

Political participation and late-life learning: A cross-cultural study of older people's participation in seniors' interest organizations in Australia and Spain

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Abstract

Understanding what older people learn from their civic participation is of critical importance both for individuals and organizations. This link has been neglected in prior research, and the evidence across diverse cultural contexts is particularly limited. However, the political context of older people's life experiences and participation is important in their participation. The intent of the present study is to explore the learnings experienced by older people through participation in seniors' interest organizations, across Australia and Spain. Participants included 52 active members of political organizations focused on issues for older people. A questionnaire was used for data collection; participants' responses to an open-ended question regarding what they have learnt from their participation in seniors' interest organisations are analysed here. Participants' answers were subjected to a multi-stage thematic analysis. Findings shows three key themes relating to learnings about themselves, such as self-improvement or skills or knowledge; learnings about others, such as cooperation with others and understand that people have different views; and learning about society, such as inequality and the need to fight for injustice. The findings suggest some interesting similarities and differences across contexts, which appears to reflect the different political contexts of the two countries.

Key words: political participation, aging, informal learning, cross-cultural research

Introduction

Population aging has led to an increased interest in approaches to assisting elders to stay healthy and active (WHO 2002). Older people's participation in civic activities, in particular, has been highlighted for its potential to contribute to community development while positively impacting elders' health and well-being (e.g. Okun et al. 2013; Son and Wilson 2012). To date, research has focused on factors that promote and maintain older people's active participation in civic activities. This includes aspects such as the motivations and barriers affecting elders' civic participation (for a review see Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007) or the effect of this kind of participation on older people's physical and psychological health (for a review see Anderson et al. 2014), however, there is far less known about other dimensions of this behaviour. This includes the perceptions of older people as to what they have learnt from their civic participation.

This paper explores the learnings gained by older people through their active involvement in political organisations, as one significant form of civic participation by this population. More specifically, the paper focuses on the informal learnings (that is, the learnings gained outside of formal educational programs) that are experienced by older people through their active involvement as volunteer leaders in politically active seniors' interest organisations. Given the nature of participation on which we focus here, the paper compares two contexts with important differences in their socio-political histories in order to explore the importance of context in such learnings.

There is some research suggesting that informal learning is a key dimension of the experience of civic participation. A seminal study on volunteering by Ilsley (1990) found that the duration of volunteers' commitment was related to the amount, kind, and quality of learning that volunteers experienced in their organizations. Further research has shown that people's participation in civic activities has the potential to transform their skills, knowledge, self-

concept, emotions, relations with others, and perspectives of the world around them (Haski-Leventhal and Bargal 2008; Piercy et al. 2011). Thus, understanding what people learn from their participation in civic activities is of critical importance both for individuals themselves and organizations seeking to recruit and retain them. However, the relationship between learning and civic participation has been neglected in prior research (Schugurensky 2013), particularly in relation to learnings across diverse cultural contexts (Author 1 et al., reference withheld).

The present study aims to explore these issues. It builds on an earlier single-nation study of seniors' learnings, based on older people's participation in a range of Spanish political organizations (Author 1 et al., reference withheld). The research questions being addressed in the present study are (1) what do older people learn from their participation in seniors' interest organizations; and (2) are there differences in these learnings across two different socio-political and cultural contexts, Australia and Spain. We start with a brief discussion of the key concepts, and specifically, political participation, (informal) learning, and seniors' interest organizations. We then go on and discuss similarities and differences in relation to the life experiences of participants and the organisational landscape across the two different contexts.

Ageing and political participation

Research into what people learn from their civic participation is complicated by the lack of agreement among researchers on the kind of activities included under this label. While some scholars have used the term quite broadly, to include all the activities that generate social capital (e.g. Putnam 2000), others have referred to specific activities such as volunteering (e.g. Cutler et al. 2011) or political participation (e.g. Burr et al. 2002). As Hustinx and Denk (2009) claimed, the assumption that different kind of activities represent homogenous and consistent realities have relegated the study of civic participation to a "black box". Berger (2009) went

even further suggesting to avoid the use of the concept as it “means so many things to so many people that it clarifies almost nothing” (p. 335).

There have been attempts to clarify the concept of civic participation in the literature. Hustinx and colleagues, for example, have explored new types of civic participation by University students, showing their participation to be complex and diverse (Hustinx et al. 2012). Some scholars have proposed to differentiate two component within the concept of civic participation: social and political participation (Adler and Goggin 2005; Berger 2009; McBride et al. 2006). While the former relates to all the activities that connect people to each other, such as caregiving or volunteering, the later refers to actions that are aimed at influencing political outcomes. Despite the importance of including senior citizens in policy-making processes, particularly in the context of ageing populations, most studies to date have focused on older people’s social participation, mostly volunteering, with seniors’ participation in political activities largely overlooked (Serrat, Villar, et al. 2015). More specifically, there is a dearth of studies addressing what older people learn from their participation in civic activities (Serrat et al. 2016).

Studying seniors’ participation in political activities, however, is further complicated by the multidimensionality of political participation, a concept including itself several kinds of involvement. Political activities may be differentiated in terms of the amount of resources they require from the individual (in high or low-investment political activities; Verba et al. 1995), and according to their degree of institutionalisation (in institutionalised or non-institutionalised forms of political participation; Kaase 1999; or conventional or non-conventional forms; Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014). For example, Hustinx and colleagues (2012) discussing young people’s participation, differentiate between conventional forms of political participation, such as contacting a politician, writing a letter to the newspaper, and, what they call, unconventional forms such as participating in an illegal protest, or wearing a badge or t-

shirt with a political message. Some conventional forms of older people's participation such as voting, have been addressed in previous research (e.g. Binstock 2000; Kam et al. 1999; Melo and Stockemer 2014; Nygard and Jakobsson 2013a, 2013b), as well as some of the less conventional forms, such as political activism through organizations such as the Raging Grannies, have also been explored to some extent (Narushima 2004). However, high-investment and institutionally channelled activities, such as seniors' active participation in political organisations, have been largely underexplored in the literature (Serrat, Villar, et al. 2015). These activities are particularly interesting due to the higher level of effort that they require from individuals (Verba et al. 1995) and the fact that they tend to be stable across time (Goerres 2009).

Research into seniors' active participation in political organisations have analysed factors predicting participation (Serrat, Villar, et al. 2015), compared their participatory patterns to younger generations (Goerres 2009), or explored seniors' perceived motivations (Serrat and Villar 2016) and barriers (Serrat, Petriwskyj, et al. 2015) to join political organisations. As well as in the literature on seniors' volunteering, informal learning through participation in political organisations has been far less often the focus of research. When considering this topic, the specific type of organisation and political activities carried out by participants should be taken into account, as these variables have proved to influence other aspects of seniors' political participation (Serrat, Petriwskyj, et al. 2015; Serrat and Villar 2016) and makes difficult to generalise results from one context to another (Schugurensky and Mundel 2005). In this study we focus specifically on the informal learning that older people gain through their participation in seniors' interest organisations.

Learning through civic participation

The learnings that take place in the context of people's participation in civic activities are generally informal. The term 'informal learning' refers to "...the body of knowledge, skills,

attitudes, perspectives and values acquired outside of the curricula of educational institutions (formal education) and outside of the programmes and workshops offered by a variety of social agencies (non-formal education)” (Schugurensky and Myers 2008, p. 75). Informal learning is one of the most promising areas of research and practice in the field of adult education, as it is typically the way adults and older adults learn (Church et al. 2008; Scheiber 2015). Considering the dimensions of awareness and intentionality, it is possible to identify three kinds of informal learning: self-directed (conscious and intentional), incidental (conscious and unintentional), and socialization (unconscious and unintentional) (Duguid, Mundel, and Schugurensky 2013). Much of the learning that arises from civic participation is unplanned and spontaneous (Ilsley 1990), commonly incidental learning (Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995). Although this kind of learning is not deliberately pursued, if individuals are openly asked about it they are usually able to retrospectively identify what they have learnt from their participation in civic activities. Thus, this kind of learning implies direct participation in life-events and a subsequent reflection on these events which allows the person to gain new insights and change his/her forms of thinking (Belda-Miquel et al. 2016; Ollis 2011; Scheiber 2015).

Although there is no evidence specifically relating to informal learning through older people participation in seniors interest organisations, there are a few studies that have identify different types of informal learning in other aspects of civic participation. This body of research suggest that civic participation provides individuals with diverse and numerous opportunities for informal learning, regardless of their formal educational background. A seminal study on volunteering by Ilsley (1990) found that volunteers experienced three types of informal learning: instrumental (acquiring skills for voluntary work), social (related to issues of trust, communication, respect, or openness), and critical (analysing of own and society’s politics, values, and priorities). In their study with African-American women’s volunteer organizations, Ross-Gordon and Dowling (1995) found that, beyond knowledge acquisition, volunteers

developed their skills to work with others and experienced a growing self-confidence and sense of connectedness to their communities. More recently, Duguid, Mundel, Schugurensky, et al. (2013) conducted a study on learnings through different types of civic activities. They found that participants developed their instrumental and communication skills, political knowledge and efficacy, and experienced a broader understanding of social realities, among others learnings.

However, research specifically focused on older adults has been limited despite the critical importance of healthy ageing in contemporary societies. Some studies focused on learnings from a broader range of civic activities undertaken by seniors. This includes the authors' prior study, which focused on participation across a range of political organizations in Spain (Author 1 et al., reference withheld). Findings showed a range of informal learnings across social, political, and instrumental domains. Another study by Narushima (2005) focused on older people's participation across social movements, finding that learning acted as an important reward. The content of learning was either integrative (e.g. interpersonal skills, leadership ability, and better understanding of people and cultures) or instrumental (e.g. practical knowledge about specific topics and technical skills).

As well as some studies of the learnings associated with older people's broader participation, there are also a few studies which focus on a narrow range of specific activities. These include a study by Piercy et al. (2011) where seniors engaged in an intensive, religious-based volunteering program. Here, findings showed that seniors experienced larger social networks, increased compassion and empathy for others, and a deeper sense of existential meaning through their volunteer experience. This kind of self and spiritual growth was also found among women involved with the 'Raging Grannies', who cultivated their creativity, critical thinking, sense of self-liberation, and well-being through their political activism (Narushima 2004). Finally, seniors involved in local governance initiatives in Toronto declared

having acquired knowledge related to local politics, developed a greater sense of political efficacy, and increased team-work skills (Schugurensky and Myers 2008).

Together these studies provide important insights into the learnings experienced by older people through their participation in a range of civic activities, which range from knowledge and technical skills to personal development and spiritual growth. However, as stated earlier, the complex and multidimensional nature of civic participation prevents us from making generalizations regarding people's learnings (Schugurensky and Mundel 2005). Although these studies have addressed older people's learnings either through broader fields or in very specific contexts, including political organizations, as far as we know there is no research focused specifically on older people's participation in seniors' interest organizations.

This kind of participation is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. Older people's active participation in seniors' organizations is a core component of the active ageing model, which recognizes seniors' right to have a say in the decisions directly affecting their lives (Walker 2006). Indeed, mirroring a generalized shift in Western countries towards more participative forms of democracy, international organizations, as well as both local and national governments, have openly encouraged the inclusion of elders and their representative interest groups in consultation, planning, and policy-making processes (Commonwealth of Australia 2001; Instituto de Mayores y Servicios Sociales 2011; United Nations 2002). Despite this, scholarly research has paid very limited attention to this issue (Doyle 2014; Walker 2006).

The role of seniors' interest groups in representing a legitimate ageing perspective in policy, for instance, has been called into question (Warburton and Petriwskyj 2007). Older people actively involved in this kind of organization are not only representing their own interests in a range of age-related issues but they are also expected to advocate for a growing and highly diverse sector of the population (Barnes et al. 2011). As Doyle (2014) has argued, the scarce literature on seniors' interest organizations assumes an outcome-based - and often

too simplistic - approach, which deals with the capacity of these organizations to influence macro political agendas. However, much less is known about the experiences and meanings that individuals attribute to their participation, in particular what they learn from it. This paper intends to contribute to our understanding of these experiences, by exploring the learnings experienced by older people through their active participation in seniors' interest organizations.

Learnings across different socio-political contexts

It may well be that learning through political participation is determined not only by individuals' perspectives and personal histories, but also by the socio-political context in which participation take place. As Goerres (2009) argues, different national contexts influence the social and political experiences that individuals have across the life-cycle: "where and when an individual grows up matters for political participation in later life [...] reaching old age in one country can be a different experience from those encountered in other countries and have varying consequences for political behavior" (p. 2). Even within one country, certainly socio-cultural histories of different groups have been identified as important in not just what challenges older people experience to their participation, but how those challenges were experienced (Petriwskyj et al. 2012). However, research on older people's political participation from a cross-cultural perspective has been almost non-existent. The few studies that have considered this dimension have shown that patterns of elders' participation in both conventional and non-conventional political activities are highly influenced by the particular socio-political milieu of the country where participation take place (Goerres 2009; Melo and Stockemer 2014). As far as we know, however, the cross-cultural dimension of seniors' political participation has not been considered in previous research on learnings, which has been commonly carried out in one particular country, mostly the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom (Narushima 2004; Ross-Gordon and Dowling 1995). This suggests that it is

important to compare learnings across two quite different countries in order to provide important insights into the influence of the socio-political context on their learnings.

This study compares this aspect of political participation between the contexts of Spain and Australia. These are countries which share some of the concerns and opportunities associated with population ageing, along with a strong voluntary sector through which older people are politically active; however, they present significant differences in their socio-political trajectories that could affect seniors' participation in political activities. This makes them valuable cases with rich potential for comparison. For example, over the next 50 years, the proportion of Australians aged 65 and over will almost double to 22% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013), and this percentage will be even higher in Spain, where the proportion of people over 65 is expected to reach 36% of the population by 2050 (Instituto de Mayores y Servicios Sociales 2014). For these different cohorts of older people, the socio-political history, and their own political experiences, have been vastly different.

Significantly, while Australia has experienced a quite stable political context and long economic boom over much of the working lives of the current cohort of older people, Spain is a young democracy with a long dictatorial past. The global financial crisis that erupted in 2008 had dramatic economic and social consequences in Spain, although a much smaller impact in Australia. In Spain, unemployment rates reached almost 27% in 2013, and are currently still above 20% (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2016), and the percentage of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion has grown steadily during the crisis to reach almost 30% of the Spanish population in 2014 (European Commission 2014). Moreover, the politics of austerity implemented by the conservative government and encouraged by the European Union has notably aggravated the situation of Spaniards, which saw substantial cutbacks in the public-based range of health, educational and social services (León and Pavolini 2014). The effect of the crisis have had significant impacts on the older sector of the population, with

policies such as an increase in retirement age, reduction in services and programs and a health co-payment (Deusdad et al. 2016; Legido-Quigley et al. 2013; Serrano et al. 2014). The result has been the development of new Spanish social movements, as well as the reactivation of many existing political organizations, including seniors' interests organizations.

Australia, on the other hand, has had a quite different history over the twentieth century. As a liberal welfare regime, Australia has been described as a wage-earners welfare state model, with a welfare state maintained by wage regulation and welfare delivered through employment (Warburton 2014a). For those in need of support, there is a welfare safety net, including a government pension; more recently compulsory superannuation savings has been implemented to provide for retirement income. Whilst recent years have seen the unravelling of a policy solution based on full employment and economic growth, the reality is that a majority of the baby boomers (those born in the postwar period) has experienced high levels of employment over their life time (Warburton and Jeppsson Grassman 2011). Further, whilst there are much lower education levels for older Australians than younger groups, adult participation in education is high in Australia compared with other OECD countries, resulting in good labour market outcomes and earnings for many of the baby boomer cohort (OECD 2012).

However, the diversity of the Australian population must be recognised, and over recent decades, there have been critical changes to welfare, pension and aged care arrangements (Warburton 2014a). A strong government-directed shift away from the aged pension towards individualized superannuation income leaves many people more vulnerable to downturns in the economic market and to the impact of inequitable employment during their lifetime. There is undoubtedly a range of important political issues facing older people in Australia, as the significance of dealing with an ageing population impacts on government action. However, it

is also the case that, compared with Spanish older people, Australian babyboomers have experienced a relatively secure social and economic period through their younger years.

The contextual differences across the two countries provide an important backdrop for the comparative dimension of the present study. Overall, the paper aims to understand the learnings experienced by older people through their political participation through seniors' interest organizations, which act to advocate for older people; and to compare these learnings across the different cultural contexts of Australia and Spain.

Senior's interest organisations in Spain and Australia

Spain's associational life has traditionally been seen as weak and lacking organisation, as the development of the non-profit sector did not take place until the return of democracy in 1976 (Montagut 2009). The era of Franco's dictatorship limited personal and collective rights, leaving no room at all for civil society's participation in public and political affairs. During almost 40 years, a very limited range of welfare services were provided by the state, with the needs of the extremely poor addressed through charity mostly provided by catholic organisations aligned with the regime (Monzón Campos et al. 2003). The construction of a modern welfare state did not occur until the 1980s, and took place thus in a context of an impoverished civil society (Encarnación 2003).

The death of Franco opened the associational life to sectors outside the church and the regime, and several groups started to organise themselves around shared interests, such as trade unions, students, professionals, and seniors' organisations (Nanetti and Holguin 2016). However, although the rates of participation of Spaniards in these newly created associations has grown steadily since then, these continue to be at the bottom of Europe (Morales and Mota 2006). As McDonough et al. (1998) stated, "Spain shows signs of Democracy Lite. Democratic

procedures are solidly in place, but participation seems to have stagnated... Civic anemia appears to be endemic in Spain” (p. 1).

Within this, however, seniors’ interest organisations play a relevant role in the Spanish associational landscape. Along with trade unions, neighbourhood associations, cultural, and religious organisations, seniors’ interest organisations are among the most commonly joined by Spaniards, with 7.1% of those aged 50 and over belonging or actively collaborating (Rodríguez et al. 2013). Seniors’ interest organisations typically function at the country-level, and advocate for a wide range of seniors’ interests, including but not limited to issues related to work and pensions, transport, education, and health and social care services. Some organisations operate as sections of pensioners within major trade unions but most of them are independent from any trade union or political party affiliation.

Seniors organisations represent and advocate for older people’s interests through activities such as providing direct support and services to affiliates (advice on a number of practical matters, such as pensions or health services, legal services, and others), participating in governmental policy and planning actions as relevant stakeholders, or initiating and supporting actions to claim for older people’s rights. Seniors’ interest organisations are managed by older people themselves, typically through a directive board which is in charge of the general aspects of the organisation (finances, affiliations, and so on), and by a number of committees which are focused in more specific issues.

In Australia, civic activities undertaken by older people are highly diverse, although an international comparison has shown that most participate for instrumental reasons, undertaking service delivery roles, particularly in community, welfare or health organizations (Warburton and Jeppsson Grassman 2011). Seniors’ interest organisations more specifically undertake social, educational, lifestyle, and political activities. While many include lobbying and political

activities and influence in their mission or aims, some are more generally focused on activities and outcomes for older people with political activities less central.

While there is a higher rate of volunteering amongst seniors than younger age groups, national data show that relatively few older people actively participate in political organisations (Warburton 2014b). However, seniors' interest organisations in Australia are active at local, state, and national policy levels and governments frequently form partnerships with, or actively consult with such organisations (Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007). Their activities range from direct partnerships (e.g. development of strategies and community action on age-related issues) to lobbying and campaigning. A number of them are particularly active and well-recognised, and are frequently invited to provide comment or advice through consultations and advisory groups, as well as providing submissions on proposals or inquiries.

These organisations tend to take a broad issue focus, although some have a specific population sub-group of interest (e.g. women, pensioners, superannuants). The topics on which they provide comment and advice include pensions and superannuation, housing, transport, health and aged care, employment, elder abuse, community services, and education, among others. This diversity of areas of expected expertise and the diversity among those they are expected to represent has led to some concerns about the pressures placed on these organisations by government (Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007). The reliance by these organisations on funding sources which include government funding has also resulted in tensions and challenges for sustainability (Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007).

These organisations, like those in Spain, are managed by older people themselves, although many employ paid staff who may be younger people. They are membership-based and often have two- or three-tiered structures reaching from the national to local level. They have a range of governance structures; while some have a management committee with divisional or branch sub-committees, others have a Board of Directors with committees

reporting up to this board. Some also form sub-committees around specific policy issues, or more generally for the development and formation of policy. Usual roles in management committees include those focused on financial, administration, and strategic leadership.

Methods

Participants

Participants were selected through convenience sampling and included active members in responsible roles (members of the directive board or committees) within political organizations focused on issues for older people in Spain and Australia. The sample comprised 52 participants, 26 from each country, with a mean age of 73 (range 65-86; $SD = 5.8$). Of the full sample, two thirds were men and 35 per cent women, 19 per cent had primary education or less, 17 per cent had secondary education, and 63 per cent had a university education or post-school professional training. The respondents had been participating in their organizations for a mean of just over 11 years, and participated for a mean of 9.3 hours per week. There were three statistically significant differences between the samples: education level (higher in the Australian sample, probably as a result of greater educational opportunities in Australia), years participating (longer in the Spanish sample), and hours committed per week (greater in the Spanish sample). The characteristics of the Australian and Spanish samples are detailed in Table I.

INSERT TABLE I ABOUT HERE

Of the five Spanish organizations involved, one was a political party for pensioners, and four were advocacy organizations for older people's rights. Of the nine Australian organizations, six were advocacy organizations for older people's rights, one was a local government advisory committee, one was a continuing education organization, and one was a

social and personal interests organization. All participants volunteered their time, and all organizations were politically active with a specific focus on older people's issues.

Instruments

A questionnaire, designed for the Spanish sample and translated for use in Australia by the authors, was used for data collection. The full questionnaire included standardized scales, open-ended questions, and incomplete sentences and was piloted with a sample of Spanish older people. The data reported in this paper relates to a selection of items relating to learnings from participation.

The questionnaire comprised socio-demographic questions including gender, marital status, education, and income, as well as questions relating to participatory characteristics such as number of years and average hours spent participating. Learnings from participation were measured with the questions: *'Have you learnt something that you consider valuable from your participation?'* (Yes, No) and *'If your answer is yes, could you explain in a few words what you have learnt through your participation?'* (open-ended). The use of an open-ended measure allowed for responses to be captured in respondents' own words which could then be used for qualitative analysis. This more qualitative approach was utilized due to the absence of existing measures that could be incorporated into instrument design. Further, the lack of appropriate evidence specific to the context and population under study suggested a more exploratory approach would be more appropriate.

Procedure

The data were collected from the Spanish sample in 2014 and then replicated with an Australian sample in 2015. Organizations in Catalonia, Spain and then in Queensland and Victoria, Australia were contacted with an invitation to take part. They were asked to distribute questionnaires to their members who met the following inclusion criteria: 1) a member of the

board or of a committee within the organization, 2) participation in the organization for at least one year prior, and 3) devoting at least one hour per week to participation.

Full information about the study, confidentiality, and right to withdraw was provided in an information letter and respondents gave informed consent. The study was approved by ethics committees of the University of XXXX and The University of XXXX. To ensure anonymity, respondents were assigned a participant code which is used in the results section below to designate the unique respondent for each quote (e.g. SPA03_M67). The first letter indicates participant's subsample (SPA stands for Spanish sample and AUS stands for Australian sample) followed by a randomly assigned participant number; the letter and number after underscore indicated participant's gender (M stands for man, W for woman) and age.

Data analysis

The qualitative responses to the questionnaire were submitted to thematic analysis to identify themes among responses. A multiple stage process was used in which ideas were identified, then condensed into themes of similar meaning. First, two of the authors of this study read carefully the responses to become acquainted with the data and to infer meanings from the text (Maxwell 1996). The researchers coded independently, and then discussed the themes to reach consensus. The sets of data and coding structures were then compared and a final set of themes identified. This coding process was undertaken using NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software. Three key themes of learnings were identified: learnings about self, about others, and about society. The Australian and Spanish samples were compared on their responses and sources of convergence and divergence in the data identified.

Findings

Analysis of findings across both sets of data showed three key themes emerging from participants' perceptions of the informal learnings they have gained from their participation in

seniors' interest organizations. These three themes related to learning about oneself, learning about others, and learning about society. All of these themes comprised a number of related sub-themes, which are discussed below. A summary of these key themes and sub-themes, with examples from the data, is presented in Table II.

INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

Learning about self

The first theme related to self and how participants feel that they have learnt more about themselves, how they can contribute better and gain skills and knowledge through participation. The first sub theme highlighted self-improvement, and how participants' political participation has taught them to be a better person, as in "I have learnt to be more generous, altruistic and ethical" (SPA16_M75). A common theme across both Spanish and Australian datasets was the growth of self-confidence, as in learning "...to be spiritually stronger" (SPA04_W86) or "I have learnt that if I just try something that I'm not confident of achieving it usually succeeds" (AUS24_M83).

A related sub-theme across both data sets was about learning how to achieve change and work effectively. Thus, as one Spanish participant noted, "achieving objectives always requires effort" (SPA19_M70) with another highlighting learning "to think and argue better" (SPA24_M67). In the Australian data, and another said he had learnt that "change is very difficult ...[and]...to produce change without offending anyone was my intention" (AUS09_M71).

Gaining some instrumental skills through participation was evident across both data sets, particularly relating to gaining knowledge, such as "that I have some useful skills" (AUS01_W69) or "I have developed human relations skills" (SPA15_M69). This also reflected the growing confidence some reported from their participation. Further, these comments

related to how participants may not have had learning opportunities in their working lives, as in “I have learnt about the working of the city” (AUS06_M84). One participant also noted “the enjoyment of continuing education, learning and exercising my mind” (AUS02_W75), reflecting the personal joy of continued learning at this stage of their life. Just one Spanish participant made a comment relating to healthy ageing by noting “the importance of staying active and keep contributing to society” (SPA05_W70). However, the attention to social contribution was consistent with other participants’ comments.

Learning about others

The second key theme showed how participants felt that they had learnt about others, and particularly about working with others. This was noted across both the Spanish and the Australian data, although was much stronger in tone and more frequently mentioned in the Spanish data. For the Spanish participants, comments often centred on “the importance of collaboration and collective action” (SPA10_M86) or “I have learnt that having solidarity is a permanent objective and associational life is the way to achieve it” (SPA21_M77). Generally, learnings relating to collective action were stronger here than in the Australian data. For example, one Spanish participant said, “I have learnt to value the importance of associations and volunteer work in the current society in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer” (SPA18_M74). By contrast, whilst the Australian participants also noted the value of learning about others and particularly “cooperation” (AUS11_M70) or “meeting the needs of members” (AUS05_M67), it was less often mentioned by participants and the language was more moderate.

Spanish participants also highlighted how they have learnt greater awareness of the needs of others, and to be assertive. Thus, one participant noted that he has learnt “...to become more sensitive to social, political and cultural injustices” (SPA14_M75). Another comment relating to their growing self-confidence highlighted the need to be assertive to achieve their

aims, as in "...to reassert my rights, never shut up and stand up for my ideas" (SPA26_W68). A third Spanish participant said that "I have learnt almost everything I know from my lifelong commitment to social activism" (SPA20_M66). This suggested that, for these Spanish participants, participation has strengthened their awareness, built assertiveness and increased their commitment to the issues.

An important sub theme across both data sets was understanding the diversity of views, with both groups recognising difference. For example, in the Spanish data, participants highlighted learning "to live together and respect others despite differences" (SPA12_M74) or "to better empathise with others; to look at everything from different points of view" (SPA11_M68). Similar comments were evident in the Australian data, as in learning about "issues facing other people" (AUS14_W68) or "everyone who is involved usually has their own reasons and passions for being there" (AUS15_W71). Interestingly, only one Australian participant reported learning that most people are apathetic, in the comment, "there is considerable passivity amongst many older people in the community with a reluctance to really challenge or fight for issues affecting themselves as older people" (AUS13_M76).

Learning about society

The third theme, learning about society, represented the strongest theme across both sets of data. Here, there were some important differences between the Spanish and Australian findings. Generally, the Spanish participants highlighted learnings in relation to injustice, as in learning "the importance of fighting against the injustices committed by our leaders" (SPA13_M67) or "to fight for a fairer and more equal world" (SPA17_M72). On the other hand, while some Australian participants did talk about "fighting", as in "it is organizations like ours that fight for better standards and conditions for pensioners" (AUS22_M69), generally Australian participants utilised a more temperate language. The Spanish data was

replete with the language of injustice, fighting or rights, unlike the Australian data, which was generally much more moderate.

Further, in the Australian sample, generally the focus was on the need to advocate for older people as well as noting learnings related specifically to ageing issues, rather than injustice more broadly. For example, participants used language such as “to improve the lot of older Australians” (AUS07_W68) or “I’ve learnt about ageing policy, government strategies to deal with an ageing population and the good and the bad of the aged care industry” (AUS10_W70). In the Spanish data, too, there was similar acknowledgement of learnings related to ageing, such as “to acknowledge the value of older people” (SPA07_M72) or learning about “all the issues related to work and pensions” (SPA23_W78). However, overall, whilst both groups recognised the importance of ageing issues, the Spanish participants tended to put this within a broader social frame related to social injustice or “the complexity of society” (SPA09_M70). As one Spanish participant noted, “we have to be organised to fight for our rights. [I have learnt] to help others in general on social and practical matters” (SPA25_M81).

Furthermore, in the final sub-theme under learnings about society, there was a much stronger sense in the Australian data of the possibilities of success and how advocacy can achieve results. Generally, this was not evident in the Spanish data. Thus, in the Australian data, one participant highlighted his learnings relating to “working out solutions” (AUS05_M67) and another said, “you can’t win every issue but there is satisfaction in trying” (AUS19_W77). Others noted how advocacy can succeed, as in “the awareness that advocacy is important to get your cause considered” (AUS23_M81) or “being kept aware of proposed changes to government policy before it is announced publicly” (AUS25_M65). There was a much stronger sense in the Australian data of the possibilities of successful action.

Discussion

This exploratory study addressed two key research questions. First, the study explored what older people across two diverse contexts learnt from their participation in seniors' interest organizations. Second, we explored these findings in relation to differences across the two socio-political and cultural contexts, Australia and Spain. Findings suggest that participants reported learning about themselves, about others and about society. Further, they also suggest some interesting similarities and differences across the two contexts. Globally, there is a growing awareness of the need to ensure that older people receive adequate support and attention, and are able to age well (WHO 2002). At the same time, there is a burgeoning of organizations designed to advocate politically to ensure that this happens, and these organizations differ across countries and across contexts. The present study focuses on national and local seniors' organizations within two such diverse countries, Spain and Australia. While both are western countries, older people in Spain have experienced a more tumultuous political history and less stable economic conditions than Australians over their lifetimes.

The research highlights what participants themselves have learnt from their participation in political organizations designed to advocate for and serve older people. Findings show that participants across both contexts are well able to highlight what they have learnt, despite differences in participants' formal educational backgrounds across the two contexts. These informal learnings can be categorised as learnings about themselves, as in self-improvement or skills or knowledge; learnings about others, as in how to cooperate with others and understanding that people have different views; and learning about society, whether it be about inequality and the need to fight for injustice, or more specifically about older people's issues, and the possibilities of success.

The learnings identified in this study are in line with those found in previous studies addressing other types of civic activities. Learnings about the self and about others were

commonly identified in studies focused on volunteering for non-profit organizations (Narushima 2004; Piercy et al. 2011), and learnings about society were also experienced by elders' involved in local-governance initiatives (Schugurensky and Myers 2008) and in our previous research with a broader range of political organizations (Author 1 et al., reference withheld). Growing skills and confidence are examples of the kinds of learnings that may be common across cultural and organizational contexts.

However, analysis of responses suggests that there are important differences across the two data sets, which appears to reflect the different political contexts of the two countries. In Spain, democracy is more recent and participants in this study have had experience of living under Franco's dictatorship, a regime which allowed an extremely limited scope for citizen's participation and where older people have historically had fewer opportunities for formal education in their youth. Furthermore, Spain has experienced more recent challenges, such as the global financial crisis, which had a profound effect on employment and retirement, and triggered massive citizens' mobilisations. By contrast, Australia has had a much more stable democratic history, where rights are recognised and where many have experienced financially stable lives, including during the period of the global financial crisis.

These differences seem to reflect the tone of responses in the data, where Spanish participants are more likely to use the language of rights, inequality and injustice; recognising the need for social activism and collective action. Whilst both Spanish and Australian participants talk about the need for "fighting", the Spanish participants talk about fighting injustice, whereas the Australians are more concerned about the need to fight for older people's issues more specifically. Interestingly, one Australian participant noted the need to fight apathy, potentially a risk for Australian older people's organizations. Furthermore, findings suggest that the Australian sample is more aware of the possibilities offered by advocacy and how successful advocacy can achieve outcomes, and specifically a seat at the political table.

None of the Spanish participants discuss learnings from success. Instead, some highlighted how their activities had reinforced their belief in the need for continued activism to achieve ends. This suggests potential differences in experiences of political activism, which future studies should explore.

Whilst there is recognition across both groups of participants of the importance of learnings relating to collaboration and working together, this was stronger amongst the Spanish participants. This group have a longer experience of political struggle over their lifetime compared with Australian participants, and hence demonstrated a stronger belief in the need to collaborate to achieve outcomes. Both groups noted learnings associated with understanding diversity and difference, and the need to respect this, perhaps reflecting the growing understanding of diversity issues in relation to ageing across the world.

The importance of the different political contexts across the two countries is thus reflected in these findings. It should be noted here that the Spanish sample are more committed in terms of their length of commitment and the hours they volunteer. This could also be indicative of their belief in the need to fight for their organization and continue to fight for injustice. Overall, these findings have important implications for political organizations understanding what it is that seniors are looking for in their political participation, and what they are learning from it. The learnings reported here are important outcomes from seniors' political participation, and hence are critical in building retention and commitment, as noted in Ilsley's (1990) seminal study of learnings. What is interesting is that these learnings are clearly influenced by more than just the organization itself, but also the socio-political context experienced by seniors over their lifetimes. Previous studies on older people's learning through civic participation has not considered the influence that particular socio-political milieus have on the types of learnings that participants experience. Thus, this study adds to the previous literature by showing that consideration of the cross-cultural dimension of participation is of

key importance to understanding what seniors gain from their participation in political activities.

Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest important implications for organizations and individuals interested in political participation. First, it is important here to recognise the breadth of activities that can be covered under the concept of political participation. In line with Hustinx's work, it needs to be recognised that seniors, like the young, can be involved in the broad "repertoire" of participation activities, be they conventional or unconventional forms of participation (Hustinx et al. 2012). Thus, globally, it is becoming more common for older people to actively demonstrate for refugees or in support of rights, as well as undertaking advocacy roles or other political activities. Further, the political landscape across western countries is more likely to demand, and achieve, for older people to be heard in relation to interests that impact them directly (Barnes et al. 2011; Petriwskyj et al. 2012). There are thus increasing opportunities for older people to be directly involved in the political sphere.

Further, findings here suggest that organizations need to recognise that seniors can identify different learnings from their political participation. In recognition of this diversity, as well as the diversity of older people themselves, organizations need to promote the range of potential learnings reported here if they are to provide a broader base from which to consult and to advocate for change. For example, it is important for organizations to recognise that participants are seeking to learn about themselves, and some are looking specifically to self-improve or develop skills. These opportunities need to be provided by seniors' interest organizations if they are to attract more active participants. Further, differences in the language used across the two sites – Australians using language of collaboration and respect, but Spanish participants showing more interest in fighting for rights – suggests that these need to be considered when appealing to new recruits.

It needs to be recognised that this study has important strengths and limitations. The study is quite exploratory, as it utilises relatively small, albeit diverse, samples from just two different countries. Also, as participants were recruited through convenience sampling, there is a potential risk of self-selection of those who have had more positive experiences of participation and therefore were more open to identifying learning from it. Further, asking people to complete short open-ended items relating to specific aspects of their political participation experience by necessity focuses on a brief response. It may be that further in depth discussion with participants would highlight the inter-related nature of their political experience, and specifically their multiple learnings from their experiences. On the other hand, such brief responses in the present study do encourage participants to focus on the most critical aspects of their learning.

However, these potential limitations need to be understood in the light of the absence of studies exploring seniors' participation in political organizations, and specifically an absence of knowledge of the learnings associated with participation in seniors' political organizations. Whilst there is some research into the learnings from civic participation, none of this provided a clear framework or instrument that could be utilised in this study, hence the exploratory approach utilized here. However, by focusing on the perceptions of this sample of participants in seniors' interest organisations, this study suggests some interesting findings relating to the impact of the political context on the learnings older people gain from such participation and indeed what participation can mean to older individuals living in different global contexts. Clearly, this small study needs to be followed by comparative studies exploring these issues in other countries, and larger or in depth studies exploring these same issues.

The present study has contributed to knowledge in relation to the similarities and differences associated with participation in seniors' political organizations in two quite different countries, and the importance of understanding older people's activities and learnings

in relation to their socio-political context. Results from this study suggest that the particularities of the socio-political context in which individuals participate along with their social and political lifespan experiences are key dimensions to understand their political participation and what they gain from it in terms of learnings. Further studies from a cross-cultural perspective are now needed in order to confirm and expand our results.

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Table I. Comparative profile of Spanish and Australian samples.

Variable	Spanish sample (n = 26)	Australian sample (n = 26)	Total (N = 52)
Age	73.9 (SD = 6.2)	72.1 (SD = 5.3)	73.0 (SD = 5.8)
Gender			
Male	76.9%	53.8%	65.4%
Female	23.1%	46.2%	34.6%
Marital status			
Married or the facto partnership	61.5%	72.0%	65.4%
Widowed	15.4%	0.0%	7.8%
Single	7.7%	12.0%	9.8%
Separated or divorced	15.4%	16.0%	15.7%
Education level***			
No formal schooling	3.8%	0.0%	1.9%
Primary school education	34.6%	0.0%	17.3%
Secondary school education	34.6%	0.0%	17.3%
Certificate or professional training / University degree	26.9%	100.0%	63.5%
General self-rated health			
Very poor / poor	3.8%	0.0%	1.9%
Fair	19.2%	11.5%	15.4%
Good / excellent	76.9%	88.5%	82.7%
Number of years participating**	15.1 (SD = 9.6)	7.5 (SD = 8.7)	11.3 (SD = 9.8)
Average hours committed per week**	12.8 (SD = 10.3)	5.7 (SD = 4.8)	9.3 (SD = 8.7)
Internal political efficacy			
Yes	38.5%	50.0%	45.1%
No	7.7%	11.5%	9.8%
I don't know	50.0%	38.5%	45.1%
Political interest	7.7 (SD = 2.2)	8.4 (SD = 0.9)	8.0 (SD = 1.7)

Note: p-values are based on the chi-square statistic and the t-test for independent samples. **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Table II. Main themes, sub-themes, and examples of the learnings participants have gained from their participation in seniors' interest organizations.

Main theme	Sub theme	Spain	Australia
About self	Self-improvement	“more patience, benevolence” (SPA03_W84)	“I have gained knowledge through participation” (AUS02_W75)
	Working effectively	“think and argue better” (SPA24_M67)	“produce change without offending anyone” (AUS09_M71)
	Skills	“human relation skills” (SPA15_M69)	“how a committee works” (AUS01_W69)
	Healthy ageing	“importance of staying active; keep contributing to society”(SPA05_W70)	-
About others	Working with others	“the importance of collaboration and collective action”(SPA10_M71)	“meeting the needs of members” (AUS05_M67)
	Diversity of views	“respect others despite differences” (SPA12_M74)	“everyone has their own reasons and passions” (AUS15_W71)
	Fighting apathy	-	“passivity of older people” (AUS13_M76)
About society	Injustice	“importance of fighting against injustice” (SPA13_M67)	“fight for better standards and conditions for pensioners” (AUS22_M69)
	Ageing issues	“acknowledge value of older people” (SPA07_M72)	“increase in knowledge of seniors' issues” (AUS18_W72)
	Success of advocacy	-	“sensible suggestions put forward to government can influence their decisions” (AUS17_M74)