per country and methodological aspects

Country of the sample	N	%
USA	16	28.1
Canada	7	12.3
Japan	6	10.5
China	5	8.8
Belgium	4	7.0
UK	4	7.0

Australia	3	5.3
Sweden	3	5.3
Israel	2	3.5
Norway	2	3.5
Finland	1	1.8
Poland	1	1.8
Portugal	1	1.8
Spain	1	1.8
Germany	1	1.8
Methodological aspects	**N**	**%**
Methodology		
Quantitative	33	57.9
Qualitative	20	35.1
Mixed	4	7.0
Research design		
Cross-sectional	48	84.2
Longitudinal	9	15.8
Data collection		
Questionnaire	34	59.6
Individual interviews	17	29.8
More than one	4	7.0
Focus group	2	3.5
Data source		
Primary data	31	54.4
Secondary data	25	43.9
Both primary and secondary data	1	1.8

In terms of the methodology of the empirical papers, quantitative designs (n=33) were more prevalent than qualitative designs (n=20), with very few studies using a mixed methods design (n=4). Most empirical studies were cross-sectional (n=48). Questionnaires were employed in 34 studies, and individual interviews in 17 studies. Papers using more than one data collection method (n=4) and papers using focus groups (n=2) were less prevalent. Of the empirical studies, 31 used primary data; compared to 25 using secondary data sources like the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (e.g., Kalbarczyk & Łopaciuk-Gonczaryk, 2022), Japan

Gerontological Evaluation Study (e.g.,Yamakita et al., 2015) or the Health and Retirement Study (e.g., Hand & Howrey, 2019). One paper used both primary as well as secondary data.

3.1. Topics in current research on the role of the living environment in older adults' civic engagement

Table 8 presents an overview of the key concepts in the studies about the role of the living environment in civic engagement in later life. First, it presents what types of living environments that have been studied. Most research attention has gone to the social environment (n=61), which was more frequently studied than the physical environment (n=31). Twenty-nine of the 63 reviewed studies examined both older adults' physical and social environments.

Second, the civic engagement dimensions that have been studied are shown, with volunteering (n=40), associational engagement (n=24) and informal helping behaviours (n=19) being the most examined. Formal (n=12) and informal political engagement (n=4) were studied less frequently, and digital engagement was not studied at all in the reviewed articles. Compared to other dimensions of civic engagement, volunteering was more frequently examined in relation to the social environment than the physical environment. Specifically, volunteering is addressed in 39 studies focusing on the social environment versus 22 on the physical environment. Among the articles focusing on two dimensions (n=16), the combination of associational engagement and volunteering was the most frequently observed (n=8). Eight articles examined three dimensions of engagement. All these studies addressed both volunteering and associational engagement. Four of them also focus on informal helping behaviours, while the other four included formal political engagement as the third dimension. Only one article focused on four dimensions, namely informal helping behaviours, volunteering and informal and formal political engagement (Anderson & Dabelko-Schoeny, 2010). One article included five of the six dimensions, omitting only digital engagement (Henkin & Zapf, 2006). None of the articles focused on all six dimensions considered in this review.

Third, regarding the determinants of the living environment in relation to civic engagement in later life, most studies (n=58) investigated enablers of civic engagement for older adults, while 37 articles studied barriers. A total of 35 papers considered both enablers and barriers. Notably, studies focusing on formal political engagement paid relatively more attention to enablers: all

12 articles on this type of engagement discussed enabling determinants, while only 4 addressed barriers.

Table 8

Evaluating existing research topics on the role of the living environment in older adults' civic engagement (N=63)

Reference	Type of living environment		Forms of civic engagement						Role of living environment determinants in civic engagement	
	Physical environment	Social environment	Informal helping behaviour	Volunteering	Associational engagement	Formal political engagement	Informal political engagement	Digital engagement	Enablers	Barriers
Ajrouch et al, (2016)		X		X					X	
Anderson & Dabelko-Schoeney (2010)	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X
Aung et al. (2022)	X	X		X	X				X	
Blekesaune & Haugen (2018)	X	X	X	X					X	
Bruland et al. (2023)	X	X		X					X	X
Buffel et al. (2014)	X	X		X	X	X			X	X
Cheung & Mui (2023)	X	X		X	X				X	X
Davern et al. (2020)	X	X		X	X				X	
Davis et al. (2012)		X	X	X	X				X	
Dury et al. (2016)	X	X		X					X	X
Dury (2018)		X		X					X	X
Dury et al. (2020)		X		X					X	X
Ehrlich et al. (2017)		X	X						X	X

Study								
Eriksson et al. (2017)	X	X	X					X	X
Faulkner (1975)		X		X					X
Gonzales et al. (2016)	X	X		X				X	X
Grinshteyn & Sugar (2021a)		X		X				X	X
Grinshteyn & Sugar (2021b)		X		X				X	X
Guell et al. (2016)	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Haines & Henderson (2002)		X	X					X	X
Hand & Howrey (2019)		X		X	X			X	X
Hand et al. (2020)		X		X	X	X		X	X
Hawley-Hague et al. (2016)	X	X			X			X	X
Henkin & Zapf (2006)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Johnson et al. (2018)		X		X				X	X
Kalbarczyk & Lopaciuk-Gonczary (2022)		X	X	X				X	
Kanamori et al. (2021)		X			X				X
Kim et al. (2022)	X	X			X			X	X
Kim et al. (2021)	X	X		X	X			X	
Kim (2020)		X	X	X				X	
Kloseck et al. (2006)	X	X		X				X	X
Knauer (2016)		X	X					X	
Ko & Yeung (2018)	X	X	X	X	X			X	X
Krause (2011)	X	X	X						X
Kuokkanen (2018)		X					X	X	
Latham & Clarke (2018)		X			X				X
Litwin (1999)		X	X					X	

Study	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9
Lu et al. (2021)		X		X				X	X
Mahmood et al. (2022)	X	X		X		X		X	X
Martins et al. (2021)		X		X	X	X		X	
Meshram & O'Cass (2013)		X		X	X	X		X	
Miao et al. (2018)		X		X				X	X
Misgav (2016)		X			X	X		X	
Naud et al; (2019)	X	X		X	X			X	X
Omoto & Packard. (2016)		X		X				X	
Parekh et al. (2018)	X	X		X	X	X		X	X
Pickering et al. (2022)	X	X	X					X	
Pilkington et al. (2012)		X		X				X	
Reinhard et al. (2018)	X			X		X		X	
Riedel et al. (2021)	X						X		X
Rosenbaum & Button (1989)		X				X		X	
Sellon et al. (2017)	X	X		X				X	X
Serrat & Villar (2016)		X				X		X	
Sheehan (1988)		X	X					X	X
Sherman et al. (1985)		X			X	X		X	
Siira et al. (2020)		X	X					X	
Silverman (2021)	X	X	X					X	
Sundar et al. (2016)	X	X		X	X			X	X
Tsuji et al. (2022)	X	X		X	X			X	X
Wang (2022)		X			X			X	X
Wenger (1982)	X	X		X				X	X
Yamakita et al. (2015)	X	X			X			X	
Yu et al. (2022)	X	X	X					X	

3.2. Content analysis

The findings of the qualitative content analysis are organised around core themes from the reviewed papers, structured under the overarching categories of enablers and barriers to civic engagement in later life. These categories were further divided into subcategories reflecting physical and social determinants. Table 4 presents how many articles address each subtheme. Given the frequent thematic overlap among sources, and to avoid excessive citation, not all corresponding articles are individually referenced under each subtheme.

Table 9

Distribution of articles addressing each subtheme

	Social		Physical	
	Subtheme	*N*	*Subtheme*	*N*
Enablers	Social networks and neighbourhood cohesion	40	Infrastructure	18
	Embeddedness in the living environment	11	Accessibility	15
	Frameworks of local organisations	8	Frameworks for age-friendly living environments	3
	Perceived safety	5		
Barriers	Lack of social networks and social cohesion	15	Poor infrastructure	10
	Disemeddednes	6	Inaccessibility	7
	Feelings of unsafety	6		
	Thin local organisational capacity	3	Environmental stressors	3

3.2.1. Enablers to civic engagement in later life in the social environment

The literature demonstrated that the social environment played a pivotal role in civic engagement in later life. More specifically, *social networks and neighbourhood cohesion*, *embeddedness in the living environment*, *perceived safety*, and the *frameworks of local organisations* were identified as key enabling determinants.

Forty of these articles underscored the role of *social networks and neighbourhood cohesion* as enabling determinants of diverse forms of civic engagement among older adults (e.g., Haines & Henderson, 2002; Johnson et al., 2018; Pickering et al., 2022). Ajrouch et al. (2016) and Buffel et al. (2014) found that older adults who frequently engaged in social interactions and resided in close proximity to their social networks exhibited an increased propensity for volunteering. The presence of larger networks and the availability of social support were identified as enabling determinants in the extant literature (Pilkington et al., 2012; Yamakita et al., 2015; Kim, 2020; Dury et al., 2020). Changes in social networks were also linked to shifts in civic engagement. For example, (Ajrouch et al., 2016) found that volunteering was facilitated by a decrease in the proportion of family members and an increase in network members living within a one-hour drive. The composition of one's network also had an impact on informal helping behaviours, with more diversified social networks enabling it (Litwin, 1999). Kalbarczyk and Łopaciuk-Gonczaryk (2022) found that an increase in the number of friends and acquaintances was associated with heightened engagement in associational activities and informal help, while Guell et al. (2016), also identified social pressure as an enabler of civic engagement. Regarding neighbourhood cohesion, reciprocal helping relationships among neighbours, friends or members of the same organisation were identified as important enablers of informal caregiving (Siira et al., 2022). These relationships fostered a sense of community and encouraged engagement in volunteering and associational activities as well (Wenger, 1982; Sheehan, 1988; Meshram & O'Cass, 2013; Knauer, 2016; Hand et al., 2020; Cheung & Mui, 2023). Furthermore, an enhanced sense of belonging has been observed to promote volunteering, encourage older residents to address neighbourhood problems, such as litter and noise pollution through activism (Cheung & Mui, 2023), and strengthen neighbourhood connectedness (Dury et al., 2016). This phenomenon has also been observed in retirement communities (Omoto & Packard, 2016). The emotional closeness to the living environment, facilitated by neighbourhood cohesion and social networks, also enhances informal help among older adults (Henkin & Zapf, 2006).

Ehrlich et al. (2017) reported that caregivers in rural areas tended to be more accepting of their caregiving role, an attitude likely shaped by the stronger family networks and reciprocal community ties typically found in rural regions. Similarly, studies comparing rural and urban environments showed that older adults in rural areas were more likely to engage in volunteer work and associational engagement, largely due to a heightened sense of community spirit and cohesion (Wenger, 1982; Blekesaune & Haugen, 2018; Tsuji et al., 2022). This strong

community spirit acted as an important enabler of volunteer work among older adults. Additionally, rural settings often exhibited a strong sense of reciprocity, where neighbours assisted each other with various tasks, thereby fostering a sense of community and encouraging engagement in political and associational activities (Davis et al., 2012).

Furthermore, 11 articles addressed the *embeddedness in the living environment* that enabled older adults' civic engagement, with three enabling determinants identified. Firstly, the length of residence in the neighbourhood was linked with increased associational and political engagement of older adults, as well as informal helping behaviours (Davis et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2021). This may have been associated with the social capital older adults had developed over the years within their living environment (Davis et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2021), or by feelings of belonging and place attachment (Hand et al., 2020). However, Kim et al. (2021) further identified that a substantial presence of new residents was associated with increased levels of volunteering. Feeling connected and integrated into one's neighbourhood was essential (Dury et al., 2016). Research by Rosenbaum and Button (1989) suggested that as the population ages, younger residents might increasingly resist expanding public services such as medical services. This resistance could have driven older adults to become more politically active to ensure they received the support they needed. Secondly, two studies highlighted that a higher percentage of migrant populations was associated with increased informal helping behaviours (Yu et al., 2022), greater volunteering and associational engagement (Ko & Yeung, 2018). Ko and Yeung (2018) noted that a higher proportion of migrants could have positively impacted older adults' civic engagement, as this facilitated the creation of more diverse social spaces and interaction opportunities. Both Sherman et al. (1985) and Hand and Howrey (2019) found that when older adults lived in a neighbourhood with a high concentration of older people, they were more likely to engage in associations. Thirdly, Dury et al., (2016) found that older adults who are not satisfied with their neighbourhood were more likely to volunteer.

Eight articles addressed the *frameworks of local organisations*, referring to the structural and operational models guiding how these organisations functioned. These frameworks helped stimulate diverse forms of civic engagement among older adults (Henkin & Zapf, 2006; Serrat & Villar, 2016; Sellon et al., 2017; Kuokkanen, 2018; Mahmood et al., 2022). The reviewed literature indicated that the availability of civic activities organised by and for older adults in their neighbourhood predicted participation in volunteering, associational, and formal political engagement (Buffel et al., 2014). Wang (2022) found similar effects for activities initiated and

promoted by the state. Research by Dury (2018) emphasised that organisational support structures, such as co-production, volunteer meetings, incentives, and the presence of a designated support officer, were essential for enabling volunteering. Kuokkanen (2018) found that when local governments collaborated with civil society forums to promote self-directed engagement and facilitate open discussions through social mixing (bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds in shared spaces), it significantly enhanced engagement among older adults. Older adults' motivation to engage politically was influenced by the nature of political organisations, specifically, their structure and the types of activities they offered (Serrat & Villar, 2016, p. 201; Martins et al., 2021). Moreover, frameworks in local organisations played a crucial role in connecting associations, volunteer organisations, long-term residents, and newcomers, thereby fostering volunteering. In nursing homes, for instance, adopting a strengths-based perspective that focused on the strengths of residents and their families helped integrate nursing home residents into community-based volunteer programmes (Sellon et al., 2017).

Lastly, *Perceptions of safety* was also identified as an enabling determinant of civic engagement in later life across five studies. A positive perception of neighbourhood safety was associated with higher civic engagement, particularly volunteering among those who rated their safety as 'very good' (Dury et al., 2020; Grinshteyn & Sugar, 2021b, 2021a).

Henkin and Zapf (2006) contended that political engagement was underpinned by community capacity, which comprised a sense of shared belonging, effective mechanisms for problem-solving, collective commitment, and perceptions of safety, dimensions that traversed several of the identified subthemes. This conceptual overlap, particularly regarding perceptions of safety and the organisational frameworks of local institutions, made it difficult to situate their findings neatly within the existing thematic structure.

3.2.2. Enablers to civic engagement in later life in the physical environment

The literature consistently highlighted the role of the physical environment, particularly *infrastructure, accessibility and frameworks for age-friendly living environments* in fostering civic engagement among older adults (e.g., Aung et al., 2022; Davern et al., 2020).

Eighteen articles highlighted the role of *infrastructure,* including well-maintained roads and comprehensive public transport systems, in reducing isolation and facilitating access to local

services and activities, thereby promoting civic engagement (Yamakita et al., 2015; Reinhard et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2022; Bruland et al., 2023). Dury et al. (2016) identified the presence of public toilets as enablers for volunteering. Community centres provided safe and inclusive spaces for older adults to engage in various forms of civic engagement (Kim et al., 2021; Misgav, 2016). For instance, centres catering to older gay men offered supportive environments for political activities and advocacy (Misgav, 2016). Access to such public facilities was also essential for enabling both volunteering and associational engagement (Dury et al., 2016; Hand & Howrey, 2019; Kim et al., 2022).

Accessibility, especially in terms of public transport, was cited in 15 articles as a key enabler. Features such as priority seating, step-free access, and reliable scheduling were shown to enhance older adults' ability to participate in volunteering and associational activities (Kim et al., 2021; Reinhard et al., 2018), which was also found to be true for nursing home residents specifically (Anderson & Dabelko-Schoeny, 2010). Eriksson et al. (2017) also noted that accessible transport supported informal helping behaviours, such as caregiving. Urban environments benefited from the spatial accessibility of amenities such as parks, restaurants, and cafés, which encouraged associational engagement and broader social participation (Kim et al., 2022). The usability of the physical environment, including grocery stores and public gathering places, was also found to positively influence informal helping behaviours and associational engagement (Kim et al., 2022; Yamakita et al., 2015). Older adults with easy access to these facilities were more likely to provide informal care to family members and neighbours, thereby strengthening community ties (Silverman, 2021; Yu et al., 2022).

Three papers discussed *frameworks for age-friendly living environments*, including theoretical contributions by Davern et al. (2020) and Mahmood et al. (2022), who discussed frameworks developed to support local contexts in promoting civic engagement among older adults. These frameworks emphasised the importance of creating environments conducive to the needs of older adults, including the provision of age-friendly housing options such as cohousing and community-based models, and age-friendly public transport (Reinhard et al., 2018). These housing options were shown to enhance civic engagement by providing opportunities for older adults to participate in community and volunteering activities (Mahmood et al., 2022).

3.2.3. Barriers to civic engagement in later life in the social environment

The social environment cannot only facilitate civic engagement in later life but also hinder it. More specifically, a *lack of social networks and social cohesion*, *disembeddedness in the living environment*, *feelings of unsafety*, and *thin local organisational capacity* were identified as barriers that limited the extent to which older adults participated in various forms of civic engagement.

Regarding the *lack of social networks and social cohesion*, 15 articles suggested that the absence of strong social networks, such as not knowing other participants in civic engagement settings, hinders civic engagement (Parekh et al., 2018; Dury et al., 2020; Bruland et al., 2023). For instance, new residents in a living environment often experienced the unfamiliarity of their surroundings as a barrier to offering informal help, as they had not yet established social networks or felt connected to their community (Sheehan, 1988). Additionally, low social cohesion and neighbourhood disorder were found to hinder participation in associational activities (Latham & Clarke, 2018). Interestingly, although it cannot be seen as a lack of social networks or social cohesion, Guell et al. (2016) observed that social networks can sometimes unintentionally limit civic engagement, particularly when close connections face physical limitations that affect the ability to engage in certain shared activities.

Six articles also identified *disembeddedness in the living environment* as a barrier to civic engagement in later life. For example, Dury et al. (2020) reported that new residents often faced barriers to volunteering because they felt excluded or unwelcome, as already existing social networks were difficult to access, which Sheehan (1988) found to be true for informal caregiving as well. Long-term residents sometimes struggled to integrate newcomers, which could unintentionally reinforce social divisions. Women with migrant backgrounds, particularly those struggling with social integration, often felt insecure about participating in civic activities (Bruland et al., 2023), reflecting broader challenges faced by marginalised groups experiencing a lack of social cohesion (Parekh et al., 2018). Additionally, individuals who had resettled from rural to urban areas often faced difficulties adapting to urban life, which reduced their participation in associational engagement compared to their urban counterparts (Wang, 2022). Neighbourhoods with many children and a high proportion of older residents often placed greater demands on social services, which in turn reduced the resources available to support formal civic engagement (Miao et al., 2018).

Six of the reviewed articles also mentioned *feelings of unsafety* as a barrier to civic engagement in later life. Safety concerns, such as fear of the neighbourhood and associated risks, greatly hindered older adults' engagement in civic activities. When older adults perceived their neighbourhood as unsafe, they were less likely to volunteer or engage in community activities (Faulkner, 1975; Bruland et al., 2023).

Lastly, three articles pointed to *thin local organisational capacity* as a barrier to civic engagement among older adults. Anderson and Dabelko-Schoeny (2010) and Hawley-Hague et al. (2016) found that a lack of staff to support civic engagement in nursing homes constituted a significant barrier. These institutions often lacked the necessary staff to organise and facilitate civic activities for residents, thereby limiting opportunities for older adults to engage in community life and volunteer their time. The literature also noted that negative perceptions of nursing homes and their residents could lead to their isolation from community-based volunteer programmes (Sellon et al., 2017). When nursing homes were viewed negatively, this created a barrier between residents and their broader living environment, reducing opportunities for civic engagement.

3.2.4. Barriers to civic engagement in later life in the physical environment

The reviewed literature shows that the physical environment can also hinder older adults' civic engagement. More specifically, a *poor infrastructure*, *inaccessibility*, and *environmental stressors* were identified as barriers.

Literature, more specifically 10 articles, highlighted that the *poor infrastructure* could present significant barriers to diverse types of civic engagement among older adults. The study of Krause (2011) demonstrated that older adults living in rundown neighbourhoods with poor infrastructure and environmental conditions were more inhospitable and less likely to offer informal help. Dury et al. (2016) found similar results for volunteering in later life. Lower scores for the physical environment, meaning less walkable and connected neighbourhoods, were also identified as barriers to volunteering among older Black people (Gonzales et al., 2016). Some studies linked rural areas to lower levels of civic engagement in associational activities, often attributing this to limited access to facilities and greater distances between them (Kanamori et al., 2021; Naud et al., 2019).

In addition to the obstacles posed by the poor infrastructure, the *inaccessibility* of the physical environment also emerged as a barrier to older adults' civic engagement (Parekh et al., 2018; Pickering et al., 2022), according to seven articles. Bruland et al. (2023), for instance, noted that the lack of bus passes reduced civic engagement in volunteering activities, especially among older immigrant women. Naud et al. (2019) also identified barriers in rural areas, such as the unavailability of activities and transportation problems, which hindered associational engagement and volunteering. Informal caregiving was hindered by less accessible care infrastructure, according to (Eriksson et al., 2017)

Literature on infrastructure and inaccessibility, which were often intertwined, also gave considerable attention to older adults living in nursing homes and care facilities. Mobility obstacles, such as the lack of accessible transportation available for nursing home residents, limited the opportunities for older adults to participate in community activities and volunteer their time (Anderson & Dabelko-Schoeny, 2010). The physical separation of nursing homes from the wider community also reduced opportunities for civic engagement, as it created a spatial divide between the residents and the community (Anderson & Dabelko-Schoeny, 2010). Moreover, leisure centres, often associated with vigorous exercise, could be perceived as intimidating environments by older adults in care facilities. This perception appeared to discourage engagement in associational sport activities, as they might have felt uncomfortable or unwelcome in these settings (Hawley-Hague et al., 2016).

Lastly, *environmental stressors*, such as perceived traffic noise and litter in the living environment, were addressed in three articles. Especially in urban environments, environmental stressors impeded older adults' informal political engagement (Dury et al., 2016; Riedel et al., 2021). Latham and Clarke (2018) added that neighbourhood disorder lowers older adults' associational engagement.

It is worth noting that although Kloseck et al. (2006) examined both physical and social enablers and barriers within the living environment in relation to volunteering, they did not identify any statistically significant associations.

4. Discussion

This paper's objectives were to gain insight into the available studies on the role of the living environment in older adults' civic engagement and to examine the determinants of the living environment related to older adults' civic engagement that have been identified in these studies. A scoping review of 63 studies was conducted, mapping 14 determinants, more specifically 8 social and 6 physical environmental determinants, through which the living environment shapes older people's civic engagement. The most consistently enabling determinants include neighbourhood cohesion, strong social networks, accessible infrastructure, and well-structured local organisations. Whereas social disembeddedness, feelings of unsafety, and poor infrastructure were common barriers.

Environmental stressors were underexplored, despite offering valuable insights. For instance, while environmental stressors such as noise pollution and litter were identified as barriers to civic engagement in later life by Dury et al. (2016) and Riedel et al. (2021), Cheung and Mui (2023) found that these same stressors could act as enablers. Visible problems in the living environment may serve as catalysts for older residents to become civically engaged, for instance, through political action or volunteering aimed at improving their surroundings. This example illustrates that environmental determinants should not be approached in binary terms. What functions as a barrier in one context may serve as an enabler in another, depending on the specific conditions under which the study is conducted. Similarly, being a newcomer in a neighbourhood also yielded mixed findings. While newcomers often encounter barriers due to limited access to established social networks and feelings of exclusion (Dury et al., 2020; Sheehan, 1988), their presence can also stimulate civic engagement and contribute to community revitalisation (Kim et al., 2021). These examples underscore the possible ambivalent nature of determinants and highlight the importance of contextual sensitivity in understanding place–engagement dynamics. While some studies, such as Arjouch et al. (2016), acknowledge the ambivalent nature of certain determinants (e.g. how changes in social networks can both facilitate and impede civic engagement), the majority of research on the role of the living environment on civic engagement in later life pays little attention to this ambivalence.

While the distinction between the physical and social environment was used to structure the results, it is important to reiterate that, in line with environmental gerontology and socio-

ecological frameworks, both types of environments are inherently intertwined (Schwarz, 2013; Greenfield et al., 2019; Hoh et al., 2021). The physical environment provides the setting in which social interactions occur, and social dynamics shape how physical spaces are used and experienced. This highlights the interconnected nature of social and physical spaces (Wahl & Gitlin, 2019). The findings further demonstrated that, except for two articles, all articles addressing the physical environment also encompassed the social environment.

Despite the heightened scholarly interest in the role of the living environment in older adults' civic engagement that has been observed in recent decades, this scoping review identifies two research gaps that merit further exploration: 1) a multidimensional approach to older adults' civic engagement and 2) the dynamic nature of the living environment.

4.1. Multidimensional approach to older adults' civic engagement

None of the reviewed articles used a multidimensional approach to civic engagement as defined in this review, which includes six distinct dimensions. Instead, most studies focused on a limited range of activities, primarily formal volunteering and associational engagement, or both, when examining the role of the living environment in civic engagement in later life. Only eight studies included three dimensions, and just two addressed four or five, combining informal helping, volunteering, and both formal and informal political engagement (Henkin & Zapf, 2006; Anderson & Dabelko-Schoeny, 2010). This approach aligns with the typology proposed by Serrat et al. (2022), which excludes digital engagement and associational engagement. However, these dimensions have been incorporated into Serrat's more recent framework (Serrat, 2025).

Several dimensions of civic engagement in later life have received scant attention from researchers. Informal political engagement was observed in only four of the 63 reviewed articles, despite evidence that older adults frequently engage in both formal and informal political activities (Serrat et al., 2020; Serrat & Tesch-Römer, 2025). Understanding informal political engagement, such as petition signing or protesting, is crucial as these activities reflect everyday, less institutionalised forms of democratic commitment. Although often overlooked in research, they can shape public decisions and drive societal change (Bherer et al., 2023). A notable lacuna also pertains to digital engagement. A paucity of research has examined how digital platforms, which are becoming an increasingly integral part of the living environment of older adults (Greenfield et al., 2019), shape civic engagement. As Seifert and Rössel (2021)

argue, digital spaces are increasingly influencing the civic engagement of older adults, encompassing activities such as coordinating volunteer efforts and participating in online advocacy. These underappreciated dimensions underscore the necessity for more inclusive, multidimensional approaches to studying civic engagement in ageing populations. Moreover, it risks reinforcing normative notions of 'successful' ageing and may marginalise those who contribute in less visible ways, such as older migrants, people with disabilities, or rural residents (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Majón-Valpuesta & Levasseur, 2025; Ågård & Torres, 2025; Winterton et al., 2025). A more integrated, multidimensional understanding is needed to reflect the full diversity of older adults' civic contributions (Bishop & Alamdari, 2020; Serrat et al., 2022).

Furthermore, while dimensions such as associational engagement and volunteering share similar living environment predictors (e.g., Cheung & Mui, 2023), studying them in isolation overlooks how different forms of engagement often interact or co-occur. Environmental features such as neighbourhood cohesion or accessibility can influence multiple forms of engagement simultaneously, and their effects may vary depending on the specific dimension. For example, urban living is linked to higher associational engagement in some studies (Kim et al., 2021), but to lower political engagement in others (Riedel et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of adapting a broader, more integrated framework to capture the complexity of the role of the living environment in civic engagement in later life, challenge exclusionary norms, and recognise the full spectrum of older adults' contributions (Serrat et al., 2021).

4.2. Change in the living environment and its role in older adults' civic engagement

The descriptive results indicated that out of the 57 empirical articles reviewed, only nine employed a longitudinal approach. Most existing research is cross-sectional, offering only a snapshot in time. This methodological limitation restricts our understanding of how civic engagement evolves in response to changes in older adults' lives and environments. Among the nine longitudinal studies identified, only two explicitly examined the impact of changes in the living environment on older adults' civic engagement (Ajrouch et al., 2016; Kalbarczyk & Łopaciuk-Gonczaryk, 2022). Both studies focused specifically on changing social networks, highlighting how shifts in interpersonal relationships can play a role in civic engagement in later life. The remaining seven studies utilised longitudinal data to explore causal relationships but did not centre their analyses on environmental changes.

Despite its relevance, the impact of changes in older adults' living environments on their civic engagement remains understudied. This gap is noteworthy considering the growing attention to how place and context influence ageing experiences (e.g., Greenfield et al., 2019). The concept of the life course of place highlights how ecological systems, including living environments, evolve over time (Lekkas et al., 2017), and how older adults adapt to these changes in ways that may influence their civic engagement (Lewis & Buffel, 2020). For example, Ajrouch et al. (2016) illustrated how shifts in the social network of older people can hinder or enhance older adults' civic engagement. Adopting a life course perspective, both for individuals and their environments, is therefore valuable, as it captures the dynamic and temporal nature of civic engagement by changing personal and contextual determinants (Serrat et al., 2020).

To incorporate a life course perspective that encompasses both individuals and places, a co-constitutional approach offers a valuable and insightful framework that examines the relationship between the living environment and civic engagement in later life (Oswald et al., 2024). This perspective underscores that older adults and their environments are continuously shaped and reshaped through ongoing interactions and mutual redefinition (Dikmans et al., 2025). It highlights the dynamic interplay between ageing individuals and their socio-material surroundings, where neither the person nor the environment remains static, but both evolve together (Oswald et al., 2024).

Integrating frameworks that address neighbourhood change, such as the life course of place or the co-constitutional approach, into future research on the role of the living environment in civic engagement could enrich our understanding of how older adults and their environments shape one another and co-evolve. These perspectives support the development of policies and interventions that reflect both the lived experiences of older people and the evolving realities of their communities.

4.3. Limitations and future directions

The present scoping review is not without its limitations. First, it included only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English and indexed in PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts, Web of Science, and Scopus, thereby excluding potentially relevant studies published in other formats, languages, or databases. Secondly, due to the wide variety of civic engagement dimensions included in the review, the search strategy may have overlooked studies that used different

terms to describe similar concepts. For example, some studies may have referred to volunteering as 'unpaid work' and thus were not captured by the selected search terms. Thirdly, the scope of this study focused solely on the role of the living environment in older adults' civic engagement, while excluding research that examines how civic engagement may, in turn, shape the neighbourhood context. This narrowed scope helped to maintain a manageable scope, but it also limits our understanding of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between older adults and their living environment regarding civic engagement.

Despite these limitations, by mapping existing evidence, this review has identified key gaps in the current literature and offers directions for future research. The limited number of longitudinal and multidimensional studies on how older adults' living environments shape civic engagement, especially in informal political and digital domains, reveals a significant research and policy gap. Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs and multidimensional frameworks to better understand the evolving interplay between physical and social environments and diverse forms of civic engagement. Policy efforts should also reflect these insights by enhancing age-friendly environments that support civic engagement across all dimensions of civic life. This includes investing in social infrastructure, promoting digital engagement among older adults, and creating space for informal political activities. Integrating these priorities into urban planning and community development can help sustain older adults' civic engagement over time and ensure their ongoing contribution to community life.

5. Conclusion

This scoping review explored the role of the living environment in civic engagement of older adults. The findings show that both social and physical determinants of the environment play a vital role. Supportive environments, characterised by strong social connections, accessible infrastructure, and feelings of safety, can enable engagement, while barriers such as a lack of social cohesion, disembeddedness and poor accessibility may constrain it. Importantly, these determinants are closely interlinked, reinforcing the need to view the living environment as a socio-physical whole. The scoping review also highlights that environmental determinants are not inherently enabling or limiting; their role depends on context and the form of engagement being examined. This complexity calls for more nuanced approaches to understanding how environments shape engagement across different settings.

Two main research gaps emerged. First, most studies on the role of the living environment on civic engagement in later life adopt a narrow view of engagement, focusing on formal activities while overlooking more informal and digital forms. This limits recognition of the full range of ways in which older adults contribute to their communities. Second, the dynamic nature of the living environment is rarely addressed, with few studies examining how changes over time affect engagement. The findings of this study carry important policy implications: creating age-friendly environments through sustained investment in both social and physical environments can support diverse forms of civic engagement.

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CHAPTER 6: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN LATER LIFE: A MULTILEVEL EUROPEAN ANALYSIS

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CHAPTER 6: Civic engagement in later life: A multilevel European analysis

Abstract

Civic engagement in later life is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by neighbourhood and societal contexts, though these levels are rarely examined together. Guided by a socio-ecological framework, this study investigates how neighbourhood conditions and country-level indicators, specifically the Human Development Index (HDI) and income inequality (Gini), are associated with civic engagement in later life. The data included responses from 9,468 individuals aged 65+ across 33 European countries. Four dimensions of civic engagement were examined: volunteering, informal caregiving, associational engagement, and political engagement. Binary two-level regression models showed that more accessible neighbourhood amenities were positively associated with all forms of engagement, while neighbourhood problems had negative effects. HDI was linked to higher engagement overall and amplified the positive effects of neighbourhood amenities on associational and political engagement, highlighting the interactive nature of national and local contexts in shaping civic engagement.

Additions to existing literature

- Applies a socio-ecological framework to fully capture the diverse indicators associated with different types of civic engagement in later life.
- Demonstrates that both neighbourhood conditions and national development indicators (HDI) are significantly associated with civic engagement.
- Reveals cross-level interaction effects, showing that HDI strengthens the positive influence of neighbourhood amenities on associational and political engagement.

Applications to gerontological practice, policy, and/or research

- Supports the development of integrated policies that combine national development goals with local environmental improvements to promote civic engagement in later life.
- Highlights the importance of investing in neighbourhood infrastructure to enhance civic engagement among older adults.
- Encourages gerontological research to adopt multilevel approaches that account for the interplay between local and national contexts to better understand civic engagement.

Keywords: civic engagement, older adults, multilevel analysis, neighbourhood, country context, socio-ecological model

1. Introduction

Civic engagement in later life is associated with higher levels of health and well-being, reduced social exclusion, and stronger community connectedness (Serrat et al., 2020; von Humboldt et al., 2024). While research has extensively explored how individual characteristics, such as health, education and income, relate to civic engagement in later life (Ackermann, 2019; Serrat et al., 2022; Wilson, 2012), far less is known about how broader contextual variables, including neighbourhood conditions (meso-level) and societal indicators (macro-level), shape older adults' civic engagement (Lu et al., 2021; Näsman et al., 2025). Guided by community gerontology (Greenfield et al., 2019), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2000), social capital theory (Putnam, 1995), and the civic voluntarism model (Verba et al., 1995) this study adopts a socio-ecological lens that integrates neighbourhood (meso) and country (macro) characteristics alongside personal (micro) characteristics to investigate civic engagement among older Europeans.

1.1. Civic engagement among older adults from a socio-ecological approach

Civic engagement, defined as *"informal and formal activities aimed at seeking better benefits for others, the community or wider society, or influencing collective decision-making processes"* by Serrat and colleagues (2021, p. 246), is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct. It encompasses volunteering, informal help, associational engagement, political engagement, and, more recently, digital engagement (Reuter, 2021; Serrat et al., 2022; Blinded). This is also how the concept is approached in this paper. A socio-ecological approach positions civic engagement in later life within interacting levels of opportunity and constraint (Greenfield et al., 2019; Serrat et al., 2020).

Meso Level: Neighbourhood Contexts

Older adults spend more time within their local environment (Matthews et al., 2012), thus, neighbourhoods provide both physical and social features that can either support or constrain civic engagement. Features such as accessible public spaces, perceptions of safety, and strong community cohesion facilitate civic engagement, whereas issues such as noise, crime, and deteriorating infrastructure present barriers (Buffel et al., 2014; Cheung & Mui, 2023; De Donder et al., 2012; Dury et al., 2016; Vercauteren et al., 2025).

Urban and rural neighbourhoods differ in resources, infrastructure, and social dynamics, making the distinction essential when studying how neighbourhoods shape civic engagement. In rural areas, civic engagement, particularly volunteering and informal helping, is often strengthened by tighter community bonds (Blekesaune & Haugen, 2018). However, such engagement may be hindered by fewer available opportunities and less access to public transport (Naud et al., 2019). In contrast, urban areas typically offer a broader range of facilities for volunteering and associational engagement, such as hobby clubs and other meeting spaces, and may foster political engagement due to the presence of civic organisations and public events (Kim et al., 2022). Nevertheless, higher perceptions of insecurity among inhabitants in urban settings compared to rural regions (Abraham & Ceccato, 2022), may counteract these benefits and lead to lower levels of civic engagement (De Donder et al., 2012).

Macro level: Country contexts

At the macro level, the opportunity landscape for civic engagement is shaped by a country's structural arrangements – its welfare regime, political institutions, policies, and degree of economic development – as well as the resources and incentives those arrangements make available to communities (Greenfield et al., 2019; Walker & Zaidi, 2019). These structural features establish the general principles that govern the field: welfare states with more generous programs may provide support for voluntary organisations, while those with more limited resources may rely on community groups to rely on private initiative. Conversely, higher levels of development have been shown to be associated with enhanced educational attainment, increased income, and improved life expectancy. These conditions, in turn, have been demonstrated to enhance the capacity and perceived efficacy of older adults to engage in various civic activities (Nyqvist et al., 2024). This study focuses on two complementary country-level indicators to capture these structural societal differences. The Human Development Index (HDI), a composite of health, education, and income, offers one lens on a country's resource base. Cross-national evidence demonstrates higher political engagement among older adults in more developed countries. However, this correlation does not necessarily translate into higher volunteering once individual advantages are considered (Perkins et al., 2021). In addition, the Gini index is a measure of resource distribution equity. However, the implications of this index for civic engagement remain unclear. Some studies have found no association between the Gini index and engagement (Perkins et al., 2021). As indicated by Stockemer & Scruggs (2012), a body of research has identified a negative correlation between income inequality and volunteering and helping behaviors (see Juma & Fernández-Sainz, 2024; Schröder & Neumayr,

2023; Seifert & König, 2019). Conversely, other studies have suggested that pronounced inequality can galvanise political or associational action as a form of protest (see Van Holm, 2019). When considered as a whole, these varied findings underscore the necessity to assess HDI and Gini in conjunction with each other, and in interaction with neighbourhood conditions, when examining older Europeans' civic engagement. Therefore, the present study focuses on structural country-level indicators, such as HDI and Gini, as they are directly associated with resource distribution and opportunity structures that influence older Europeans' civic engagement.

Additionally, prior research by Schröder and Neumayr (2023) highlights that in unequal societies, the diminished social trust and cohesion reduce civic engagement, while more equal societies foster it, particularly among those with fewer resources. These findings suggest interactions between neighbourhood conditions and macro-level variables. This study, therefore, explores how country-level development and inequality interact with neighbourhood-level factors. Investigating these cross-level interactions is essential to understanding the contextual complexity of civic engagement in later life.

1.2. Present study

Adopting a socio-ecological lens, this study examines how neighbourhood conditions and country-level indicators, both independently and interactively, relate to civic engagement among older adults in 33 European countries.

The specific focus of our study is on the interplay between neighbourhood conditions and country-level indicators, while also accounting for individual characteristics. The following three research questions are addressed:

1. How are neighbourhood conditions (access to amenities, problems, safety and urbanisation) associated with civic engagement among older people?
2. How are country-level development (HDI) and income inequality (Gini) associated with civic engagement, when controlling for individual characteristics and perceived neighbourhood conditions?
3. How do neighbourhood conditions interact with country-level development (HDI) and income inequality (Gini) to shape civic engagement in later life?

2. Methods

2.1. Data and sample

This study utilised data from the fourth wave of the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), which was collected in 2016 and 2017, covering 33 European countries (Eurofound, 2018a). Participants aged 18 and older were selected through a multi-stage, stratified, random sampling process, with no upper age limit (Eurofound, 2018b). Data collection was conducted using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). The survey adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring voluntary informed consent and compliance with an interviewer's code of conduct, details of which can be found in the technical and fieldwork report of EQLS (Eurofound, 2018b, pp. 68-69). In each participating country, between 1,000 and 2,000 individuals living in private households were surveyed (Eurofound, 2018b). The sample for this study consisted of 9,468 individuals from 33 countries aged 65 and above, as the age of 65 is frequently used in research as a benchmark for defining older people (e.g., Näsman et al., 2025).

2.2. Measures

Outcome variables

Drawing on cited literature and items available in the EQLS (Eurofound, 2018a; Reuter, 2021; Serrat et al., 2022; Vercauteren et al., 2024), four outcome variables were identified to capture civic engagement: *volunteering, informal caregiving, associational engagement and political engagement*. *Volunteering* was measured by whether respondents had engaged in voluntary work within the past 12 months in community and social services, or in educational, cultural, sports, professional, or other associations. *Informal caregiving* captured whether individuals had provided care to disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends. *Associational engagement* referred to engagement in the social activities of a club, society, or association. *Political engagement* encompassed both formal political activities (e.g., attending meetings, working or volunteering, paid or unpaid, for a union or political party) and informal political engagement (e.g., unpaid voluntary work through social movements or charities, attending demonstrations, signing petitions, contacting politicians or public officials, boycotting products, or commenting on political or social issues online) done within the previous 12 months. For all outcome variables, 0 indicates no civic engagement, while 1 denotes participation in that specific form. The data available on digital engagement in EQLS was too limited to include this dimension in the analysis. Since the only present variable on digital

engagement concerns a digital form of political engagement, it was included in the political engagement dimension.

Neighbourhood – meso level

Based on previous literature (Buffel et al., 2014; De Donder et al., 2012; Dury et al., 2016; Serrat et al., 2021; Vercauteren et al., 2025), four variables were included.

Access to amenities in the neighbourhood was computed into one scale from three items. The items were: "Thinking of physical access, distance, opening hours and the like, how easy or difficult is your access to the following services? Public transport facilities (bus, metro, tram, train, etc.), cinema, theatre or cultural centre, and recreational or green areas". The created scale showed good internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of .733 (Field, 2013) and ranges from 1 (Very difficult access) to 4 (Very easy access).

Neighbourhood *problems* were computed into one scale out of four items: "Please think about the area where you live now – I mean the immediate neighbourhood of your home. Do you have major, moderate or no problems with the following? Noise, air quality, litter or rubbish on the street, and heavy traffic in your immediate neighbourhood". The scale was constructed by summing the values of each item and dividing by the number of items, leaving us with a scale of 1 (Major problems) – 3 (No problems). The scale had a Cronbach's Alpha of .799, indicating good internal consistency.

S*afety* was assessed using an ordinal variable based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', in response to the statement: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? I feel safe when I walk alone in this area after dark." This variable was recoded into three categories: feels safe (0), feels neither safe nor unsafe (1), and feels unsafe (2).

Urbanisation level was operationalised by using the question: "Would you consider the area in which you live to be...?". The respondents could choose an option between a) The open countryside, b) A village/small town, c) A medium to large town, and d) A city or city suburb.

Country – macro level

The *Human Development Index* (HDI) was used to measure a *country's development level* (UNDP, 2024). The HDI serves as a composite measure of average achievement in three fundamental dimensions of human development: health, education, and standard of living (UNDP, 2024).

The *Gini* coefficient, a measure of *income inequality* within a country, was used in this study to assess how income is distributed among individuals or households (World Bank Group, 2025). A Gini index of 0 signifies perfect equality, while a score of 100 indicates extreme inequality. The United Nations scores HDI in decimals ranging from 0 to 1, but in this study, HDI was represented as a score out of 100 instead of a decimal to ensure a more consistent display compared to the Gini variable. A higher HDI score indicates a higher level of development in a country. For both indicators, the 2017 values were used, as this is the year in which data collection of the EQLS sample was completed.

Covariates, used to account for the association of the individual characteristics with older people's civic engagement, included *gender* (0 = males, 1 = females) and *age* (continuous). *Education* was classified into three categories according to the 2011 International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED): primary (ISCED 0-1), secondary (ISCED 2-4), and tertiary (ISCED 5-8) (UNESCO, 2012). *Self-rated health* was assessed with the question, "In general, how is your health?" Responses were grouped into bad (bad, very bad = 0) and good (very good, good, fair = 1). Additionally, *employment status* (0 = employed/self-employed, 1 = retired, 2 = others) and living with a *partner* (0 = no, 1 = yes) were also included. *Perceived economic situation* was measured with the question, "Is your household able to make ends meet?" Responses were grouped into easily (very easily, easily, fairly easily = 0) and with difficulty (with some difficulty, with difficulty, with great difficulty = 1). *Homeownership* was evaluated with the question, "Which of the following best describes your accommodation?" Responses were recorded as 0 for owners and 1 for renters. These covariates were chosen based on previous research, which are known to correlate with civic engagement in later life (Serrat et al., 2023; Vercauteren et al., 2024).

2.3. Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to present the data on civic engagement, individual characteristics, neighbourhood conditions and country indicators were summarised as percentages and means for the overall sample. To account for population size differences, the EQLS data were weighted using the WCalib_crossnational_total weight (Eurofound, 2018b).

Second, two-level binary logistic regression models were conducted, with individuals on level 1 nested within countries at level 2. The *melogit* command in STATA 18 was used to analyse the data. The suitability of multilevel modelling was initially assessed by running empty models

for each type of civic engagement to determine the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC). According to Heck et al. (2013), an ICC value above 0.05 indicates sufficient clustering at the country level. The ICC values obtained were 0.16 for volunteering, 0.08 for informal caregiving, 0.22 for associational engagement, and 0.17 for political engagement, supporting the choice of using two-level binary logistic regressions.

To address the research questions, three models for each type of civic engagement were tested. Model 0 included only the covariates and their association with civic engagement dimensions. The aim of Model 1 was to investigate how neighbourhood conditions are associated with civic engagement among older people. Model 2 incorporated the two country-level indicators (Gini and HDI) in addition to the first-level variables to assess how a country's level of inequality and development affects older people's civic engagement, while controlling for individual characteristics and neighbourhood conditions. Additionally, cross-level interactions between the level of inequality and development in a country and neighbourhood conditions were analysed, to understand how these variables interact to associate with civic engagement among older people. All cross-level interactions were added simultaneously for each of the four civic engagement outcomes and were controlled for individual characteristics, neighbourhood conditions and country indicators.

Missing data were minimal across all variables, with the exception of the access to neighbourhood amenities measure, where 1,696 individuals (17.9%) did not respond. As a result, the sample sizes for the regression analysis varied between 7,224 and 7,306, depending on the type of civic engagement being examined. Descriptive and bivariate analyses of non-respondents revealed significant differences with respondents (p<0.05). Non-respondents were, on average, older and more likely to report financial difficulties and poorer health than those who did answer the neighbourhood amenities questions. They were also more often female, less likely to live with a partner, and more likely to fall into the 'other' employment status category. Participants with missing values were also more likely to have obtained a primary education and less likely to have a tertiary education.

3. Results

First, this paper addresses the sample characteristics of older adults in 33 European countries (n=9,468) (Table 10). Among the four dimensions of civic engagement, associational engagement (34.7%) was the most common, followed by political engagement (24.8%), informal caregiving (23.1%), and volunteering (21.6%). Regarding neighbourhood conditions (meso), the average rating for access to amenities was 2.96 (higher values indicating easier access), while the average for neighbourhood problems was 2.67 (higher values indicating fewer problems). Two-thirds (67.3%) reported feeling safe walking outside after dark. Concerning urbanisation, 11.4% of the respondents lived in the open countryside, 43.2% in a village or small town, 24.1% in a medium to large town, and 21.3% in a city or suburb. At the country level (macro), the mean Human Development Index (HDI) was 88.65, reflecting a generally high level of development across the participating countries (ranging from high HDI like Germany and Denmark (94.4) to lower HDI in Northern Macedonia (78.9)), while the mean Gini index was 31.78, indicating moderate income inequality (ranging from low inequality 23.2 (Slovakia) to higher inequality 43.5 (Turkey)).

Table 10

Sample characteristics of older people (aged 65+) in Europe (n = 9,468)

Civic engagement (dependent variable)		*n* (%)
Volunteering	Did voluntary work in community and social services or in educational, cultural, sports, professional, or other associations in the last 12 months	2,038 (21.6)
Informal caregiving	Cared for disabled or infirm family members, neighbours, or friends	2,166 (23.1)
Associational engagement	Participated in social activities of a club, society, or association	3,271 (34.7)
Political engagement	Did formal political activity in the last 12 months (attending meetings, working or unpaid volunteering for/through a union or political party), engaged in informal political activity in the last 12 months (unpaid voluntary work through social movements or charities, attended a demonstration, signed a petition, contacted a politician or public official, boycotted certain products, commented on political or social issues online)	2,306 (24.8)
Covariates		*n* (%)/mean (SD)
Gender	Male	4,036 (42.6)

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	Female	5,432 (57.4)
Age	Age in years	73.5 (SD=6.6)
Education	Primary	2,466 (25.4)
	Secondary	5,256 (55.8)
	Tertiary	1,726 (18.3)
Self-rated health	Fair/good/very good	7,562 (80.0)
	Bad/very bad	1,896 (20.1)
Employment	Retired	8,577 (90.6)
	Employed/self-employed	429 (4.5)
	Other	462 (4.9)
Partner in the household/	Yes	4,774 (50.4)
living together	No	4,694 (49.6)
Perceived economic	No problems making ends meet	5,091 (54.3)
situation	Problems making ends meet	4,228 (45.7)
Home ownership	Owner	8,025 (87.0)
	Renter	1,196 (13.0)
Perceived neighbourhood conditions		*n* (%)/mean (SD)
Access to neighbourhood amenities		2.96 (SD=0.8)
Problems in the neighbourhood		2.67 (SD=0.5)
Feelings of safety	Feels safe	6,175 (67.3)
	Feels neither safe nor unsafe	1,252 (13.6)
	Feels unsafe	1,755 (19.1)
Level of urbanisation	Open countryside	1,078 (11.4)
	Village/small town	4,085 (43.2)
	Medium to large town	2,283 (24.1)
	City or city suburb	2,018 (21.3)
Country indicators		*n* (%)/mean (SD)
Income inequality	GINI	31.78 (SD=4.1)
Development	HDI	88.65 (SD=4.4)

Rounding up the percentages might yield added percentages slightly higher than 100%

3.1. Multilevel models of civic engagement

Tables 11-14 present the results of the two-level binary logistic regression models, each focusing on one dimension of civic engagement. For volunteering (Table 11), greater access to neighbourhood amenities was positively associated with volunteering in Models 1 (OR=1.15; p=0.003) and 2, including the country indicators as well (OR=1.14; p=0.007). Neighbourhood problems, such as noise and poor air quality, were negatively associated with volunteering

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(Model 1: OR=0.78; *p*=0.010; Model 2: OR=0.77; *p*=0.006). Neither feelings of safety nor urbanisation showed significant associations. Comparing models 0 and 1, the association between volunteering and secondary education became non-significant when including neighbourhood conditions (Model 0: OR=1.64; *p*=0.009; Model 1: OR=1.49; *p*=0.052). Regarding the country-level indicators, a higher HDI was positively associated with volunteering at a statistically significant level (OR=1.17; *p*=0.000), while income inequality (Gini) was not (OR=1.06; *p*=0.126).

Table 11

Two-level binary logistic regression model examining the association between neighbourhood conditions and covariates (level 1) and Gini and HDI at the country level (level 2) with volunteering

Volunteering	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2	
	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value
Covariates						
Gender (ref. male)						
Female	0.99 (0.85-1.15)	0.908	1.00 (0.85-1.18)	0.998	1.00 (0.84-1.18)	0.957
Age	0.96 (0.95-0.98)	0.000	0.96 (0.94-0.98)	0.000	0.96 (0.94-0.97)	0.000
Education (ref. primary)						
Secondary	1.64 (1.13-2.38)	0.009	1.49 (1.00-2.21)	0.052	1.46 (0.98-2.17)	0.062
Tertiary	3.11 (2.09-4.63)	0.000	2.78 (1.80-4.29)	0.000	2.70 (1.76-4.15)	0.000
Self-rated health (ref. bad, very bad)						
Fair, good, very good	1.70 (1.27-2.26)	0.000	1.65 (1.14-2.40)	0.008	1.64 (1.13-2.37)	0.009
Employment status (ref. employed/self-employed)						
Retired	0.79 (0.52-1.20)	0.268	0.78 (0.50-1.22)	0.275	0.79 (0.51-1.24)	0.310
Other	0.46 (0.25-0.87)	0.016	0.41 (0.19-0.88)	0.023	0.43 (0.20-0.91)	0.028
Partner in the household/ living together (ref. no)						
Yes	1.08 (0.92-1.28)	0.352	1.06 (0.88-1.28)	0.547	1.06 (0.87-1.28)	0.560
Perceived economic situation (ref. no problems making ends meet)						
Problems making ends meet	0.86 (0.75-1.01)	0.070	0.86 (0.71-1.03)	0.109	0.87 (0.72-1.05)	0.141
House ownership (ref. owner)						
Renter	0.81 (0.70-0.94)	0.005	0.81 (0.68-0.96)	0.015	0.79 (0.67-0.94)	0.008
Perceived neighbourhood conditions						

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	Model 0	Model 1 OR (95% CI)	p	Model 2 OR (95% CI)	p
Accessibility neighbourhood amenities		1.15 (1.05-1.26)	0.003	1.14 (1.03-1.25)	0.007
Neighbourhood problems		0.78 (0.65-0.94)	0.010	0.77 (0.64-0.93)	0.006
Safety (ref. agree)					
Neither agree nor disagree		1.06 (0.82-1.38)	0.653	1.06 (0.82-1.39)	0.644
Disagree		0.98 (0.82-1.18)	0.864	0.97 (0.81-1.17)	0.784
Urbanisation (ref. the open countryside)					
A village/small town		1.01 (0.80-1.29)	0.908	1.03 (0.82-1.31)	0.791
A medium to large town		0.87 (0.63-1.19)	0.369	0.89 (0.65-1.22)	0.457
A city or city suburb		0.83 (0.62-1.13)	0.236	0.86 (0.64-1.16)	0.317
Country indicators					
HDI				1.17 (1.11-1.22)	0.000
Gini				1.06 (0.98-1.14)	0.126
Constant	1.86 (0.4-8.67)	3.47 (0.67-18.02)	0.139	0.00 (0.00-0.00)	0.000
Intra Class Correlation (ICC)	0.15 (0.11-0.20)	0.15 (0.11-0.22)		0.07 (0.04-0.14)	
AIC	7108.15	6057.607		6036.87	
BIC	7193.48	6188.64		6181.70	
Log pseudolikelihood	-3584.99	-3009.803		-2997.44	

Note. Model 0 included covariates. Model 1 added perceived neighbourhood conditions, Model 2 added Gini and HDI indicators on the second level. The weight WCalib was applied to the regression analysis. HDI = Human development Index, Gini = income inequality index

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As shown in Table 12, neighbourhood problems were significantly negatively associated with informal caregiving in Model 1 (OR=0.78; p=0.000). Feelings of safety were positively associated, with neutral feelings of safety being linked to an increased likelihood of providing informal caregiving (OR=1.29; p=0.026). The significant neighbourhood conditions in Model 1 remained significant in Model 2. In Model 0, education level was positively significantly associated with informal caregiving (Secondary education: OR=1.22; p=0.048; Tertiary education: OR=1.40; p=0.014), but this significance was not found in models 1 and 2. Financial struggles were significantly associated with a higher likelihood of informal caregiving in Model 2 (OR=1.20; p=0.038), but not in Models 0 and 1. A higher HDI (model 2) was positively associated with informal caregiving (OR=1.08; p=0.002), while income inequality (Gini) showed no significant association (OR=1.03; p=0.19).

Table 12

Two-level binary logistic regression model examining the association between neighbourhood conditions and covariates (level 1) and Gini and HDI at the country level (level 2) with informal care

Informal caregiving	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2	
	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value
Covariates						
Gender (ref. male)						
Female	1.39 (1.19-1.63)	0.000	1.37 (1.14-1.65)	0.001	1.37 (1.14-1.65)	0.001
Age	0.97 (0.95-0.98)	0.000	0.97 (0.96-0.98)	0.000	0.97 (0.95-0.98)	0.000
Education (ref. primary)						
Secondary	1.22 (1.00-1.48)	0.048	1.17 (0.93-1.46)	0.179	1.17 (0.93-1.46)	0.179
Tertiary	1.40 (1.07-1.83)	0.014	1.27 (0.93-1.75)	0.136	1.26 (0.92-1.74)	0.147
Self-rated health (ref. bad, very bad)						
Fair, good, very good	1.23 (1.06-1.43)	0.007	1.19 (1.02-1.40)	0.030	1.18 (1.01-1.39)	0.042
Employment status (ref. employed/self-employed)						
Retired	0.70 (0.50-0.97)	0.031	0.66 (0.47-0.93)	0.018	0.67 (0.47-0.94)	0.021
Other	0.53 (0.24-1.17)	0.116	0.50 (0.19-1.36)	0.176	0.51 (0.19-1.37)	0.180
Partner in the household/ living together (ref. no)						
Yes	1.76 (1.46-2.13)	0.000	1.71 (1.43-2.05)	0.000	1.71 (1.43-2.05)	0.000
Perceived economic situation (ref. no problems making ends meet)						
Problems making ends meet	1.13 (0.96-1.33)	0.144	1.18 (0.99-1.40)	0.065	1.20 (1.01-1.43)	0.038
House ownership (ref. owner)						
Renter	1.05 (0.86-1.27)	0.649	0.92 (0.71-1.16)	0.467	0.90 (0.71-1.13)	0.361
Perceived neighbourhood conditions						

	Model 0		Model 1	p	Model 2	p
Accessibility neighbourhood amenities			1.04 (0.95-1.14)	0.357	1.04 (0.95-1.14)	0.434
Neighbourhood problems			0.78 (0.67-0.89)	0.000	0.77 (0.67-0.89)	0.000
Safety (ref. agree)						
Neither agree nor disagree			1.29 (1.03-1.62)	0.026	1.29 (1.03-1.62)	0.026
Disagree			1.00 (0.79-1.26)	0.995	1.00 (0.79-1.26)	0.969
Urbanisation (ref. the open countryside)						
A village/small town			0.87 (0.66-1.16)	0.344	0.89 (0.67-1.17)	0.398
A medium to large town			1.03 (0.74-1.44)	0.842	1.06 (0.76-1.47)	0.747
A city or city suburb			0.92 (0.66-1.27)	0.608	0.94 (0.68-1.30)	0.708
Country indicators						
HDI					1.08 (1.03-1.14)	0.002
Gini					1.03 (0.98-1.09)	0.191
Constant	1.86 (0.54-6.46)	0.326	3.36 (0.81-14.02)	0.096	0.00 (0.00-0.12)	0.004
Intra Class Correlation (ICC)	0.08 (0.05-0.11)		0.09 (0.06-0.13)		0.07 (0.05-0.10)	
AIC	8080.68		6761.98		6757.11	
BIC	8165.97		6892.96		6901.87	
Log pseudolikelihood	-4028.34		-3361.99		-3357.56	

Note. Model 0 included covariates. Model 1 added perceived neighbourhood conditions, Model 2 added Gini and HDI indicators on the second level. The weight WCalib was applied to the regression analysis. HDI = Human development Index, Gini = income inequality index

Table 13 shows that access to neighbourhood amenities was positively associated with associational engagement (Model 1: OR=1.20; *p*=0.002; Model 2: OR=1.20; *p*=0.003). Neighbourhood problems were negatively associated with associational engagement in Model 1 (OR=0.84; *p*=0.053), but the association only became statistically significant in Model 2 (OR=0.84; *p*=0.045) after adding country indicators. Safety was positively associated with associational engagement in both models (Model 1: OR=1.24; *p*=0.042; Model 2: OR=1.24; *p*=0.040), with those feeling neutral about safety more likely to engage. Urbanisation was significantly associated with associational engagement, with residents of small towns or villages more likely to engage (Model 1: OR=1.27; *p*=0.006; Model 2: OR=1.28; *p*=0.004). The covariate model (Model 0) indicated that older people struggling financially were significantly less likely to engage in associational activities (OR=0.82; *p*=0.020). However, this association became non-significant when neighbourhood conditions were added in Model 1 (OR=0.84; *p*=0.090). Conversely, homeownership showed no significant association with associational engagement in Model 0 (OR=0.84; *p*=0.062), but being a renter became significantly negatively associated with associational engagement when neighbourhood conditions were included (OR=0.79; *p*=0.040). In Model 2, higher HDI at the country level was associated with higher associational engagement (OR=1.19; *p*=0.000), while economic inequality (Gini) showed no significant association (OR=0.99; *p*=0.828).

Table 13

Two-level binary logistic regression model examining the association between neighbourhood conditions and covariates (level 1) and Gini and HDI at the country level (level 2) with associational engagement

Associational engagement	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2	
	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value
Covariates						
Gender (ref. male)						
Female	0.97 (0.81-1.15)	0.684	0.97 (0.81-1.15)	0.709	0.96 (0.81-1.15)	0.671
Age	0.97 (0.96-0.98)	0.00	0.98 (0.97-0.99)	0.000	0.98 (0.97-0.99)	0.000
Education (ref. primary)						
Secondary	1.61 (1.28-2.01)	0.000	1.51 (1.18-1.94)	0.001	1.48 (1.15-1.91)	0.002
Tertiary	3.28 (2.54-4.23)	0.000	3.05 (2.27-4.11)	0.000	2.97 (2.20-4.02)	0.000
Self-rated health (ref. bad, very bad)						
Fair, good, very good	1.78 (1.45-2.19)	0.000	1.59 (1.30-1.94)	0.000	1.58 (1.29-1.93)	0.000
Employment status (ref. employed/self-employed)						
Retired	0.82 (0.47-1.43)	0.488	0.78 (0.44-1.37)	0.381	0.78 (0.44-1.38)	0.394
Other	0.52 (0.28-0.96)	0.036	0.48 (0.23-0.97)	0.042	0.49 (0.25-0.99)	0.046
Partner in the household/ living together (ref. no)						
Yes	1.00 (0.87-1.16)	0.954	1.00 (0.86-1.16)	0.955	0.99 (0.85-1.16)	0.935
Perceived economic situation (ref. no problems making ends meet)						
Problems making ends meet	0.82 (0.70-0.97)	0.020	0.84 (0.69-1.03)	0.090	0.84 (0.69-1.03)	0.095
Education (ref. primary)						
House ownership (ref. owner)						
Renter	0.84 (0.69-1.01)	0.062	0.79 (0.63-0.99)	0.040	0.78 (0.63-0.98)	0.030

Perceived neighbourhood conditions

	Model 0 OR (CI)	Model 0 p	Model 1 OR (CI)	Model 1 p	Model 2 OR (CI)	Model 2 p
Perceived neighbourhood conditions						
Accessibility neighbourhood amenities			1.20 (1.07-1.35)	0.002	1.19 (1.06-1.34)	0.003
Neighbourhood problems			0.84 (0.71-1.00)	0.053	0.84 (0.70-1.00)	0.045
Safety (ref. agree)						
Neither agree nor disagree			1.24 (1.01-1.52)	0.042	1.24 (1.01-1.52)	0.040
Disagree			0.94 (0.80-1.11)	0.468	0.93 (0.79-1.10)	0.417
Urbanisation (ref. the open countryside)						
A village/small town			1.27 (1.07-1.51)	0.006	1.28 (1.08-1.52)	0.004
A medium to large town			1.08 (0.86-1.35)	0.501	1.09 (0.87-1.36)	0.442
A city or city suburb			1.18 (0.91-1.51)	0.207	1.20 (0.93-1.55)	0.163
Country indicators						
HDI					1.19 (1.14-1.24)	0.000
Gini					0.99 (0.94-1.05)	0.828
Constant	1.67 (0.65-4.27)	0.287	1.24 (0.38-4.05)	0.719	0.00 (0.00-0.00)	0.000
Intra Class Correlation (ICC)	0.20 (0.15-0.27)		0.21 (0.15-0.28)		0.07 (0.05-0.10)	
AIC	8188.22		6953.25		6918.22	
BIC	8273.55		7084.29		7063.05	
Log pseudolikelihood	-4082.11		-3457.62		-3438.11	

Note. Model 0 included covariates. Model 1 added perceived neighbourhood conditions. Model 2 added Gini and HDI indicators on the second level. The weight

WCalib was applied to the regression analysis. HDI = Human development Index, Gini = income inequality index

Table 14 presents the results for political engagement. Access to neighbourhood amenities was positively associated with political engagement (Model 1: OR=1.11; *p*=0.025; Model 2: OR=1.10; *p*=0.045), while neighbourhood problems decreased the likelihood of political engagement (Model 1: OR=0.71; *p*=0.000; Model 2: OR=0.70; *p*=0.000). Safety and the level of urbanisation were not significantly associated with political engagement. All covariates remained statistically significant in their association with political engagement after adding neighbourhood conditions in Model 1. In model 2, a higher HDI at the country level was associated with a higher likelihood of political engagement (OR=1.16; *p*=0.000), while no statistically significant association was found with the income inequality measure (Gini) (OR=1.05; *p*=0.185).

Table 14

Two-level binary logistic regression model examining the association between neighbourhood conditions and covariates (level 1) and Gini and HDI at the country

level (level 2) with political engagement

Political engagement	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2	
	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value
Covariates						
Gender (ref. male)						
Female	0.92 (0.79-1.07-	0.290	0.89 (0.76-1.05)	0.172	0.89 (0.76-1.05)	0.162
Age	0.95 (0.94-0.96)	0.000	0.96 (0.94-0.97)	0.000	0.95 (0.94-0.97)	0.000
Education (ref. primary)						
Secondary	2.21 (1.55-3.13)	0.000	2.02 (1.39-2.94)	0.000	2.00 (1.38-2.90)	0.000
Tertiary	5.77 (3.94-8.45)	0.000	5.10 (3.37-7.72)	0.000	5.00 (3.31-7.56)	0.000
Self-rated health (ref. bad, very bad)						
Fair, good, very good	1.44 (1.17-1.78)	0.001	1.30 (1.01-1.68)	0.041	1.29 (1.00-1.66)	0.048
Employment status (ref. employed/self-employed)						
Retired	0.68 (0.43-1.06)	0.089	0.65 (0.41-1.01)	0.056	0.65 (0.42-1.02)	0.061
Other	0.44 (0.20-0.97)	0.041	0.38 (0.15-0.95)	0.039	0.39 (0.16-0.97)	0.043
Partner in the household/ living together (ref. no)						
Yes	1.23 (1.03-1.46)	0.021	1.29 (1.09-1.54)	0.004	1.29 (1.09-1.53)	0.004
Perceived economic situation (ref. no problems making ends meet)						
Problems making ends meet	0.95 (0.83-1.01)	0.497	0.99 (0.87-1.14)	0.917	1.01 (0.88-1.15)	0.936
House ownership (ref. owner)						
Renter	0.96 (0.77-1.21)	0.751	0.95 (0.75-1.20)	0.658	0.93 (0.74-1.18)	0.558
Perceived neighbourhood conditions						

	Model 0		Model 1		Model 2	
Accessibility neighbourhood amenities			1.11 (1.01-1.22)	0.025	1.10 (1.00-1.21)	0.045
Neighbourhood problems			0.71 (0.59-0.85)	0.000	0.70 (0.58-0.84)	0.000
Safety (ref. agree)						
Neither agree nor disagree			1.19 (0.88-1.63)	0.260	1.19 (0.88-1.63)	0.261
Disagree			0.94 (0.78-1.14)	0.526	0.93 (0.77-1.13)	0.473
Urbanisation (ref. the open countryside)						
A village/small town			1.10 (0.78-1.55)	0.575	1.12 (0.80-1.58)	0.508
A medium to large town			1.02 (0.69-1.48)	0.938	1.04 (0.71-1.52)	0.834
A city or city suburb			1.14 (0.83-1.57)	0.419	1.17 (0.85-1.62)	0.327
Country indicators						
HDI					1.16 (1.09-1.23)	0.000
Gini					1.05 (0.98-1.14)	0.185
Constant	4.12 (1.18-14.33)	0.026	7.16 (1.26-40.56)	0.026	0.00 (0.00-0.00)	0.000
Intra Class Correlation (ICC)	0.17 (0.12-0.23)		0.17 (0.12-0.23)		0.10 (0.06-0.16)	
AIC	7207.42		6146.95		6130.80	
BIC	7292.60		6277.77		6275.39	
Log pseudolikelihood	-3591.71		-3054.48		-3044.40	

Note. Model 0 included covariates. Model 1 added perceived neighbourhood conditions, Model 2 added Gini and HDI indicators on the second level. The weight WCalib was applied to the regression analysis. HDI = Human development Index, Gini = income inequality index

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As shown in Tables 11-14, Model 2 consistently demonstrated that higher country development, as measured by the HDI, was associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in all four civic engagement dimensions. Including country-level indicators (HDI and Gini) in Model 2 led to decreased ICC values compared to Models 0 and 1, suggesting that country-level indicators, particularly HDI, explained part of the variation in civic engagement among older people across countries.

To address the third research question on the interaction of meso- and macro-level variables, cross-level interactions between neighbourhood conditions and country indicators of development and income inequality were analysed. Table 15 shows the significant interaction effects and shows significant interaction effects between HDI and access to amenities on both political (OR=1.03; p=0.013) and associational engagement (OR=1.02; p=0.006). The positive interaction indicates that older people in countries with high levels of HDI, in combination with good access to amenities, were more likely to engage in associations and political engagement. Additionally, a significant negative interaction was found between HDI and a neutral feeling of safety concerning informal care (OR=0.94; p=0.034), meaning that in highly developed countries, older adults who neither feel safe nor unsafe may be less likely to engage in informal care. Non-significant interaction effects are not reported.

Table 15

Significant cross-level interaction effects

	Informal care		Associational engagement		Political engagement	
	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value	OR (95% CI)	p-value
HDI*feeling neither safe/unsafe	0.94 (0.90-1.00)	0.034				
HDI*access to amenities			1.03 (1.01-1.05)	0.013	1.02 (1.01-1.04)	0.006

 HDI = Human development Index

4. Discussion

Adopting a socio-ecological lens, this study examined how meso-level neighbourhood conditions and country-level development, and inequality relate to civic engagement among older adults in Europe. Two main patterns were identified. First, neighbourhood conditions were found to be consistently significant. Specifically, access to neighbourhood amenities was observed to facilitate all forms of civic engagement, while simultaneously neighbourhood problems hindered civic engagement. Second, higher country development (HDI) promoted civic engagement, while income inequality (Gini) showed no associations. Cross-level interactions revealed that the benefits of neighbourhoods with easier access to amenities are particularly pronounced in developed countries, reinforcing the value of a multilevel perspective on civic engagement in later life. Conversely, ambivalent safety perceptions suppressed informal helping in more developed countries.

4.1. Neighbourhood conditions and civic engagement

The results provide strong evidence that neighbourhood conditions, particularly access to amenities and neighbourhood problems, play an important role in civic engagement among older people. Our results corroborate prior research demonstrating that the presence of accessible public amenities fosters engagement by reducing practical and mental barriers (Dury et al., 2016; Greenfield et al., 2019). Equally, neighbourhood problems, such as noise or air pollution, have been shown to diminish civic engagement, likely due to their negative impact on perceived liveability and well-being (Dury et al., 2016). Contrary to the findings of prior studies, which suggest that older people address significant neighbourhood issues through engagement (e.g., Cheung & Mui, 2023), this study did not find evidence that neighbourhood problems increase civic engagement. However, the observation that individuals who perceive a neutral or ambivalent sense of safety were more inclined to engage in informal caregiving and associational activities may be indicative of a possible compensatory dynamic. In this scenario, older adults who do not feel entirely safe civically engage to strengthen social ties or enhance their safety perception (Leverentz et al., 2018).

The disparities in civic engagement between urban and rural areas were found to be minimal. However, living in small towns and villages was associated with a higher likelihood of associational engagement, which aligns with previous research suggesting that rural community

life may offer stronger relational incentives for joining associations (Blekesaune & Haugen, 2018).

4.2. Country-level development and inequality

In line with prior research by Perkins et al. (2021), which identified a significant positive correlation between political engagement and country development, the present study found that country development (HDI) was positively associated with civic engagement across all examined dimensions. This finding supports the idea that developed countries provide better structural supports, such as education, income, and health systems, which collectively enable civic engagement in later life (UNDP, 2024).

In contrast, income inequality (Gini) was not significantly associated with civic engagement in any domain. Although previous studies (e.g., Juma & Fernández-Sainz, 2024; Seifert & König, 2019) have reported a negative association between income inequality and civic engagement, suggesting that widening income disparities hinder engagement in civic activities among lower-income groups, the current findings do not support this association. This is consistent with findings from Perkins et al. (2021) and Stockemer & Scruggs (2012), and may suggest that other institutional indicators, like civic culture or welfare regimes, play a more decisive role in shaping the relationship between income inequality and civic engagement.

4.3. Cross-level interactions between neighbourhood conditions and country indicators for civic engagement

The interaction patterns support a cumulative advantage thesis. Country development (HDI) strengthened the positive effect of neighbourhood amenities on political and associational engagement. This suggests that civic engagement is most likely to flourish in settings where both high-quality neighbourhood conditions and favourable country structures are present (Vercauteren et al., 2025). In such settings, older adults may encounter fewer barriers and more opportunities to engage meaningfully in civic life.

However, in countries with higher development levels, older adults who expressed uncertainty regarding neighbourhood safety were less inclined to provide informal care. This observation suggests that even in well-developed countries, perceptions of insecurity can deter caregiving responsibilities (Cheung & Mui, 2023).

The complexity of these interactions necessitates a multilevel, socio-ecological approach to fully capture the diverse indicators associated with civic engagement in later life. The findings from this study underscore the need for coordinated national policies and local investments: while country-level development provides a foundation, neighbourhood infrastructure, such as safe, accessible spaces, plays a critical enabling role. Future research should build on these insights to inform strategies that promote ageing in place and lifelong civic engagement (e.g., Caperon et al., 2022).

4.4. Changes in significance between models

Incorporating meso- and macro-level variables in our study led to notable changes in the importance of several individual-level predictors. This underscores the value of a multilevel modelling approach. For instance, the previously significant association between education and volunteering became non-significant after incorporating neighbourhood-level conditions. This suggests that local environmental conditions may influence older adults' engagement in civic activities (Dury et al., 2016; Vercauteren et al., 2025).

Similarly, financial hardship only emerged as a significant predictor of informal caregiving once country-level development was accounted for. This finding indicates that economic strain may compel older adults to take on caregiving roles, even in countries with supportive welfare systems (Giplaye, 2019; Quashie et al., 2022). Conversely, the association between financial strain and associational engagement weakened after incorporating neighbourhood conditions, thereby indicating that community resources may buffer the negative effects of economic disadvantage (Bonomi Bezzo & Jeannet, 2023).

Political engagement, by contrast, showed relatively little variation across models. This stability suggests that individual-level predictors, such as education, perceived economic situation and health, may serve as more stable drivers of political activity in later life (Ackermann, 2019; Serrat et al., 2021).

Overall, the observed variations in the significance of associations between variables across different models and the interaction effects between country- and neighbourhood-level variables underscore the importance of addressing contextual influences on civic engagement in later life.

4.5. Limitations and future directions

The present study draws on cross-sectional data from the 2016–2017 wave of the EQLS, which imposes limitations on the generalisability of the findings over time. The evolution of civic engagement, particularly in the realm of digital forms, may have occurred since that time (e.g., Reuter, 2021). Additionally, due to the lack of data on how intensely older adults engage in each dimension of civic engagement, this study is unable to capture those nuances. Furthermore, the analysis was constrained to only two levels due to limitations in the available data. Nesting individuals within neighbourhood units on the second level, and in countries on the third level, thus creating a three-level analysis, could facilitate the acquisition of more nuanced insights into the relationships between the micro, meso, and macro levels and their association with civic engagement in later life.

In this study, HDI and Gini were used as structural country indicators. However, the authors also considered a comprehensive range of indicators, including religiosity, materialism (Pancer, 2015), ageism (Abrams & Swift, 2012), solidarity (Global Nation, 2024), and a country's culture of civic engagement (Simon & Mobekk, 2019). Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2011), such as collectivism (Pancer, 2015), were also considered. These cultural dimensions may shape civic behaviour in ways not captured by HDI or Gini. Incorporating them alongside structural indicators could yield a more comprehensive understanding of civic engagement in later life (Tesch-Römer & Von Kondratowitz, 2006). Data on these cultural indicators could not be utilised due to incompatibility with the countries included in the research. In future studies, there is a need to integrate alternative structural and cultural macro-level indicators to achieve a more holistic understanding of civic engagement in later life.

Moreover, future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine the evolution of civic engagement trajectories among older adults over time (Serrat et al., 2021), with a particular focus on how these trajectories respond to changing neighbourhood conditions or country indicators. To further elucidate the mechanisms through which older adults engage civically and respond to neighbourhood environments and national policies, qualitative and mixed-method studies are also needed.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of neighbourhood and country contexts in shaping civic engagement among older adults. Access to neighbourhood amenities consistently supported engagement across all dimensions of civic engagement, while neighbourhood problems posed barriers. At the macro level, country development (HDI) exhibited a positive association with engagement, while income inequality (Gini) did not show a significant relationship. Furthermore, cross-level interactions showed that the positive effects of supportive neighbourhood environments on political engagement and associational engagement are most pronounced in countries with a higher development level (HDI).

These findings underscore the importance of a socio-ecological perspective in examining the civic engagement of older adults. This perspective indicates that civic engagement in later life is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by the interplay between local environmental and country conditions. Consequently, endeavours aimed at fostering civic engagement among older adults ought to integrate national policies with local strategies, for example, by enhancing neighbourhood infrastructure and promoting social cohesion. Future research must delve further into the intricate interplay of multilevel indicators to elucidate the dynamics that facilitate or impede civic engagement in later life across a spectrum of diverse contexts.

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CHAPTER 7: GENERAL DISCUSSION

Chapter 7: General discussion

This final chapter presents an overarching discussion of this dissertation. It begins with an overview of the main findings in relation to the research questions. This is followed by a series of critical reflections, which also incorporate directions for future research. Subsequently, the chapter explores the implications for policy and practice. The chapter concludes with a general conclusion.

1. Discussion of the main findings

Firstly, civic engagement in later life is frequently approached as a single, uniform construct, with a predominant focus on formal volunteering or political engagement, rather than as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing a range of diverse engagement dimensions. Secondly, existing research has the tendency to prioritise individual-level explanations for civic engagement in later life, overlooking the broader socio-ecological context, including the living environment and national-level conditions, that shapes opportunities for engagement. To address these gaps, three interrelated aims are pursued:

1. **To map the civic engagement profiles in later life**, providing a nuanced, multidimensional picture of how older adults combine different forms of civic engagement.
2. **To identify factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels that shape civic engagement among older people**, thereby moving beyond individual explanations and foregrounding contextual factors.
3. **To integrate these levels**, explaining how individual and contextual (neighbourhood and national) factors jointly shape civic engagement and interact in complex ways.

To address aim 1 and offer a nuanced view on the multidimensionality of civic engagement in later life, Chapter 3 of this dissertation demonstrates that civic engagement consists of different dimensions that co-occur within distinct engagement profiles. This issue is further discussed in *1.1. Understanding multidimensional civic engagement in later life*.

Furthermore, the findings of Chapters 3-6 emphasise the contextual embeddedness of civic engagement in later life, demonstrating that it is shaped by interrelated factors operating across micro, meso, and macro levels. Building on this, an integrated ecological model was developed

and applied. The model conceptualises civic engagement as both multidimensional and ecologically embedded, emerging from the dynamic interplay of individual characteristics, features of the living environment, and broader societal structures. The living environment is of particular interest in this study, as it is recognised as a factor both enabling and hindering civic engagement in later life, and serves as a unifying concept bridging the micro and macro levels (Greenfield et al., 2019). This ecological perspective addresses aims 2 and 3 and is discussed in detail in *1.2. Ecological integration of civic engagement in later life.*

1.1. Understanding multidimensional civic engagement in later life

Civic engagement in later life is multidimensional, both in terms of what types of activities older adults do and how they combine these activities. The six empirically derived profiles (see Chapter 3) – *Non-engaged*, *Informal Caregivers*, *Association-Engaged*, *Volunteers*, *Politically Engaged* and *Diversely Engaged* – demonstrate the diversity of civic engagement in later life. While the *Diversely Engaged* older adults engage across several dimensions, other profiles concentrate narrowly on one form, often informal caregiving, or do not engage at all.

By identifying these profiles, this dissertation demonstrates that civic engagement in later life cannot be understood through a one-size-fits-all approach. Furthermore, it also highlights the difficulties that may arise between different types of engagement, as individuals navigate limited resources and responsibilities across diverse civic engagement domains.

1.1.1. Role dynamics shape multidimensional civic engagement in later life

Two countervailing mechanisms – i.e. *role extension* and *role overload* (Strauss, 2021) – may help to explain the different engagement profiles found in Chapter 3. *Role extension theory* suggests that engagement in one civic dimension can encourage engagement in others. For instance, engagement in associational activities can encourage volunteering (Dury, De Donder, et al., 2016), and volunteering can, in turn, encourage informal helping behaviours (Strauss, 2021). This reinforcing effect is more likely among older adults with sufficient resources (Ackermann, 2019; Serrat et al., 2023; Stopka et al., 2022). In this research, this dynamic is illustrated in the *Volunteering*, *Politically Engaged* and *Diversely Engaged* profiles, in which older adults, who benefited from a higher level of socio-structural and social capital resources, were engaged in a multitude of civic activities.

Conversely, *role overload theory* underscores how limited resources can constrain civic engagement across multiple dimensions (Choi et al., 2007; Coverman, 1989; Strauss, 2021). For example, older adults who are heavily engaged in informal caregiving may lack time or energy to engage in volunteering or associational activities (Bertogg & Strauss, 2020; Dury et al., 2015; Strauss, 2021). This dissertation demonstrates that this phenomenon is particularly evident in the *Informal Caregiver profile*, where older adults were engaged exclusively in informal caregiving, with no engagement in other dimensions. Intensive informal caregiving may limit the capacity of older adults to engage elsewhere. A related pattern emerges in the *Association-engaged profile*, where civic engagement remains limited to associational engagement and informal caregiving, without extending to other dimensions of engagement. This contrasts with earlier research (Dury et al., 2015), which identified a positive association between engagement in associations and volunteering. The findings of my dissertation indicate that civic engagement is shaped not only by socio-structural and social capital resources, but also by trade-offs between types of engagement.

1.1.2. Informal caregiving, digital engagement and informal political engagement as valuable parts of civic engagement

The civic engagement profiles in Chapter 3 clearly show the central role of informal caregiving. Present across nearly all profiles, including those engaged in just one or two civic activities, informal caregiving emerges as a substantial and consistent dimension of civic engagement in later life. This finding is reinforced in Chapter 6, where statistical associations between informal caregiving and neighbourhood conditions and national development are identified. These results further highlight informal caregiving as a socially embedded and context-sensitive form of civic engagement in later life.

These findings call for a broader conceptualisation of civic engagement, one that goes beyond volunteering or political engagement. This dissertation adopts such a perspective by recognising the wide range of informal contributions made by older adults to their communities, many of which remain underrepresented in research and policy discourses. As Verbakel (2018) observed, individuals frequently do not self-identify as caregivers, even when providing substantial support, resulting in an underestimation of informal caregiving. These informal practices not only reflect meaningful forms of civic engagement but also play a crucial role in reinforcing interpersonal relationships and strengthening community networks (Dury et al., 2023). Moreover, adopting a diversity-sensitive perspective that acknowledges non-

traditional forms of civic engagement is imperative for recognising the diverse expressions of informal caregiving across contexts, given that understandings of civic engagement differ significantly across cultures (Pego & Nunes, 2018; Serrat et al., 2022). The omission of these understudied and less visible dimensions of civic engagement is not trivial. It reflects a broader tendency in civic engagement research to prioritise formal and visible forms of engagement, often neglecting the significance of everyday, informal practices (Serrat, 2025a). This phenomenon reinforces the established norms associated with what is considered 'successful ageing' and excludes less visible forms of engagement.

The broader perspective used in this dissertation also draws attention to other dimensions of civic engagement that remain largely overlooked in both research and practice, such as digital engagement. While Seifert & Rössel (2021) point out the growing relevance of digital engagement, it remains less prevalent among older adults (Chapter 3) and is underexplored in gerontological literature (Reuter & Scharf, 2025). The scoping review in Chapter 5 also highlights a notable lack of studies examining how the living environment shapes digital engagement among older adults.

Similarly, the present dissertation (see Chapters 3 and 6) acknowledges informal political engagement, such as signing petitions or joining protests, as a meaningful dimension of civic engagement in later life (Serrat & Tesch-Römer, 2025). However, these activities are rarely studied in relation to the living environment (see Chapter 5). Nevertheless, informal political actions reflect democratic engagement and play a significant role in shaping public policy and driving social change (Bherer et al., 2023).

By integrating the different overlooked dimensions (i.e. informal caregiving, digital engagement and informal political engagement), this dissertation contributes to a more comprehensive framework for understanding civic engagement. This framework is indicative of both the diversity of civic activities and the strategic decision-making processes of older adults in regard to the combination or non-combination of these activities. Civic engagement is thus multidimensional, not only in terms of *what* people do, but also in *how* they do it, by combining different dimensions (Dury et al., 2025; Serrat, 2025b).

1.2. Ecological integration of civic engagement in later life

1.2.1. Context matters: Individual, neighbourhood and national factors co-define engagement

Traditional approaches to civic engagement have often placed significant emphasis on individual-level determinants as the primary drivers (Serrat et al., 2020) of this phenomenon. While these factors are undeniably important, this perspective has been critiqued by scholars for overlooking the broader ecological context in which engagement unfolds (Serrat et al., 2020). Scholars argue that such an overly narrow focus risks missing how structural and environmental conditions give shape to both the opportunities and constraints for civic engagement (Caperon et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2021; Morrow-Howell & Greenfield, 2016). In response, this dissertation adopts an integrated ecological model (see Figure 7) that examines the dynamic interplay between individual characteristics (micro-level), living environment settings (meso-level), and societal structures (macro-level). While personal resources and motivations remain central to this theoretical framework, they are embedded within and shaped by these interdependent layers. The meso level is of particular interest as it is a critical relational layer where civic engagement is enacted, negotiated, and reshaped (Dikmans et al., 2025; Greenfield et al., 2019; Oswald et al., 2024).

The following sections will apply this ecological framework to analyse how factors at each level shape civic engagement in later life. Special emphasis is placed on cross-level interactions and cumulative effects, thereby highlighting the complexity of civic engagement dynamics.

Figure 7

An integrated socio-ecological model of multidimensional civic engagement in later life
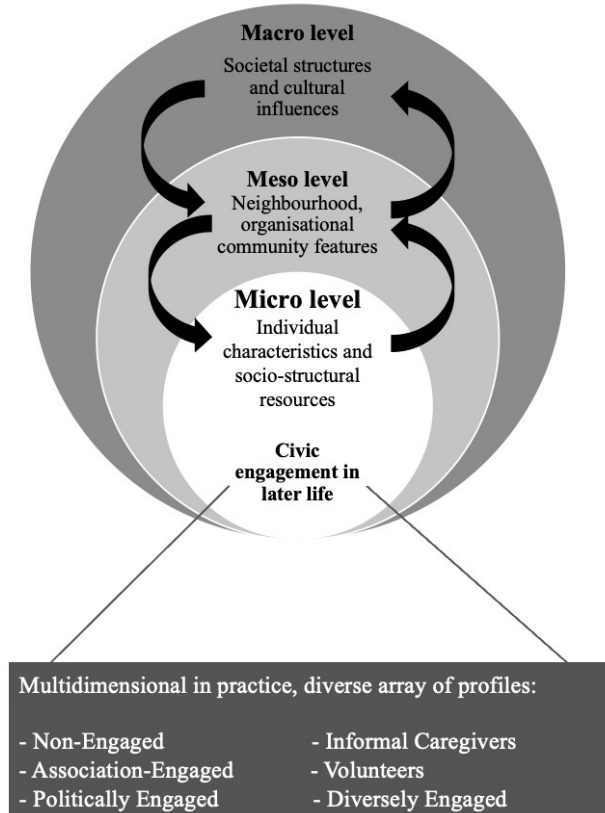
1.2.2. An integrated socio-ecological model of multidimensional civic engagement in later life

Individual characteristics matter, but do not fully explain civic engagement

Previous research has shown that at the micro level, civic engagement is influenced by individual characteristics such as health, education, economic status, and social capital characteristics (Dury et al., 2015, 2020; Einolf & Chambré, 2011; Leedahl et al., 2017; Serrat et al., 2023). Chapter 4 discusses this literature in more detail, demonstrating that older adults with better self-rated health, higher educational attainment, and more favourable economic conditions are more likely to engage in volunteering, political engagement, and digital civic engagement.

This research makes a significant contribution to the field by applying socio-structural resources and social capital theory to empirically examine which characteristics make some older adults more likely to engage in a diversity of civic activities than others. This objective is realised by linking these individual-level characteristics to the civic engagement profiles identified in Chapter 3. Specifically, the *Diversely Engaged* and *Politically Engaged* profiles were characterised by higher levels of socio-structural and social capital resources, while the *Non-Engaged* and *Informal Caregivers* profiles reflected lower levels.

Furthermore, this dissertation contributes to a nuanced understanding of how not all forms of civic engagement are equally dependent on individual resources. The *Informal Caregivers* profile, for instance, engages in caregiving despite limited socio-structural resources. As indicated by earlier studies (Bertogg & Strauss, 2020; Hermansen, 2016; Strauss, 2021), this dimension of civic engagement is more related to situational demands and familial obligations than with voluntary choice. Chapter 3 further demonstrates how social capital resources, such as employment and living together with a partner, shape civic engagement in later life. The findings from Dury et al. (2015) are reinforced by the evidence that older adults who are employed or living with a partner are more likely to be *Diversely Engaged*, while those living alone may be more inclined to volunteer or provide informal care. However, various scholars posit that the presence of a dependent partner in the household has been demonstrated to result in an increase in providing informal care (Boerio et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2007). These insights underscore how the specific context of informal caregiving distinguishes it from other dimensions of civic engagement, both in terms of motivation and resource dependency.

The *Non-engaged profile,* which encompasses a significant proportion of the older European population studied in Chapter 3, is characterised by individuals who have fewer socio-structural and social capital resources. However, previous research suggests that non-engagement may also represent a conscious decision not to engage (Ubels et al., 2020). Therefore, civic engagement must be understood as being shaped by multilevel determinants, as well as individual choice. Critical gerontology emphasises that every older adult should have the opportunity to engage, regardless of their background, but engagement should never be assumed (Martinson & Minkler, 2006). The promotion of equitable civic engagement means ensuring that those who want to also have the opportunity to engage, while respecting the decisions of those who opt not to engage.

The living environment shapes civic engagement, but the relationship is ambivalent and context-dependent

While micro-level characteristics provide foundational resources, their impact can be shaped by the surrounding living environment. As demonstrated in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, this dissertation examines how the meso level exerts both a direct impact and interacts with other levels to shape civic engagement in later life. It is not merely a passive backdrop, but rather an active and relational space that can either support or constrain engagement. Existing literature shows that the physical and social dimensions of the living environment are deeply interrelated. The physical environment shapes opportunities for social interaction, whilst social dynamics influence how these spaces are perceived and used (Greenfield et al., 2019; Hoh et al., 2021; Wahl & Gitlin, 2019). These interrelations are further substantiated by the scoping review presented in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Regarding the physical environment, Chapter 6 presents empirical evidence that suggests a positive correlation between access to neighbourhood amenities and civic engagement in later life. This is in line with the literature discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, which identifies that access to inclusive public amenities and transport facilitates engagement (Buffel et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2021), whilst inaccessible transport (Bruland et al., 2023) has been shown to impede it. With regard to the social environment, the literature examined in Chapters 4 and 5 suggests that neighbourhood cohesion, strong social networks, feelings of safety, and well-organised local organisations tend to facilitate civic engagement, whereas community disconnection, limited organisational capacity, and perceived unsafety act as barriers (Davis et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2021; Yamakita et al., 2015). However, the analysis presented in Chapter 6 of this dissertation could not confirm a clear relationship between perceived safety and civic engagement.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer additional nuance to these findings by suggesting that these relationships may be more ambivalent and context-dependent than previously assumed. Chapter 6 indicates that neighbourhood problems, such as noise pollution and litter, can hinder civic engagement. However, the literature reviewed in Chapter 5 offers a more nuanced perspective: while such adverse conditions are often cited as deterrents (Dury, Willems, et al., 2016; Riedel et al., 2021), they may also serve as catalysts for action. Visible environmental problems can prompt older adults to engage in volunteering or informal political activities aimed at improving their surroundings (Cheung & Mui, 2023). By combining these insights, this dissertation demonstrates that the same environmental aspects may offer opportunities to some while

presenting barriers to others. This complexity is further illustrated by the findings in Chapter 6, which show that neighbourhood conditions can influence the impact of individual characteristics. For example, a previously significant association between education and volunteering becomes non-significant once neighbourhood-level factors are taken into account.

Additionally, this dissertation demonstrates that the living environment and its impact on older adults' civic engagement must be approached in a multidimensional way. The environmental conditions, such as those present in an urban setting, may encourage one dimension of engagement (e.g., associational engagement) while discouraging another (e.g., political engagement). To add to the complex relationship between civic engagement and the living environment, existing literature also points out that civic engagement is not only shaped by environmental conditions but also has the capacity to actively reshape them (Dikmans et al., 2025; Hand et al., 2020; Oswald et al., 2024). By examining and integrating the complexities in the relationship between the living environment and civic engagement in later life, this dissertation highlights the need for a more holistic perspective that recognises the interplay between different dimensions of engagement and the living environments in which they take place.

National structures and cultural norms shape civic engagement
According to Greenfield et al (2019), meso-level conditions are closely linked to broader macro-level structures, where cultural and institutional systems further shape civic engagement. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, the literature reports a significant variation in engagement across Europe, with higher levels typically observed in Northern and Western countries (Erlinghagen & Hank, 2006; Nyqvist et al., 2024). Chapter 6 of this dissertation contributes to the existing research by demonstrating that higher national development, more common in these regions, is positively associated with all forms of civic engagement. Assuming that more developed countries tend to invest more in their welfare systems, this finding supports literature on the *crowding-in hypothesis*, which posits that generous welfare regimes promote civic engagement by providing supportive infrastructure and incentives (Van Oorschot & Arts, 2005). However, alternative perspectives, such as the *crowding-out hypothesis*, argue that extensive state provision may reduce the perceived need for civic engagement, such as informal helping behaviours (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2011). Welfare generosity may thus simultaneously encourage caregiving while concurrently reducing its intensity by shifting responsibility to formal services (Verbakel, 2018).

In contrast to the findings on national development, income inequality showed no consistent association with civic engagement in Chapter 6 of this dissertation. Nonetheless, previous research has identified a negative correlation between inequality and engagement, suggesting that inequality may still play a role under certain conditions or in specific forms of engagement (Juma & Fernández-Sainz, 2024; Seifert & König, 2019; Stockemer & Scruggs, 2012).

Additionally, the literature in Chapter 4 also discusses cultural norms and values that shape civic engagement. *Familiarism*, a concept that is prevalent in Southern and Eastern Europe, emphasises family-based support networks and tends to encourage informal caregiving (Mair et al., 2016; Strauss, 2021). However, these cultural orientations do not exist in isolation; they interact with institutional arrangements such as electoral systems and political institutions, and are shaped by broader historical, economic, and cultural contexts (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). These interactions contribute to the complex and context-dependent nature of civic engagement across societies.

1.2.3. From levels to interactions: cross-level dynamics and cumulative effects

Building on the discussion of micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors, this section explores how interactions across these levels can produce cumulative effects that shape civic engagement in more complex ways. It emphasises the need for an integrated approach that accounts for cross-level dynamics, as illustrated in Chapters 4 and 6. These chapters offer a more nuanced understanding of how individual and contextual conditions jointly shape civic engagement in later life. A clear example is the manner in which older adults' engagement in a volunteering programme may hinge on the availability of accessible public transportation (meso), supported by national funding for local initiatives (macro), and facilitated by the individual's health and motivation (micro).

This multilevel perspective highlights that the outcomes of civic engagement do not depend on any single factor, but rather on the structure and alignment of the broader system. When individual resources are limited, but the environment is supportive and policy frameworks are enabling, engagement may still flourish. Conversely, even well-resourced individuals may encounter obstacles in contexts where environmental or structural conditions are unsupportive. Chapter 6 of this dissertation shows how cross-level interactions can generate cumulative advantage effects. Favourable macro-level conditions, such as high national development, have

been shown to enhance meso-level environments, which in turn amplify the effects of individual resources. However, it should be noted that these interactions are not uniformly positive. In highly developed countries, neutral perceptions of neighbourhood safety were found to suppress informal caregiving. Furthermore, Chapter 6 observed the interrelated effects of the macro-level on micro-level factors. Financial hardship only emerged as an influencing factor of informal caregiving when the national development level was taken into account. The literature suggests that economic strain may impede engagement even within well-resourced societies (Giplaye, 2019; Quashie et al., 2022).

When considered as a whole, these multilayered factors emphasise the ecological embeddedness of civic engagement (e.g. Serrat, 2025b; Serrat et al., 2021). Ensuring equitable access to civic engagement in later life, therefore, requires attention to all ecological levels and their interdependencies.

2. Critical reflections and future research recommendations

2.1. Secondary database and biases

As outlined in the methodological chapter (Chapter 2), this dissertation relies exclusively on secondary data sources. These data sources include existing literature and, most prominently, publicly available databases, such as the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS). Since the author of this dissertation did not participate in the design of the EQLS questionnaires, including selection and operationalisation of variables, a pragmatic research paradigm was adopted to make the most of available data. Whilst this approach facilitates the analysis of large datasets and broad trends, it concomitantly introduces two key limitations: those related to the sample and those related to measurement.

2.1.1. Sample-related limitations

EQLS aims to capture both objective conditions and subjective experiences across Europe, with a focus on identifying vulnerable groups and informing policy through the use of multidimensional indicators (Eurofound, 2017). However, its sampling strategy does not fully reflect this ambition (Eurofound, 2018b). Sampling bias is evident in the demographic composition of the dataset. Key populations, such as individuals with migrant backgrounds, residents of long-term care facilities, and the oldest old, remain systematically underrepresented. For instance, individuals aged 90 and above are grouped into a single category, thereby limiting the ability to explore age-related nuances in civic engagement (Eurofound, 2018a). Similarly, the exclusion of non-native speakers from survey participation further narrows the sample, likely favouring more educated and socially integrated subgroups of foreign-born individuals (Serrat et al., 2023; Villar et al., 2023). As a result, the dataset does not support a meaningful analysis of migrant populations, despite their relevance for comprehending civic engagement inequalities in later life (Ågård & Torres, 2025; Torres & Serrat, 2019).

Additionally, given that the respondents themselves decided whether they wanted to participate in the survey or not, nonresponse bias may have had an impact on the sample. Individuals who choose to respond to questionnaires such as EQLS tend to be those with more pronounced opinions or a greater interest in societal issues (Stone et al., 2024). This self-selection mechanism can result in an overrepresentation of respondents who are more civically engaged, potentially skewing the findings.

2.1.2. Measurement-related limitations

The EQLS dataset lacks consistency in the measurement of the frequency and intensity of older individuals' civic engagement, thereby constraining the level of detail available for analysis (Eurofound, 2018a). Therefore, Chapters 3 and 6 focused exclusively on binary indicators of civic engagement, distinguishing between engagement and non-engagement across its various dimensions. As a result, the chapters do not substantiate conclusions regarding the intensity of civic engagement in later life or its correlation to civic engagement profiles and broader contextual factors. The incorporation of measures of intensity could have yielded alternative insights into the behavioural patterns of civic engagement among older adults, potentially revealing more nuanced dynamics (Alexander et al., 2012).

The limited level of measurement is especially evident in the measurement of informal helping behaviours. The EQLS does not provide sufficient detail to differentiate between occasional support and intensive caregiving. Moreover, the survey fails to differentiate between informal caregiving provided within the household and informal caregiving to people outside of the household. This is a significant omission, as informal caregiving within the household is often less voluntary (Choi et al., 2007) and less likely to be combined with other civic activities (Strauss, 2021) compared to informal caregiving outside the home. The absence of tools that capture both the intensity and context of informal caregiving hinders the capacity to comprehend not only whether individuals are engaged, but also the depth of their engagement and the circumstances surrounding it.

Furthermore, the EQLS dataset includes only a limited selection of meso-level variables. While it does address factors such as accessibility to neighbourhood infrastructure, neighbourhood problems, level of urbanisation, and safety, several other important predictors of civic engagement identified in the scoping review in Chapter 5 are missing. These include variables related to social networks, neighbourhood cohesion, embeddedness in the neighbourhood and the frameworks of local organisations (e.g. Dury et al., 2020; Hand et al., 2020; Kuokkanen, 2018). The absence of these elements limits the ability to fully evaluate the role of the meso-level context's relationship with civic engagement in later life.

Macro-level variables are not at all included in the EQLS dataset itself. However, these variables could be retrieved from external databases and linked to the survey data via the country identifier. This methodological approach permits the integration of broader contextual

information, thereby enriching the analysis with national-level indicators. However, the use of national-level data may result in the oversimplification of complex national contexts, potentially obscuring significant cultural, institutional, or policy differences within countries (McSweeney, 2002).

Building on these limitations, future research should continue to examine civic engagement in later life as a contextually embedded concept, while also expanding its scope by exploring alternative meso-level and macro-level factors, such as neighbourhood cohesion, local infrastructure, cultural expectations, and policy environments, that were not addressed in this study. This broader perspective has the potential to provide more profound insights into the diverse and embedded nature of civic engagement in later life. In order to more accurately capture the embedded nature of civic engagement, two alternative research approaches to those employed in this dissertation are proposed:

To address the lack of social environment variables at the meso-level in the EQLS dataset, network analysis offers a promising alternative. This analytical strategy aligns with the embedded nature of civic engagement in its social environment. It facilitates the mapping of relational ties that structure enablers and barriers of civic engagement (Borgatti et al., 2009; Ho et al., 2023). This methodological approach has the potential to capture the dynamics of social networks, community embeddedness, and social cohesion in relation to civic engagement in later life, offering insight into how individuals are positioned within and shaped by their immediate social environments.

To capture the complex interdependencies among the three ecological levels that shape civic engagement in later life, future research could employ three-level multilevel modelling. This methodological approach enables the examination of more advanced cross-level interactions and provides a more precise understanding of how individual characteristics, neighbourhood conditions, and macro-level variables interact with each other. In comparison with the two-level model used in this dissertation, a three-level structure allows for more accurate estimation of neighbourhood effects and more effectively accounts for how national variables shape these effects. This approach also helps to circumvent the underestimation of standard errors and the inflation of statistical significance that can result from the neglect of intermediate clustering (Leckie, 2013). However, this method requires a substantially larger sample size than was

available in this study, which may present practical challenges for future research (Lee & Hong, 2021).

The utilisation of these proposed methodologies in future research endeavours holds to potential to cultivate a more nuanced and context-dependent understanding of civic engagement. This, in turn, can stimulate the development of more context-sensitive policies and interventions aimed at fostering inclusive and sustainable civic engagement in later life.

2.2. Temporal and causality limitations due to a lack of longitudinal data

It is important to note that EQLS only offers cross-sectional data (Eurofound, 2018a), which means that its static nature restricts the ability to examine how civic engagement unfolds over time or how it interacts with life course transitions and shifting meso- and macro-level contexts. Although the temporal dimension was not a central focus of this dissertation, it remains an important aspect of understanding civic engagement in later life, as shown in the ecological models introduced in the introduction of this dissertation (Burholt et al., 2020; Greenfield et al., 2019; Serrat et al., 2021). Civic engagement and its determining factors evolve over time, shaped by life course transitions and broader societal changes (Bronfenbrenner, 2000; Serrat et al., 2021). The co-constitutional relationship between people and places, in which individuals and their environments continuously co-evolve (Oswald et al., 2024), further underscores the importance of studying the evolving nature of civic engagement in later life (Dikmans et al., 2025).

Additionally, while the ecological model employed in this study assumes interdependence between micro, meso, and macro levels (Greenfield et al., 2019), the direction and causality of these relationships remain open to debate. It is unclear whether, for instance, meso-level conditions shape macro-level dynamics, or whether the influence flows in the opposite direction, or whether both occur simultaneously (Greenfield et al., 2019). Furthermore, without longitudinal data, it is impossible to determine whether ecological factors drive civic engagement or whether civic engagement itself contributes to shaping these contextual layers. A reciprocal relationship is likely, based on the co-constitutional view of the person-place relationship (Oswald et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the absence of longitudinal data prevents a definitive understanding of these intricate interactions.

Based on this reflection, future research on civic engagement should adopt both qualitative and longitudinal designs to enhance the understanding of how civic engagement unfolds over time and how it is shaped by the interaction between older adults and their environments. While quantitative studies, including those presented in this dissertation, are valuable for identifying profiles and illustrating the ecological embeddedness of civic engagement in later life, they often fail to capture the lived experiences, evolving motivations, and contextual dynamics that influence engagement. Given that civic engagement is a dynamic and context-dependent process (Serrat et al., 2021), qualitative and longitudinal research designs are, therefore, essential to explore its depth, contextual meaning, and development over time.

Qualitative interviews using a life course approach are specifically recommended to trace how individuals' engagement evolves in response to life events, policy changes, or neighbourhood transformations. These interviews have the capacity to reveal how older individuals interpret their roles as civic actors, how they navigate barriers, and how their motivations, roles and relationship with the living environment shift over time (Dikmans & Chacur, 2024; Reyes, 2024).

In order to enhance causal reasoning and clarify the directionality of observed relationships, researchers should also consider using a quantitative longitudinal design. This would enable researchers to observe patterns and trajectories in civic engagement over the life course, such as increases, declines, or periods of stability (Russell et al., 2019). These trends can be linked to life events, policy changes, or shifts in neighbourhood dynamics to deepen understanding of the interdependencies and interactions across the multiple levels of the ecological model over time. The longitudinal SHARE (Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe) database is a valuable source for conducting longitudinal analyses, as it allows for the linking of multiple waves (SHARE-ERIC, 2024). However, it should be noted that not all dimensions of civic engagement are captured in SHARE, which conceptually limits the scope of civic engagement in such analyses.

As an alternative method to explore causality and, for instance, to inform longitudinal research designs, researchers could use Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs) to identify potential causal relationships between factors and civic engagement. DAGs are conceptual tools that visually map assumptions, based on existing literature, about how variables influence one another (Digitale et al., 2022). They help clarify the directionality of effects and underlying causal

structures without necessarily requiring longitudinal data. However, this method does not prove causality outright; rather, it suggests possible causal pathways (Fleischer & Roux, 2008).

2.3. Diversity in later life, diversity in civic engagement experiences

2.3.1. Western-centric frameworks

In addition to the limitations of the civic engagement variables employed in this dissertation, it is important to acknowledge the Western-centric framework that is used. While this research set out to incorporate more informal and less visible dimensions of civic engagement in later life, it is nevertheless reliant on a typology rooted in Western scholarship (Dury et al., 2015; Reuter & Scharf, 2025; Serrat, 2025a; Serrat et al., 2022). This perspective risks overlooking meaningful, context-dependent practices that may not align with dominant frameworks but still represent expressions of civic engagement in later life (Ågård & Torres, 2025; Reyes, 2024). For instance, recent work by Ågård and Torres (2025) critiques dominant civic engagement typologies for being theoretically driven and for neglecting older adults' own understandings of civic engagement in later life. The authors focus on older migrants and demonstrate how scholarly assumptions have shaped research, with limited attention to how migrancy influences if, how, and when individuals engage civically across the life course. A bottom-up perspective, incorporating voices of underrepresented groups of older adults, such as older people with a migrant background, has the potential to challenge assumptions of uniformity of civic engagement in later life (Serrat, 2025b). However, while incorporating non-Western, bottom-up dimensions of civic engagement is essential for a more inclusive understanding, one should be careful. Using an overly broad definition carries the risk of conceptual overstretch, potentially blurring lines between civic engagement and related concepts, thereby undermining the analytical clarity and precision of the concept (Kuzma, 2010; Serrat et al., 2022).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods can be particularly valuable in this context, as they involve older adults directly and meaningfully in identifying relevant civic activities and what they mean for them. PAR approaches can help uncover culturally embedded and less visible forms of engagement, particularly among marginalised groups. By embracing this broader and reflexive approach, future research endeavours can more effectively inform policies that support diverse, meaningful, and context-sensitive forms of civic engagement in later life (Serrat, 2025b). However, when employing PAR approaches, researchers must ensure that older adults' input is meaningful, sustainable, and transformative, while critically addressing power imbalances throughout the research process (Corrado et al., 2020). Failure to

do so may result in the method missing its mark and reinforcing dominant narratives about civic engagement in later life.

2.3.2. Diverse experiences with civic engagement

In addition to critiquing Western-centric frameworks, consideration must be given to the diversity that exists within the older population itself. Civic engagement in later life is not solely shaped by factors such as cultural background or migratory experiences, but also by factors such as living in rural areas, residing in residential aged-care facilities, and being among the oldest-old (Kruse & Schmitt, 2015; Serrat, 2025b; Serrat et al., 2020; Villar & Peiró-Milián, 2025; Winterton et al., 2025). While these circumstances were not a specific focus in this dissertation, they reflect the diversity of experiences that can shape how older adults perceive and respond to barriers and enablers to civic engagement. Chapter 5 briefly touches on aspects related to rural residency and living in residential aged-care facilities. However, these contexts remain underexplored.

Consequently, just as the diversity in interpretations of civic engagement warrants attention, the diversity in how older adults experience its barriers and enablers must also be acknowledged. Future research should aim to capture these varied experiences more explicitly, particularly those of less extensively studied populations such as the oldest-old, older adults residing in residential aged-care facilities, and those living in rural areas. These lived realities remain marginal within dominant civic engagement research. Nevertheless, they are essential for developing a more nuanced understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder civic engagement in later life. It is imperative to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the older population in order to promote inclusive research and policy that reflects the full spectrum of civic engagement (Serrat, 2025b).

2.4. Instrumentalisation of civic engagement in late life

Another important consideration is the normative framing of civic engagement as inherently positive, which risks overlooking its potential downsides (Serrat, 2025b). Whilst civic engagement is frequently lauded for its physical, psychological, and community benefits (Ghiglieri et al., 2021; Guiney & Machado, 2018; Morrow-Howell et al., 2019), this perspective can obscure the complex realities faced by older adults. It is evident that civic engagement is not invariably voluntary, nor is it universally accessible and empowering. For instance, informal caregiving can impose considerable emotional and physical burdens on

individuals (Cheng, 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2018), particularly when it occurs within the household and is driven more by necessity than choice (Choi et al., 2007). This necessity reflects a broader trend of the 'socialisation of care', where responsibilities traditionally held by the state are increasingly transferred to individuals and informal networks, often without adequate support (Peterie & Broom, 2024). Similarly, O'Neill et al. (2011) have expressed concerns that an increasing reliance on older volunteers is occurring as a compensatory measure for reductions in public funding and institutional support within the public sector.

This raises concerns regarding the risk of instrumentalisation, that is, the way in which civic engagement may be employed as a means to achieve, for instance, state policy objectives, such as successful ageing (Martinez et al., 2011; Serrat et al., 2020). Videnović and Baucal (2025) identified that in policies, successful ageing is partly seen as a personal responsibility, shifting the responsibility from institutional support to individual engagement. In this context, there is a risk that civic engagement may be framed as a normative obligation, with older adults expected to contribute in ways that align with institutional priorities. This framing has the potential to marginalise individuals whose contributions deviate from these predefined norms (Minkler & Holstein, 2008). Therefore, the integration and appreciation of less visible, informal forms of civic engagement, as done in this dissertation, is essential to challenge these predefined norms.

As researchers studying civic engagement, it is imperative to recognise that while everyone should have the opportunity to engage and potential barriers should be lowered, it should not be treated as a civic duty imposed from above. Moreover, framing civic engagement as an expectation may reinforce exclusion for those unable or unwilling to engage due to individual or contextual barriers or personal motivations (Serrat et al., 2021). It is recommended that future research endeavours continue to explore both the positive and negative outcomes of civic engagement, acknowledging both its potential to reproduce inequalities as well as its capacity to foster inclusion (Serrat, 2025b).

3. Implications for practice and policy

As explored in the introduction, civic engagement can generate a wide range of benefits for individuals and society as a whole, including improved mental and physical health, enhanced subjective well-being, and strengthened social cohesion (Guiney & Machado, 2018; Martinez et al., 2011; Nelson et al., 2019; Villar et al., 2023). Over time, these outcomes can have a fertilising effect, feeding back into the system and enriching the conditions that support future civic engagement.

In order to realise these benefits, policy and practice should be guided by targeted, evidence-based recommendations. The following proposals are informed by the findings of this dissertation and by insights from the CIVEX project (https://civex.eu/), which addressed the issue of social exclusion from civic engagement among older adults. The author actively contributed to this project during the course of his PhD. The complete CIVEX policy brief is included in Appendix A of this chapter.

3.1. Validating and promoting less visible dimensions of civic engagement

This dissertation emphasises that certain informal dimensions of civic engagement, such as digital engagement, informal political engagement, and informal caregiving, remain largely overlooked in both civic engagement policy and practice. Informal caregiving, in particular, is frequently discussed in the context of health and social care but rarely framed as civic engagement. Despite their less visible nature, these informal dimensions play a vital role in strengthening society. Therefore, policymakers should consider broadening their frameworks regarding civic engagement and explicitly include these undervalued dimensions in future policy development. To move towards a more inclusive civic engagement policy, three concrete policy measures are proposed to ensure that these dimensions are recognised and supported.

Firstly, expanding policy definitions to include these less formal dimensions is critical. Civic engagement policies and strategies often rely on narrow definitions that focus on formal dimensions of civic engagement (Serrat et al., 2021). It is imperative to expand these definitions to encompass informal dimensions such as caregiving, digital engagement, and informal political engagement. Improved data on civic engagement dimensions would ensure their inclusion in civic statistics and reporting, thereby increasing their visibility and legitimacy

(National Research Council, 2014). Secondly, funding and allocating resources towards grassroots initiatives, digital civic platforms, and informal care networks can promote engagement in less formal and visible dimensions of civic engagement (Light & Seravalli, 2019). These platforms often depend on personal and voluntary contributions. The provision of financial support and institutional support, such as offering training, giving infrastructural support or providing access to digital tools, can help embed them as valid actors in civil society. Finally, in line with efforts to include the voices of older adults engaged in less visible dimensions in policy, increasing their visibility in public discourse can foster broader societal validation. This contributes to the validation of their contributions and supports a more inclusive civic culture.

3.2. Designing multilayered interventions to promote civic engagement

As this dissertation demonstrates, civic engagement in later life is shaped by a complex interplay of micro, meso and macro factors. Addressing barriers, therefore, requires multilayered strategies that link individual experiences with local initiatives and national policy frameworks. Chapter 6 demonstrates that favourable macro-level conditions can amplify the impact of meso-level environments, thus making coordinated efforts across governance levels essential. For instance, national governments can, for instance, provide overarching legal frameworks and funding, while local authorities can tailor civic engagement initiatives to local needs and conditions based on these frameworks and resources. In doing so, they can ensure that such initiatives are accessible, relevant, and effective for their local communities.

A key component of this multilayered approach is the vertical integration of the voices of civically engaged older adults, thereby ensuring that input from the grassroots level informs decision-making across governance levels. Actively including representatives of older adults in these processes is essential, as their lived experience provides valuable insights that can significantly enhance the quality and relevance of policymaking.

Older adults often engage in civic activities within their local communities (Serrat et al., 2020), but to meaningfully influence policy, their perspectives must be represented beyond the local level. This can include advisory roles in community organisations, such as community centres or residential aged-care facilities, as well as representation in national bodies, such as state councils or forums. This kind of involvement in policymaking not only constitutes civic engagement itself but also helps shape policies that support other forms of engagement.

Including older adults in decision-making processes makes civic strategies more inclusive and responsive to their needs (Fox, 2001). In order to reflect the diversity of the older population, it is vital to involve local and culturally rooted organisations and older adults from all backgrounds, at both the community and national levels.

For civic engagement policymaking to be truly sustainable, the involvement of older adults must be structurally embedded. This prevents tokenism and empowers older adults by providing them with the necessary resources and influence needed to shape decisions. Embedding their voices, in all their diversity, into civic policy contributes to a more equitable and representative civic landscape in later life.

3.3. Addressing structural barriers to civic engagement

Chapters 3 to 6 demonstrate that structural barriers can impede civic engagement in later life. Policymakers should invest in lowering these barriers; otherwise, civic engagement risks becoming accessible only to older adults with sufficient individual resources. This dissertation offers practical suggestions to address these structural barriers and promote more inclusive and equitable civic engagement.

One of the key insights from Chapters 5 and 6 is that accessibility and infrastructure in the living environment play a critical role in fostering civic engagement. Public spaces such as parks and cultural centres must be accessible and welcoming to all (Kim et al., 2021). Practical enhancements to the living environment, such as ensuring wheelchair accessibility and providing affordable transport, can significantly promote civic engagement among older adults (Kim et al., 2021). To build on these improvements and move toward a truly enabling environment for civic engagement, local governments should monitor and address neighbourhood-level issues such as safety concerns, which often hinder older adults in their engagement (Riedel et al., 2021). The scoping review in Chapter 5, as well as existing research on civic engagement in later life (Dikmans et al., 2025), emphasised the vital role of local community centres within civic infrastructure. These centres should offer activities and services that foster connection and engagement among older adults. It is important to ensure that these centres are well-funded, accessible, and integrated into broader civic strategies to enable sustained engagement.

Local governments should systematically monitor whether older adults have adequate access to civic engagement opportunities, such as those offered by local community centres, to ensure that resources are allocated where they are most needed. These centres should also proactively evaluate how accessible they are to older adults and how effective their outreach efforts are, for example, by conducting surveys in the neighbourhood. By identifying specific barriers, such as limited public transportation and inaccessible buildings, local governments can implement targeted interventions to sustain civic engagement.

A personalised approach, such as home visits or peer-based support, can help to overcome barriers such as a lack of social networks or limited access to information and services. In peer support, civically engaged older adults can share their experiences and help others to navigate the available civic engagement opportunities. In parallel, local organisations and community workers should undergo training in inclusive practices and cultural competence. This training should include accessible communication methods, anti-ageism strategies, and culturally sensitive outreach to ensure that the available engagement opportunities respond to the diverse needs and preferences of older adults. Finally, it is important to establish feedback loops that allow older adults to share their views on civic engagement initiatives. This can be achieved through community meetings, suggestion boxes, or digital platforms where they can express their opinions. These feedback mechanisms can improve the effectiveness of interventions, foster a stronger sense of ownership, and encourage sustained engagement in civic life (Cao et al., 2024).

4. General conclusion

This PhD dissertation advances the understanding of civic engagement in later life by adopting a multidimensional and multilevel perspective. It expands the scope of current research beyond formal volunteering by incorporating informal caregiving, digital engagement, and political engagement. In addition, it broadens previous research by encompassing not only individual characteristics that shape civic engagement, but also by examining the role of the living environment and broader societal contexts. Across four scientific contributions, the research demonstrates that civic engagement is shaped by a dynamic interplay of micro, meso, and macro-level factors. The study identifies six different engagement profiles, highlights the importance of the living environment and demonstrates how neighbourhood conditions interact with societal structures to facilitate or impede civic engagement. By applying an ecological and multidimensional approach, this dissertation offers an integrated framework for understanding how older adults contribute to their communities and society. This work underscores the necessity for policies and interventions that reflect the full spectrum of civic engagement and address the structural conditions that enable or constrain engagement. Future research should continue to explore these multilevel dynamics, employing alternative research methods to better understand and support older adults' civic engagement.

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POLICY BRIEF

CIVEX: Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Features, experiences, and policy implications

Prepared by

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This document summarises the key policy messages arising from CIVEX (www.civex.eu), organised into **four main areas**: recognising the multidimensionality of civic engagement, addressing contextual influences, considering the life-course, and embracing the diversity of older people.

This policy brief highlights **four key recommendations** for enhancing civic engagement among diverse older populations:

1. **Recognize the Multidimensionality of Civic Engagement**: Broaden the definition of civic engagement to include informal help, associational, and digital contributions, while aligning opportunities with personal motivations to foster sustained participation.
2. **Enhance Accessibility and Equity**: Implement age-friendly and digitally inclusive programs, while promoting good practices across regions to address disparities in participation rates.
3. **Adopt a Life-Course Perspective**: Develop flexible policies that account for how life experiences, transitions, and inequalities influence civic engagement trajectories over time.
4. **Embrace Diversity in Older Populations**: Recognize and address the unique barriers faced by marginalized groups while valuing diverse perspectives on what civic engagement means.

These recommendations aim to create inclusive and equitable pathways for all older people to actively participate in their communities, shaping policies and practices that reflect their diverse contributions and needs.

Multidimensionality of civic engagement

Civic engagement is a multidimensional concept, encompassing a range of activities:

- Informal helping behaviours
- Associational membership
- Formal volunteering
- Political participation
- Digital engagement

These activities highlight the diversity of civic engagement, with each reflecting different ways people contribute to their communities and influence collective decisions.

Recognize Diverse Contributions: Policies must acknowledge all forms of civic engagement, from informal helping to political activism, ensuring activities align with personal interests. A multidimensional approach to civic engagement policies is therefore encouraged, incorporating diverse forms of engagement and enabling individuals to connect with causes and activities that resonate with them.

Ease Participation Barriers: Engaging in civic activities, such as informal caregiving, requires a commitment of time and energy, which often limits involvement in other forms of civic engagement. Policies must offer targeted support such as respite care, flexible schedules, or other support mechanisms for volunteers and participants in other civic activities.

Update Measurement Frameworks: A critical challenge in civic engagement is accurately measuring it, which is essential for understanding how to sustain participation throughout an individual's life. Traditional measures tend to emphasise formal participation (e.g., voting, volunteering) and may overlook more informal forms of engagement. To better understand civic engagement, measurement frameworks would benefit from being updated to capture informal, political, and digital forms of engagement. These activities often go unrecognised yet play a critical role in older people's civic contributions.

Contextual influences on late life civic engagement

Civic engagement in later life is shaped by individual characteristics (e.g., education, motivation), community factors, and broader societal systems like welfare policies. Participation rates vary across Europe, with Northern and Western countries leading. This disparity underscores the need to share successful strategies across regions. While national policies provide a foundation, local organizations and communities play a vital

role in creating accessible opportunities for older adults to engage.

Increase Accessibility: This includes implementing age friendly programs that encourage older people's participation in civic activities, such as volunteering or associational engagement and ensuring that civic engagement platforms (such as voting locations and community events) are physically accessible. The digital context is becoming increasingly relevant, especially for people with mobility issues and those living in remote areas. This is also true for civic engagement, meaning that these activities should be made accessible to everyone. Digital literacy programs that teach older people how to navigate technology can be implemented to increase inclusion.

Share Good Practices Across Europe: Encourage the exchange of good practices between countries to promote equal access, to civic activities for older people. While Northern and Western Europe show higher participation rates especially in volunteering associational membership and political participation, efforts should be made to support and develop civic engagement initiatives in regions where rates are lower. This includes tailoring programs to fit local contexts, enhancing support for local organisations, and fostering collaborations that adapt successful strategies to varying societal, cultural, and economic environments across Europe.

Life-course influences on late life civic engagement

To enhance civic engagement among older people, it is important to look beyond the current circumstances and acknowledge the influence that their life experiences may have on their engagement. Studying a person's life course increases our understanding of changes and adaptations over time in a person's life and helps us compile life events and life phases as impactful experiences that may affect civic engagement trajectories and levels of engagement.

Integrate Life-Course Perspectives: Policies should reflect how civic engagement evolves over time, influenced by historical and individual life paths. Developments over time in people's lives are not universal, but they can take on different patterns, depending on when and where a person lived. Current surveys fail to incorporate measures to identify and understand different paths and changes in civic engagement during the life course, making it difficult to relate to other micro-, meso- or macro-level variables. Building bridges between researchers focused on civic engagement at different life stages could help develop a more comprehensive and integrated view of the dynamics of civic engagement across the life course.

Accommodate Shifting Contexts: Influence of contextual factors and life phases. Contextual factors, such as those related to social, economic, political or environmental spheres, affect and vary throughout life, and what is called the "life course of place", changes in ecological systems over time. Individuals adapt to these shifts in unique ways, influencing how they approach civic engagement in the present and in the future, depending on the life paths a person navigates. Flexibility in civic engagement activities is essential to accommodate the different experiences older people face throughout their lives.

Address Cumulative Inequalities: Life course trajectories often align with social inequalities, with differing impacts based on gender, race, educational level, and other factors. Life events such as migration, marital status, and employment history may compound over time, multiplying effects on an individual's ability to engage civically. Community-based actors should be allocated resources to identify and address the cumulative effects of social inequalities on civic engagement. Policies should prioritize recruitment strategies that acknowledge the lifelong and fluctuating needs and diversity of the targeted population.

Older people's diversity

CIVEX focuses on the experiences of older persons that are seldom included in research about civic engagement in later life. By doing so, the project highlights the need for an inclusive approach in policy that incorporates the voice of these diverse groups of older persons and the different meanings that they attribute to their civic engagement.

Include Marginalized Voices: CIVEX shows how older migrants from non-European backgrounds give meaning to their civic engagement in various ways. When developing policy around civic engagement in later life, a broad approach should be adopted. The project urges policies aiming to promote civic engagement to be aware of the fact that older persons' definitions of what civic engagement entails may differ. For instance, older persons might want to contribute to society, have an ecological mindset, or they want to keep themselves updated. Through expanding the imagination of civic engagement in this way, policy and practice will be able to counter the often-limited perceptions of civic engagement that obscure the contributions of older persons and recognize that they might find civic engagement meaningful for a variety of reasons that have until now been ignored.

Balance Individual and Group Needs: CIVEX shows how older persons have a lot in common when it comes to what promotes and hinders engagement during the life

course. However, policies could certainly benefit from working around group-specific factors that have an impact. CIVEX therefore encourages policymaking that is able to manage the balancing act, which is about seeing that older persons are a diverse group with individual needs, desires and different understandings of what civic engagement means, while at the same time being aware that certain groups of older persons are more likely to face specific types of obstacles when it comes to their civic engagement.

English summary

This PhD dissertation investigates the multidimensional civic engagement of older adults through a micro, meso, and macro perspective, encompassing individual, living environment, and societal factors. Civic engagement is widely recognised as important for promoting healthy and active ageing and mitigating social exclusion among older people. However, existing research often narrowly focuses on formal volunteering, overlooking other dimensions of civic engagement such as associational engagement, informal helping behaviours, digital engagement, and political engagement. Additionally, it often focuses on individual factors that hinder or enable civic engagement, rather than the role of meso- and macro-level factors. This dissertation, therefore, has three aims: (1) to map civic engagement profiles of older adults; (2) to study the multilevel factors that shape their civic engagement; and (3) to integrate micro, meso, and macro-level factors to examine how they interact and jointly shape civic engagement.

The dissertation consists of four complementary studies. The first study utilises data from the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) to conduct a latent class analysis, identifying six distinct profiles of civic engagement among older adults. The main findings of this study emphasise the heterogeneity of civic engagement in later life. A subset of older adults demonstrates high levels of engagement by engaging in multiple activities simultaneously. In contrast, some profiles engage in fewer activities, with informal caregiving emerging as a consistent dimension even among those who are less broadly engaged. Moreover, the study reveals that higher levels of socio-structural resources, such as education and health, are positively associated with greater diversity in civic engagement, indicating that resource availability plays a key role in enabling broader civic engagement. The second study adopts an ecological framework to analyse how factors at the micro, meso, and macro levels interact to shape civic engagement among older adults, drawing on existing literature to unpack the complex interplay between individual characteristics, neighbourhood conditions, and broader societal structures. The third paper, a scoping review, investigates the role of the living environment in older people's multidimensional civic engagement. It identifies barriers and enablers to civic engagement in both the social and the physical environment. Living environments characterised by strong social networks, accessible infrastructure, and inclusive community structures tend to foster engagement. In contrast, conditions such as social isolation, poor accessibility, and fragmented communities may inhibit it. These social and physical determinants are closely interrelated, which underscores the importance of viewing

the living environment as a dynamic socio-physical whole. Importantly, environmental factors are not inherently enabling or constraining; the way they shape civic engagement in later life depends on the specific context and the dimension of civic engagement being considered. The final study, a multilevel analysis using EQLS data, examines how neighbourhood conditions and national levels of inequality and development are associated with civic engagement in later life. The results show that better access to neighbourhood amenities is positively associated with all forms of civic engagement, while neighbourhood problems are negatively associated. At the national level, higher levels of national development are linked to higher overall engagement and strengthen the positive effects of neighbourhood amenities on associational and political engagement. These findings highlight the interactive nature of macro and meso contexts in shaping civic engagement and underscore the importance of adopting a socio-ecological perspective.

This dissertation emphasises the importance of a multidimensional and ecological approach to civic engagement in later life. By examining the interrelation of micro, meso, and macro factors, this doctoral research expands the existing knowledge base by offering a nuanced and integrated understanding of how older adults civically engage and how this engagement is shaped by their personal characteristics, the living environment, and broader societal structures. This approach informs the development of policy measures and interventions that are better aligned with the diversity of civic engagement in later life and the contextual factors that shape it. To effectively support older adults in their civic engagement, policies must recognise the full spectrum of civic engagement and implement layered interventions that address structural barriers at all levels.

Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Dit doctoraat onderzoekt het multidimensionale maatschappelijk engagement van oudere volwassenen vanuit een micro-, meso- en macroperspectief, waarbij individuele, leefomgeving- en maatschappelijke factoren worden meegenomen. Maatschappelijk engagement wordt algemeen erkend als belangrijk voor het bevorderen van gezond en actief ouder worden en het tegengaan van sociale uitsluiting bij ouderen. Toch richt bestaand onderzoek zich vaak eenzijdig op formeel vrijwilligerswerk, waarbij andere vormen van maatschappelijk engagement zoals verenigingsengagement, informele hulp, en digitaal en politiek engagement vaak over het hoofd worden gezien. Bovendien ligt de focus vaak op individuele factoren die maatschappelijk engagement bevorderen of verhinderen en minder op de rol van meso- en macro-niveaus. Dit doctoraatsonderzoek heeft daarom drie doelstellingen: (1) het in kaart brengen van maatschappelijk engagementprofielen; (2) het bestuderen van de multilevel factoren die hun maatschappelijk engagement vormgeven; en (3) het integreren van micro-, meso- en macro-niveaus om te onderzoeken hoe deze met elkaar interageren en gezamenlijk maatschappelijk engagement beïnvloeden.

Het doctoraat bestaat uit vier complementaire studies. De eerste studie maakt gebruik van gegevens uit de European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) om via een latente klasseanalyse zes verschillende profielen van maatschappelijk engagement bij ouderen te identificeren. De bevindingen benadrukken de heterogeniteit van maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen. Een deel oudere volwassenen vertoont hoge niveaus van engagement door gelijktijdig aan meerdere activiteiten deel te nemen. Andere profielen zijn minder breed actief, waarbij informele hulpverlening naar voren komt als een consistente dimensie van maatschappelijk engagement, zelfs onder degenen die minder activiteiten combineren. Daarnaast toont de studie aan dat hogere niveaus van sociaal-structurele resources, zoals opleiding, inkomen en toegang tot sociale netwerken, positief samenhangen met een grotere diversiteit in maatschappelijk engagement. Dit wijst erop dat de beschikbaarheid van persoonlijke resources een sleutelrol speelt in het mogelijk maken van breder engagement. De tweede studie hanteert een ecologisch kader om te analyseren hoe factoren op micro-, meso- en macro-niveau met elkaar interageren en maatschappelijk engagement bij ouderen vormgeven, en baseert zich op bestaande literatuur om de complexe wisselwerking tussen individuele kenmerken, buurtomstandigheden en bredere maatschappelijke structuren te ontrafelen. De derde studie, een scoping review, onderzoekt de rol van de leefomgeving in het multidimensionale maatschappelijk engagement van ouderen. Deze studie identificeert barrières en bevorderende factoren voor maatschappelijk

engagement in zowel de sociale als de fysieke omgeving. Leefomgevingen die gekenmerkt worden door sterke sociale netwerken, toegankelijke infrastructuur en inclusieve gemeenschapsstructuren bevorderen engagement. Daarentegen kunnen omstandigheden zoals sociale isolatie, slechte toegankelijkheid en gefragmenteerde gemeenschappen dit belemmeren. Deze sociale en fysieke determinanten zijn nauw met elkaar verweven. Dit onderstreept het belang van het beschouwen van de leefomgeving als een dynamisch sociaal-fysiek geheel. Belangrijk is dat omgevingsfactoren niet inherent stimulerend of beperkend zijn; hun invloed hangt af van de specifieke context en de vorm van maatschappelijk engagement die wordt onderzocht. De laatste studie, een multilevel analyse op basis van EQLS-gegevens, onderzoekt hoe buurtvariabelen en nationale niveaus van ongelijkheid en ontwikkeling samenhangen met maatschappelijk engagement op latere leeftijd. De resultaten tonen aan dat betere toegang tot buurtvoorzieningen positief samenhangt met alle vormen van maatschappelijk engagement, terwijl buurtproblemen een negatieve invloed hebben. Op nationaal niveau blijkt dat hogere ontwikkelingsniveaus geassocieerd zijn met hoger maatschappelijk engagement. Daarnaast versterken ze de positieve effecten van buurtvoorzieningen op verenigingsengagement en politieke engagement. Deze bevindingen benadrukken de interactieve aard van macro- en mesocontexten in het vormgeven van maatschappelijk engagement en onderstrepen het belang van een sociaal-ecologische benadering.

Dit doctoraat benadrukt het belang van een multidimensionale en ecologische benadering van maatschappelijk engagement bij ouderen. Door de interrelatie van micro-, meso- en macrofactoren te onderzoeken, breidt het de bestaande kennisbasis uit door een genuanceerd en geïntegreerd inzicht te bieden in de manieren waarop ouderen maatschappelijk betrokken zijn en hoe deze betrokkenheid wordt gevormd door hun persoonlijke kenmerken, levensomgeving en bredere maatschappelijke structuren. Deze benadering draagt bij aan het ontwikkelen van beleidsmaatregelen en interventies die beter afgestemd zijn op de diversiteit van engagementsvormen van ouderen en de contextuele factoren die ze beïnvloeden. Om ouderen effectief te ondersteunen in hun maatschappelijk engagement moeten beleidsmaatregelen het volledige spectrum van maatschappelijk engagement erkennen en gelaagde interventies implementeren die structurele barrières op alle niveaus aanpakken.

Curriculum vitae

Toon Vercauteren obtained his Educational Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Education, with a focus on History, Dutch, and Economics, from Artevelde University of Applied Sciences in 2019. He continued his academic journey at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where he earned a Master's degree in Adult Educational Sciences in 2021. That same year, he began his PhD at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where he is currently affiliated with the Society and Ageing Research Lab (SARLab). During his doctoral research, Toon was part of the Belgian team of the transnational CIVEX project, which investigated the exclusion from civic engagement among a diverse older population, exploring its features, lived experiences, and policy implications.

List of publications and contributions

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