Chapter 17

Capability and Political Participation Among Ageing Populations

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17.1 Introduction

Political science is the scientific study of politics and governance. At a general level, the discipline of political science deals with questions concerning how power is won, used and delegated; the distribution of power and values within a society; ideas and behaviours within government institutions and public authorities; and collective action and decision-making, both among individuals and within different systems of governance.

Within the subfield of political behaviour, political scientists aim to explain outcomes such as political attitudes and ideologies, as well as political participation by individuals. Political participation – ‘action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes’ (Brady, 1999: 737) refers to activities such as voting, contacting politicians and government officials, demonstrating, signing petitions or working for political parties and action groups. Political participation is an expression of political equality; it is a fundamental principle of liberal democracy, which implies that, in general, high and equal levels of political participation across groups, especially voting, is desirable (Verba, 2003).

The societal challenges connected to population ageing, such as shrinking tax bases and the increasing costs of pensions, healthcare and elder care, are now well known and are at the top of the agenda for organisations and political bodies such as the WHO and the EU. However, less attention is being paid to the fact that a

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growing ageing population also means a growing ageing electorate. Since 1973, the proportion of eligible voters aged 65 years and older in Sweden has increased from 19% to 28% (Statistics Sweden, 2013, 2018). Hence, with increased life expectancy comes a prolonged political life, during which the individual is supposed to remain active and to manifest her or his interests through voting or other political activities. At the same time, it is a well-established fact that political participation declines with old age, with the oldest old being the group who participates least (Bhatti et al., 2012; Nygård & Jakobsson, 2013).

In light of these demographic changes, it is important to highlight the *democratic* challenges that we are facing as our senior members of society become more numerous while at the same time being less inclined to vote or otherwise participate in politics compared to younger age groups. Still, we know surprisingly little about why seniors abstain from political participation, because the specific determinants as to why some older individuals are more politically active than others are rarely investigated in political science research. We argue that two main problems with previous research impair the understanding of why political participation declines with old age. Firstly, a lack of interest in the oldest old neglects how steep the decline in participation really is. This is because insufficient research methods exist to reach the oldest individuals, and also because the habit of using broad age intervals, such as age 65+ or age 80+, makes data less exact (see Bhatti & Hansen, 2012: 480 for a similar discussion). Secondly, routine and somewhat ageist assumptions that the participatory decline is natural and derives from deteriorating health, are likely to have contributed to the dismissal of further studies on why political participation declines with old age (see Burden et al., 2016 and Goerres, 2009 for similar discussions).

Against this background, the aim of our chapter is to study reasons for and conceptions of non-voting among older individuals in Sweden. We argue that asking older individuals why they do not vote is a necessary research step in order to gain a deeper understanding of why voting declines with older age and why it varies across individuals.

To achieve this aim, we present a tentative framework for studying capability and political participation among older people, in which we combine insights from previous research on age, health and political participation with the perspective of capability: what a person is effectively able to be and do (Nussbaum, 2003; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1980). This framework is later used as an analytical tool for understanding and categorising responses from extended interviews with eight individuals, all aged 80 years or older. The working hypothesis is that capability is a key explanation for what hinders or enables political participation among older people. Capability can refer both to available resources within the individual (internal capability/micro-level factors) and the surrounding context (external capability/meso-level factors) (Robeyns, 2005). Thus, we further assume that internal and external capability, both separately and combined, are important predictors of political participation among older people and that a negative change in capability is a core determinant of decreasing political participation.

The chapter continues with a short empirical overview of age patterns in political participation followed by a review of previous research on ageing, health and political participation. Thereafter, we briefly present the capability approach and how it adds to existing research. We then present empirical illustrations from extended interviews with eight seniors on conceptions of and reasons for non-voting in old age and how these could be understood from the capability perspective. The chapter ends with a brief discussion on the potential of a capability approach to political participation.

17.2 The Relationship Between Age and Political Participation

The relationship between age and political participation is very often described as curvilinear, with both younger and older people tending to participate less than the middle-aged. The decline in participation during old age is a well-established fact that has been observed in different countries and over time (e.g. Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980: 38; Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Bhatti et al., 2012; Fieldhouse et al., 2007; Nygård & Jakobsson, 2013; Rattinger, 1992). Sweden is no exception; in the Swedish national election of 2018, the highest turnout level, 90.3%, was among voters age 65–69 and 70–74 respectively, while voters aged 80 years and older had the lowest turnout level of all age groups, at 75.1% (Statistics Sweden, 2019). Over the last 30 years, voters aged 75 years and older have consistently shown the lowest turnout levels of all age groups (see Fig. 17.1).

Fig. 17.1 Voter turnout by age in the Riksdag elections 2002–2018 (percent). (Source: Statistics Sweden, <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/demokrati/allmanna-val/allmanna-val-valdeltagandeundersokningen/>. Last accessed 2021-02-25)

Similarly, the results for Sweden from the European Social Survey show that levels of *non-electoral* political participation, here defined as at least one political activity such as contacting politicians, signing petitions or wearing campaign badges during the previous 12 months are by and large around 70% among the young, the middle-age and the newly retired, while participation levels decrease rapidly after the age of 75 (see Fig. 17.2). Thus, what both Figs. 17.1 and 17.2 illustrate is that the relationship between age and political participation in Sweden is no longer curvilinear. Levels of participation are fairly stable across age groups until the age of 75.

However, results from the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg show that levels of political interest do not follow the same pattern; political interest reaches its highest levels in the oldest age groups (see Fig. 17.3). Thus, older people remain interested in politics but do not manifest this interest as frequently in either electoral or non-electoral participation. Following this, we argue that it is relevant to direct attention towards the presumed differences in political participation *within* the older age group (65 and older) and what explains these differences.

Fig. 17.2 Political participation by age, pooled data from 2002–2016 (percent). (Source: European Social Survey, pooled data for Sweden 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016 (unweighted as sample sizes are very similar for each year). *Political participation* concerns the proportion of respondents who, during the previous 12 months, did at least one of the following activities: Contacted a politician, government or local government official, Worked in a political party or action group, Worked in another organisation or association, Wore or displayed a campaign badge/sticker, Signed a petition, Took part in a lawful public demonstration, Boycotted certain products)

Fig. 17.3 Interest in politics by age, pooled data from 1986–2016 (percent). (Source: The Swedish National SOM Survey, pooled data 1986–2016, University of Gothenburg. Data are not weighted, which means that earlier years with smaller samples (but higher response rates) weigh equally with later years, which had larger samples but lower response rates. The overall conclusion is not altered if year-specific lines are drawn, but such a graph would also illustrate the overall increase in political interest over time in all age groups. *Political interest* concerns the proportion of respondents who have answered that they are Very or Quite interested in politics)

17.3 Ageing, Health and Political Participation

In modern political science, inequality in citizens' participation is commonly analysed using the so-called Civic Voluntarism Model, which includes three different, but intertwined, sets of variables at the individual level: socio-economic resources, such as time and skills; motivation, such as political interest and political efficacy; and recruitment, such as being part of a network. The explanations as to why some citizens report lower levels of political participation are because they cannot participate, they do not want to or no one asked (Verba et al., 1995). In short, the results show that higher education, having an interest in politics and being socially included play a significant role in explaining an individual's level of political participation, both independently and controlled for each other.

Although research focusing on political participation among seniors is scarce, there are two opposing views about how ageing potentially affects such participation. On the one hand, ageing has been both argued and shown to *increase* political participation. Ageing, and particularly retirement, increases the free time at an individual's disposal, and having time is an important resource for active participation

and engagement (Verba et al., 1995). With increased time at one's disposal, there also follow increased opportunities to follow the news, which is positively associated with a high level of interest in politics (Strömbäck et al., 2013). A second factor of importance is the lifetime accumulation of political knowledge and experience, coupled with an increased sense of duty and compliance (Goerres, 2009). A third argument is the mobilisation that comes with the fact that retired or older individuals become more dependent on the state through pension systems, healthcare and eldercare. In some countries, these welfare-state benefits have mobilised strong interest groups that resist cutbacks (Campbell, 2003). Finally, the current older generation is very different from previous older generations (Goerres, 2009). Extensive research shows that living conditions, well-being and education levels have improved or increased tremendously, all important predictors of both a longer life and greater political participation. In terms of health, today's 70-year-olds are both objectively and subjectively more like the 50-year-olds of the 1970s (AgeCap, 2019).

On the other hand, ageing has also been both argued and shown to *decrease* political participation. As shown earlier, it is difficult to ignore the empirical facts that both turnout and other political activities tend to decrease after 75 years of age. The main causes behind this decline in participation are, according to one study, the disruption of social connections due to retirement and the higher probability of living alone due to loss of one's partner (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012). However, worsened general health (Burden et al., 2016; Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Mattila et al., 2013), decreased capacity for learning, loss of memory functions and disability are also negatively associated with both social and political participation. This tendency is evident among both the population in general (Sund et al., 2017), and older people in particular (Bukow et al., 2002). Arguments have also been put forward that older people tend to focus on more inward-oriented activities (Katz, 2000). Johnson and Barer (1992) found that older people redefine themselves and readjust to a narrower social world, voluntarily or involuntarily as a way to align their functionings with the social expectations to which they are subjected. With old age, individuals become less susceptible to expectations that conflict with their capacities and shift their awareness away from the long perspective and the external, towards the present and introspection. In yet another study, it has been shown that social participation, that is participation in which one needs to share resources with others, should be seen as cumulative. People who take part in political forms of participation also engage in less demanding forms of social participation. However, with increasing age and worsening health, the oldest old refrain from political participation because it takes too much effort, and instead focus on social participation (Bukow et al., 2002). These latter studies all suggest that, for some, becoming old implies an increased feeling that politics does not matter, or, from a broader perspective, that what is going on in the outside world is of less importance than before. This would further imply that political participation is not a desirable function for everyone.

Our main point is that the degree to which ageing is associated, on the one hand, with an *increase or stability* in political participation or, on the other hand, with a *decrease* in political participation could depend on the individual's capability. We further argue that these two opposing views are a result of insufficient data, and that

the more positive outlook on the relationship between ageing and political participation relies on studies conducted with the younger old. Therefore, we argue that it is important to direct attention towards the oldest old in research on ageing and political participation.

17.4 A Capability Approach to Political Participation

From the literature review above, we can conclude that the ageing process affects individuals' levels of participation differently. We argue that capability, the degree to which a person can execute valuable functionings, could serve as an overarching explanation for the ability a person has to participate in politics and that this has been overlooked in previous research.

As discussed elsewhere in this book, capabilities are functionings that make life valuable – the extent to which a person is able to function in a way that is valuable or desirable to that person (Sen, 1980). Examples of capabilities that could be seen as valuable include bodily health, bodily integrity, the senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play and control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2011: 33–34). A different way to express this is that 'functionings are "being and doings", that is various states of human beings and activities that a person can undertake' (Robeyns, 2018: 112). Thus, functionings include everything from being educated, through voting to travelling and spending time with grandchildren. Every functioning has a corresponding capability, which is seen as the individual's opportunity to achieve this functioning (ibid. 2018). In addition, one ought to distinguish between internal capabilities, which are states of a person that enable him/her to exercise a specific functioning, and combined capabilities, which includes the external conditions that enable a person to exercise a specific function (see Nussbaum, 2000: 84; Robeyns, 2005: 104).

This means that capability is what a person *can do*, rather than what the person *actually does*, to achieve desirable goals. Having access to means of political influence, for example the right to vote, is often seen as an important functioning associated with well-being. In fact, it has also been pointed out that social/political participation in itself is an indicator of quality of life among older people (Bukow et al., 2002). In democratic countries, this political right is equal for everyone (one person, one vote). But not everyone has the *capability* to vote – this may be due to a lack of resources, motivation or recruiting networks, but it could also be due to not having the physical and/or mental health to be able to vote.

17.5 Study Design and Method

Even though capability is not a new concept within political science, it has not, to the best of our knowledge, been studied in relation to ageing and political participation. Studying the relationship between capability and political participation ideally requires a mixed-method approach that combines individual qualitative interviews and focus-group interviews with older individuals and elder-care professionals, along with statistical analyses of cross-sectional survey data, epidemiological population data and panel data with older people. Such a mixed-method design will remedy shortcomings identified in previous research, with earlier studies of political participation having tended not to include capability and well-being, and studies of ageing and health tending not to include political participation. Here, we will provide an empirical illustration from an interview study of how the capability approach could be used to understand conceptions of, and reasons for, non-voting among older individuals. We further argue that our study moves the field forward with its focus on the explicit conceptions of and reasons for non-voting rather than (yet) another study of who votes. The motivation for our focus on voting, rather than other forms of political participation, is that voting is the central political activity for adults in any democracy.

The population studied consists of Swedish citizens born in Sweden, who are 80 years old or older and who have good cognitive abilities and adequate hearing. The respondents were selected using the principle of maximum variation, in order to ensure, to a reasonable degree, correspondence with the general population. The factors included in the selection of respondents were explicitly chosen to increase the variety of views on conceptions and reasons for non-voting: *age, gender, voting in the 2018 election, living circumstances and political interest* (see Table 17.1).

Comment: Respondents from a population of Swedish citizens, born in Sweden, aged 80 or older (born in 1940 or earlier) and with sufficient hearing and no dementia disease. The assessment of political interest is a combination of the respondent's own assessment and the researcher's assessment based on answers during the interview.

The respondents were reached using a combination of snowball sampling and convenience sampling. Due to Covid-19, it was not possible to contact older people

Table 17.1 The respondents

Respondent nr.	Age (Born year)	Gender	Voted 2018	Living circumstances	Political interest
1	85 (1935)	Male	No	Own home	No interest
2	81 (1939)	Female	No	Care home	Some interest
3	82 (1938)	Female	Yes	Own home	Large interest
4	82 (1938)	Female	Yes	Own home	Large interest
5	89 (1931)	Male	Yes	Own home	Large interest
6	84 (1936)	Male	Yes	Own home	Large interest
7	86 (1934)	Female	Yes	Own home	Some interest
8	95 (1925)	Female	Yes	Care home	No interest

in person; instead, contacts were mediated through friends, family, social media posts and by contacting retirement homes. To mitigate the risk of the sample being biased towards more active and communicative individuals, the persons who mediated the contacts (e.g. relatives, friends or caretakers of respondents) were reminded that all types of individuals within the population were of interest. In total, eight respondents aged 81–95 years were interviewed by telephone between April and July 2020. Each interview took between 20 and 60 min to complete. The decision to use telephone interviews was another consequence of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and the fact that all respondents were considered to belong to the high-risk group.

Conducting interviews over the telephone generally runs the risk of missing out on non-verbal communication that facilitates naturalness, comfort and trust in the interview situation. Additionally, when interviewing older people, hearing-impaired individuals can also benefit from in-person interviews (Shuy, 2001). On the other hand, telephone interviews typically generate fewer interviewer effects and facilitate less biased questions. An additional advantage is that interviews over the phone usually take less time than in-person interviews and thus reduce demanding preparations that the respondent would undertake before an in-person interview (ibid. 2001). In sum, telephone interviews were a necessary choice but nevertheless a less preferable option that does not create the same dynamic as in-person interviews would have achieved. However, our firm perception is that all respondents were comfortable in the interview situation.

The interview guide consisted of three themes: biographical and warm-up questions, questions about voting and non-voting, and questions about the social world. Each interview ended with a debriefing. All interviews were transcribed, with the consent of the respondent, and the transcripts were later analysed using the grounded theory method. This method prescribes the use of *categories*, *dimensions* and *qualities* for summarising the collected material; broad categories are identified within the empirical material, the dimensions of these categories are then determined and given specific qualities (Eneroth, 2005).

17.6 Empirical Illustration of Conceptions of and Reasons for Non-voting

Based on the interviews, conceptions and reasons for non-voting were categorised into *internal* reasons and *external* reasons, which also correspond to the two main dimensions of capability. Among the internal reasons, the dimensions: *engagement*, *health* and *efficacy* were identified. Among the external reasons, three additional dimensions were identified: *practical assistance*, *social support* and *information*. Of the six dimensions, answers related to engagement, health, practical assistance and social support all bear a close resemblance to the concept of capability; thus, these are the focus of the empirical illustration. Answers related to efficacy were

strongly connected to distrust in and disappointment with politicians, while information concerned the (lack of) information provided by political parties and the election authorities. These are also well-established determinants of voter turnout in political science research (see e.g. Franklin, 2004), but will not be included in our illustration. However, all six dimensions are illustrated in Fig. 17.4 in the appendix.

17.6.1 Internal Capabilities: Engagement

R1 is an 85-year-old man who did not vote in the 2018 election and has no intention of doing so in the future. He is ‘too old’ and too frail, he says. When asked if this is a physical issue, he says:

No, it’s not the body, it’s... One doesn’t have the strength to get familiar with the stuff. I have the strength to go out [for walks] but I don’t have the strength to take in all the political decisions in the newspapers. I can’t say ‘Oh Lord, what’s that? I have to call someone!’ – that’s over [...] You see, it only has to do with age. It’s very simple: age takes its toll. I don’t have the strength to go to meetings, I don’t have the strength to get into details. I could 10–15 years ago, but... (R1)

R1 explains that it is not health issues that keep him from being engaged, which is supported by the fact that earlier in the interview he said that he is satisfied with his physical health. It is rather the effects of ageing on how much he is able to *mentally* engage with that hinder him from being engaged enough to vote.

R8, who is a 95-year-old woman who does vote, puts forward similar thoughts when she is reflecting on other people’s non-voting in old age: ‘[...] when one gets older, one doesn’t invest as much interest any more, as one would have when, for

Fig. 17.4 Category schedule, conceptions of and reasons for non-voting among seniors

example, one was young. That's what I think. It just passes. "What will be will be", they think' (R8). In addition to being expressions of a lack of engagement, the answers given by R1 and R8 could also relate to a lack of the internal capabilities necessary to be able to perform the function of voting. What further unites the statements from R1 and R8 is that voting can simply be too much of an effort and that one can thus feel the need to direct one's capabilities towards other functions that are more desirable. This finding is largely in line with the work of Bukow et al. (2002).

17.6.2 Internal Capabilities: Health

The respondents also emphasise a lack of the necessary physical or cognitive abilities to be able to vote; for example, to be able to choose between different candidates, to locate the right documents and go through the procedures of voting.

R3 is an 82-year-old woman whose husband was living in a care home during the 2018 election, where she spent a lot of time with him. She puts it well when she is asked about whether she thinks the other residents in the care home were able to vote:

No, not at all. They were too deeply immersed in their illnesses and their situation to make the excess movement – both mentally and bodily – that voting is; to go out and collect ballots, making sure that it's the right ballot, presenting their ID papers – it was too demanding. (R3)

R5 reflects on his wife's disabilities: 'She had such difficulties with mobility and with getting to the voting station, so I think her difficulties outweighed her interest' (R5). In these statements, it is evident that poor health was hindering the respondents' spouses from exercising the function of voting.

17.6.3 External Capabilities: Practical Assistance

Both the spouses of R3 and R5 had health issues that would have hindered them from being able to participate, *if* they had not received help with transportation and finding the right ballot. Thus, the external resources of their spouses were key for enabling them to vote, which can be related to the concept of combined capabilities discussed earlier.

However, it is not only family members who are a source of practical assistance for those who need it, but also professionals working close to them. R3 is displeased with the assistance that was offered her husband in his care home. She felt that the care home personnel were incapable of assisting residents with practical issues during the election; partly due to a lack of interest and partly due to low proficiency in Swedish and little civic engagement, because they were all immigrants. She says:

[...] a person who has had several strokes has difficulties with comprehending. They even have difficulties with their eyesight. They need glasses, they need assistance. And in order to read things like election material, one needs better assistance [...] than what was offered at [husband's care home]. (R3)

R3's attribution of her husband's difficulties with voting to a lack of assistance rather than to his internal capabilities – his health issues – is a good example of the difference between the health dimension and the practical assistance dimension, and demonstrates once again how external conditions can either hinder or enable the function of voting.

17.6.4 *External Capabilities: Social Support*

The social support dimension is the external counterpart to the internal engagement dimension. While a lack of engagement is connected to internal capabilities, which can cause non-voting alone, social support can remedy the effects of low engagement. A lack of social support is therefore considered a reason for non-voting that is qualitatively different from that of low engagement. Additionally, social support is connected to external conditions that can enable a person to exercise a specific function, such as voting.

R5 cared for his wife during her final years and was not only essential for her ability to vote in terms of practical assistance, but also in terms of social encouragement. The following exchange takes place when he is asked if his wife would have been able to vote in 2018 if he had not helped her:

No, she wouldn't have.

How come?

Well, to begin with, I don't think she was interested enough. I was probably the one who spurred her interest quite a lot [...] (R5)

Verbal encouragement from others is not the only aspect of social support; the company of others can also comprise a form of support. R1 lost his wife, with whom he voted together, several years ago. Lacking a voting partner had a negative impact upon his desire to go to the voting station, which is illustrated by his answer to how voting felt after she passed away: 'Well... Then the interest in voting declined too, I guess. It's not much fun going out alone to the voting station. I guess I did it for a year or so, but then it died out' (R1). The negative effect on voting of losing a partner, as an example of a disruption of social ties, has also been established in previous research (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012; Hobbs, 2019). Thus, we can once again conclude that external capabilities, or rather the lack thereof, are important.

As previously described, R3 is displeased with the assistance that was offered to her husband in his care home and is thus also displeased with the *social* support offered. She would have wanted the staff to engage in conversation with residents about the election, but the care home staff were incapable of socially supporting residents. She describes how:

[...] they had no social behaviour towards the residents. They made sure they were fed and clean [...] and then they disappeared into their break room where they sat, chatting with each other [...] But they had relatively recently arrived in the country, two, four years maybe. Spoke poor Swedish and weren't at all engaged in talking to the elderly. (R3)

She does not really blame the staff for their inability to assist. Holding dual citizenship herself, she understands how difficult it can be to become familiarised with the politics of another country than one's home. Thus, R3's statements include expectations of external conditions in terms of social support from eldercare professionals in order for older people to be able to exercise the functioning of voting. Whether or not this is a reasonable expectation is something we leave for future research. On the one hand, training eldercare professionals to inform their patients about elections, or to stimulate discussions about politics, could be seen as a rather large democracy project with the goal of improving political equality. On the other hand, we can also see a potential risk of biased or inadequate information and potential problems with the electoral integrity of the individual, and that such information should rather be given by trained voting aid ambassadors from the Swedish election authority.

17.7 Summing Up: The First Steps Towards a Capability Approach to Political Participation

The aim of this chapter has been to provide an integrated and empirical illustration of a capability approach to studies of political participation among ageing populations. As emphasised by Robeyns (2005: 94), capability is not a theory per se, but rather an analytical framework that can be used for the conceptualisation and evaluation of different social arrangements and forms of well-being. Based on the combined demographic and democratic challenges posed by ageing populations, whereby the political life of individuals is prolonged, at the same time as levels of political participation in Sweden decline quite steeply after the age of 80, we used the capability approach to further understand conceptions of and reasons for non-voting among older voters.

The empirical illustration, based on interviews with eight individuals aged 80 years or older, demonstrates that the concepts of internal and combined capabilities are fruitful when understanding non-voting. For some individuals, voting is simply too much of an effort, and they need to direct their capabilities towards other, more desirable, functionings. For others, health and mobility issues hinder their ability to vote but, in some instances, both the practical and social support of close relatives enables voting participation. In sum, the reasons as to why older people abstain from voting seem to be numerous, from no longer viewing voting as important, to not having the internal and/or combined capabilities to execute this functioning.

In order to further understand and explain the differences in voting activity within the older electorate, and political participation among older individuals more

generally, we need to continue to combine explanations at the macro, meso and micro levels. Although the current study has primarily focused on the individual's social context (external capability/the meso level) and socioeconomic and health-related prerequisites (internal capability/the micro level) connected to political participation, we also perceive a need to incorporate macro-level perspectives into future research. Such perspectives could be accessed via normative questions about how democratic institutions should be set up to cater to the interests of different groups, and how political participation in old age should be viewed from the perspective of political equality across generations. Additional macro-level perspectives that it would be fruitful to pursue in future research include how the design of welfare states in general, and the design and functioning of elder care, healthcare and pension systems in particular, provide different institutional constraints and opportunities for the political participation of older individuals in different countries.

Appendix

Comment: Reasons based on conceptions of non-voting among voters and non-voters, aged 80 years and older.

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