Life-course transitions and participation in political organisations in older Spanish men and women

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Abstract:

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of studies addressing older people's political participation. Much of this literature, however, can be criticized for neglecting important aspects of seniors' political participation, such as its dynamics across the life-course, its gendered nature, and the influence of the particular socio-political contexts in which participation occurs. In this paper we bring together all these issues to explore the relation between life-course transitions and participation in political organisations in Spanish men and women. We conducted life-story interviews with 40 highly engaged older political activists regarding their life-time story of political commitment, and identified eight different life-course transitions affecting their participation in political organisations. Three of these transitions were related to the work domain and five to the family domain. Most of them were clearly gender-dependent, affecting men's and women's engagement in political organisations in different ways and to different degrees. Our study expands on previous

research on life-span-related aspects of political participation by showing that considering biographical, gendered, and historical aspects is key to understanding the relationships between life transitions and participation in political organisations across the life course.

Key words: life-course transitions, political participation, gender, older people, life-course, narrative.

Introduction

Global population ageing, along with a shift of emphasis in Western societies towards more participatory forms of democracy (Barnes *et al.* 2004), has given rise to growing concern about engaging older people in political processes (European Commission 2012; United Nations 2002; WHO 2002). As a result, in recent years there has been an increasing number of studies addressing older people's political participation (e.g., Nygård and Jakobsson 2013; Petriwskyj *et al.* 2014). Much of this literature, however, can be criticized for neglecting important aspects of seniors' political participation, such as its dynamics across the life-course (Hirshorn and Settersten 2013), its gendered nature (Sawchuk 2009), and the influence of the particular socio-political contexts in which participation occurs (Serrat, Warburton, *et al.* 2017). This paper contributes to the research on life-span aspects of political participation by exploring the different effects of life-course transitions on participation in political organisations in Spanish men and women. We start by describing the key concepts in this study – political participation and life-course transitions – before going on to discuss the role of gender and socio-political contexts in greater depth.

What is political participation?

Older people's political participation has been traditionally included under the concept of civic engagement, a concept which has raised concern among scholars due to the lack of

agreement on its definition (e.g., Berger 2009). Both narrow and broad definitions of civic participation have been proposed in the gerontological literature. While some restrict the concept to formal volunteering (e.g., Cutler *et al.* 2011) or to a range of political activities (Burr *et al.* 2002), others stretch it to include any activity creating social capital (e.g., Putnam 2000). As a result, the study of civic participation has become the study of *everything* (Van Deth 2001), thereby hampering the comparability and applicability of research results.

In recent years, several attempts have been made to classify the different activities included under the concept of civic engagement. Notwithstanding the differences in these attempts, most researchers agree on two basic kinds of classification (e.g., Adler and Goggin 2005; Ekman and Amnå 2012). In the first, civic participation includes activities carried out individually (e.g., voting or donating money) or collectively (e.g., participating in social movements, NGOs, or political organisations). In the second, civic participation may be primarily aimed at helping others or at solving a community problem, with no manifest political intention (what is termed *social participation*), or may explicitly aim to impact political decision-making processes (what is called *political participation*). A recent scoping review of the gerontological literature on older people's civic participation showed that studies on political participation lag far behind studies focused on other types of civic participation, particularly volunteering (Serrat *et al.* 2019).

The study of political participation is complicated further by its multidimensionality, as it includes high- and low-investment political activities (e.g., Serrat *et al.* 2015) as well as institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms (e.g., Van Deth 2016). Most previous research on older people's political participation, however, has addressed low-investment and institutionalised forms of political participation, mostly voting (e.g., Hobbs *et al.* 2014; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008), and has tended to ignore more demanding types of participation such as participation in social movements or political organisations, which may

actually be more sensitive to the influence of life-course transitions. Among these, active participation in political organisations is particularly interesting, as it tends to be more stable across time than other types of political activity (Serrat, Petriwskyj, *et al.* 2017), and thus allows an exploration of its relationship with a wider range of life-course transitions. It is this type of political participation that constitutes the focus of this study. In the following section we place the spotlight on the relationships between political participation and life-course transitions.

Political participation and life-course transitions

As Kinder (2006) has argued, political participation develops "… from the cradle to the grave" (p. 1905). Indeed, the roots of political participation can be traced back to childhood and adolescence. Research has shown, for instance, that parental socioeconomic and political resources, as well as family and community connections and more generally social class background, are associated with political participation at later stages of the lifecycle (e.g., Pacheco and Plutzer 2009; Verba *et al.* 2003).

In addition, the trajectory of participation in political organisations might reflect and be influenced by life events and life transitions. These events, which represent opportunities but also constraints on participation, may be of different kinds. For instance, Baltes (1987) or Heckhausen (1999) distinguish between age-graded influences, which are associated with specific developmental timetables; history-graded influences, concerning historical events or transitions affecting specific cohorts of persons; and non-normative influences, which refer to positive or negative events that cannot be anticipated by the individual. In the case of participation in political organisations, events and transitions related to working and family context are particularly relevant.

In terms of working context, labour force participation, for instance, has been associated with higher rates of political participation (Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Quintelier 2007) and, on the contrary, unemployment has been found to decrease participation (Kinder 2006; Rosenstone 1982). The importance of the workplace as an agent of politicisation, which boosts individuals' exposure to political cues, has been repeatedly highlighted in the political science literature (Verba *et al.* 1995; e.g., Verba and Nie 1972).

In relation to family context, partnering and parenthood have been the life transitions that have received the most attention in previous research, although their effects on political participation are still under discussion. Partnering and parenthood could, on one hand, foster political participation, as they can provide new incentives to participate as well as increase opportunities for exposure to political issues (Jennings and Niemi 1981; Stoker and Jennings 1995). On the other hand, these life transitions could have a detrimental effect on political participation, as commitment to family responsibilities may reduce the individuals' time available for participation (Burns *et al.* 1997). This is in line with Doug McAdam's (1986) concept of biographical availability, or "…the absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation" (p. 70), which may condition individuals' availability to engage in politics.

Regarding partnering, it has been found to have both negative (Corrigall-Brown 2012; Kinder 2006; Stoker and Jennings 1995), neutral (Burr *et al.* 2002; Voorpostel and Coffé 2012), and positive (Quintelier 2007; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008) effects on different types of political activities. With regard to parenthood, the evidence is also mixed. Having children was a negative predictor in some studies (Schlozman *et al.* 1994; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008), but a neutral (Burr *et al.* 2002; Voorpostel and Coffé 2012) or a positive (Jennings 1979) predictor in others. On the contrary, divorce or separation (Voorpostel and

Coffé 2012; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008) and widowhood (Hobbs *et al.* 2014; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008) seem to decrease political participation.

Although these studies provide useful hints on the relationship between life-course transitions and political participation, there are a number of gaps that need to be addressed in order to fully understand this link. First, as stated earlier, most previous research has addressed low-investment forms of political participation, mostly voting (e.g., Hobbs *et al.* 2014; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008), tending to ignore more demanding types of participation, such as active participation in political organisations, which may be more sensitive to the influence of life-course transitions. Second, most of these studies focused on a single life-course transition or life-period rather than studying how these transitions develop over the entire lifecycle. In this vein, addressing "lifetimes of commitment" (Andrews 1991) rather than single moments of political engagement and disengagement could allow us to better understand how political participation "comes out and unfolds over time" (Nolas *et al.* 2017: 8). Third, previous findings have mainly been based on survey data, neglecting the biographical aspects of political participation. Exploring how individuals make sense of their political engagement through creating and sharing stories (Hammack and Pilecki 2012; Mayer 2014) could provide a more nuanced understanding of the links between life-course transitions and political participation, as this approach may capture ways in which life-course transitions affect participation that go beyond simply remaining or exiting from it. Finally, most previous research did not consider the role that gender plays in shaping political trajectories. We address this important issue in the next section.

The role of gender in shaping political trajectories

Although research into women's political participation has come a long way in the last 20 years (e.g., Siim 2000; Threlfall *et al.* 2005), much less is known about the influence of life-course transitions on political participation from a gendered perspective, and even less

regarding the ways in which this influence affects political participation in later life. As Moen and Spencer (2006) argue, the life course is both gender-graded and age-graded, as role transitions and trajectories are experienced differently for men and women and at different life stages, creating sources of convergence and divergence as people move into old age.

Gender influences not only the incidence but also the impact of life-course transitions (Moen 2001). Previous research has shown, for instance, that women are less likely to be influenced by the workplace as an agent of politicisation (Schlozman *et al.* 1999), and the effects of partnering and parenthood are different for men and women, although the direction of the effect remains under debate in both cases (Burns *et al.* 1997; Jennings 1979; Quaranta 2016; Voorpostel and Coffé 2012). Moreover, to fully understand the effect of life-transitions on political participation from a gendered perspective, we need to consider the historical setting in which these transitions occur. Life-stories are embedded in an ecological milieu of social structures and changes (Moen and Spencer 2006) that provides different opportunities for and constraints on political participation for men and women.

This study was conducted in Spain, a country in which the male breadwinner–female homemaker family model has been predominant until fairly recently. Although women's participation in the labour market has progressively increased since the 1990s, there is still a pervasive gender distribution of household chores (Moreno Mínguez 2013). Women are also more likely to exit the labour force or reduce work hours to take care of children or dependent family members (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2017). From a feminist perspective, it has been argued that household inequalities could lead to inequalities in political participation (Phillips 1991), as women's participatory resources and exposure to political socialisation agents may be lower than those of men.

These gender inequalities may be particularly pronounced in the case of older Spaniards. The current generation of Spanish elders lived an important part of their youth

under Franco's regime (1939–1975), which limited the scope for citizens' participation. For almost 40 years, political organisations such as parties and independent trade unions were banned "… on grounds that politics was a poisonous and divisive activity" (Encarnación 2008: 22). In close alliance with the Catholic Church, Franco's dictatorship took a clear position against any improvement in women's status and rights. Legal equality, including the right to vote awarded during the previous democratic regime of the Second Republic (1931–1936), was abolished, and the role of women was confined "… to the kitchen and the care of children" (Threlfall 2005: 16). The Francoist regime also put into place numerous policies against women's participation in the labour market, including marriage bars (prohibitions to enter certain professions) and the inability to sign labour contracts without their husband's permission (Valiente 2002).

Thus, it could be hypothesized that life-transitions may differentially affect Spanish men's and women's participation in political organisations, this being especially true when it comes to analysing older Spaniards' trajectories of political participation. Taking into account the particular socio-political context in which they have been socialised, one might expect that women would have to overcome more barriers and confront higher personal costs than men in order to actively participate in political organisations.

The two research questions (RQs) for this study are as follows:

- RQ1: How do life-course transitions affect participation in political organisations across the lifecycle?
- RQ2: To what extent is the influence of life-course transitions on participation in political organisations gender dependent?

Methods

We conducted life-story interviews with 40 highly engaged older political activists. We chose to carry out life-story interviews for a series of reasons. First, life-story interviews allow a life-course approach to political participation, providing an overview of older people's participatory trajectories. Second, life-story interviews are a useful tool to capture the meanings that participants ascribe to their trajectories of political engagement in their own terms, rather than just recording the times they are or are not politically active. Finally, this data-gathering technique touches on several aspects of participants' personal lives, allowing us to gather relevant information not only on age-graded life-transitions but also on potential history-graded and non-normative events and transitions (Baltes 1987; Heckhausen 1999) that participants may have experienced throughout their life course.

Participants were selected from a larger sample of 192 elders used in a previous study on older people's active participation in political organisations (Serrat, Petriwskyj, *et al.* 2017). Inclusion criteria for that study were: a) being age 65 and over; b) being a member of a committee or a board in a political organisation; c) participating in the organisation for at least one year and; d) devoting at least one hour per week to the organisation. Political organisations included neighbourhood organisations, political parties, trade unions, and single-issue organisations. In the previous study, participants answered a written questionnaire concerning different aspects of political participation (e.g., motivations to participate, barriers for participation, etc.). For the present study, we re-contacted the participants with the longest history of political participation (as reflected in their answer to the question: *'How many years have you spent participating in politics'*), and invited them to take part in a life-story interview. We did not use a specific threshold for years spent participating in politics to select the sample. All of them agreed to participate. The rationale for selecting those who had been participating for longer is related to our life-course approach

to political participation, as this subgroup of participants have probably experienced more age-graded transitions than those who have been participating for a shorter period.

Moreover, as we were interested in exploring this issue from a gendered perspective, we used quota sampling to select a similar number of men and women. The final sample was composed of 21 men and 19 women, as one woman was unavailable at the time of data collection and was therefore substituted by the next participant with the longest history of political participation, who was a man. Participants' age ranged from 65 to 86 years, with a mean of 71.8. The mean number of years participating in politics was 27.8 (*SD* = 14.2), and the mean number of hours per week currently committed to this participation was 12.8 (*SD* = 9.1). Twenty-three participants were married, 11 were widowed, five divorced, and one single. The educational level was split fairly evenly between those who had completed primary studies (n = 12), those who had completed secondary studies (n = 15), and those who had a university degree (n = 12). One participant stated that he had not received any formal education.

Interviews took place at a location chosen by the participants, usually a coffee-shop, the headquarters of their organisation, or their home. For data collection, we developed an adaptation of McAdams' (1993) life-story interview, explicitly focused on the participants' narratives of political engagement. We began the interviews with an open invitation to participants to talk about their lifetime story of political commitment (*'Please, tell me your story of political participation…'*), and then we focused on specific events of their trajectory (a positive event, a negative event, a turning point, etc.). In this paper, we only analyse the participants' answers to the first question. The use of an open-ended question allowed us to explore what life-course transitions were spontaneously identified by participants and how these affected their engagement in their own terms, rather than asking for a pre-determinate set of biographical events and transitions that may have influenced the participants' answers.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using Atlas.ti. We applied a constructivist approach to our data (Guba *et al.* 2018), using participants' narratives as a tool to understand how they understand the changes they have experienced in their political engagement across the life-cycle. We looked at which life-transitions appeared spontaneously in the participants' responses and how they made sense of these in relation to their story of political commitment. We also examined to what extent men and women narrated these transitions differently. The two authors carried out these analyses independently, and then shared the results and discussed disagreements until reaching consensus. To increase the trustworthiness of results, a third researcher who was not involved in data gathering and analysis performed a peer-debriefing process (Creswell and Miller 2000). She reviewed our main themes and sub-themes, and challenged our explicit and implicit assumptions through intensive discussion meetings.

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Barcelona. Approval was also granted for re-contacting participants from the previous study. Participants were informed of the objectives of the study, procedures for data collection, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time and to decline to answer any of the questions. All of them agreed to take part in the study and signed a written formal consent before being interviewed. Data were pseudonymised before analysis, to ensure that neither participants nor third parties were identified. Nor were raw or identifiable data available to anyone outside the research team. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all participants quoted in this paper.

Findings

We identified eight different life-course transitions in the narratives of our interviewees. Three of these transitions were related to the work domain: entering the labour force, dismissal, and retirement; and five to the family domain: partnering, parenthood, divorce, widowhood, and taking care of relatives. Life-transitions related to the work domain were more often mentioned than transitions related to the family domain. In general, life-course transitions related to work appeared more often in men's interviews, and life-course transitions related to the family domain appeared more often in women's narratives. Nevertheless, beyond the relative frequency of appearance in men's and women's narratives, most life-course transitions were clearly gender dependent.

Life course-transitions in the work domain

Retirement

Stories about how retirement had affected their political commitment appeared spontaneously in many of our interviews. For men, retirement meant mainly a continuation of their political involvement. A political party's militant, for instance, stated: "Since I retired, there has been a continuation of my activity, and of my social and political consciousness, a continuity of the idea that we have to fight to achieve what we lack…" (Man, 66 years old, political party). However, some men recognized that retirement had introduced changes in their way of participating. For an old trade unionist, retirement was linked to abandoning high-risk political activities and changing his organisational affiliation: "Retirement arrived and I thought that I was too old to be putting posters up during the night. So I left the trade union, and I have gone where I belong: the retirees' organisation" (Man, 83 years old, trade union). For another, it meant to step back from power positions within the trade union:

> "I held the presidency [of the trade union] for eight years, until I was 60 years old… I already knew that it was not possible to renew board members after 60, this is a non-

written norm that we try to follow to avoid transforming the union into a geriatric unit… So I left the role of Secretary-General at the age of 53, and when I turned 65 I stepped down from any executive tasks…" (Man, 66 years old, trade union).

On one hand, these feelings of being 'too old' to carry out certain political activities or to occupy a place on the board suggest a concern on the part of participants about maintaining their usefulness as they age, and could perhaps be interpreted as a manifestation of self-directed ageism (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2017). On the other, taking a back-seat position allows them to cope with some of the possible losses associated with becoming old while not completely abandoning their political activity. So, it could also be read through the lens of the processes of selection, optimisation, and compensation described by Baltes and colleagues (e.g., Baltes and Smith 2003). Moreover, some of the participants even saw advantages in moving away from the front lines. An old trade unionist, for instance, openly stated that he has felt freer to express his political ideas since retirement:

"The result of all this is that I am an active militant, and I have the advantage of freedom… Because I am no longer representing anybody… I write and talk with absolute freedom, and I note that my frame of mind is more that of a youth than that of an ageing man" (Man, 66 years old, trade union).

The picture is quite different when it comes to women's narratives of retirement. For most of them, retirement provided the opportunity to commit more time to political participation as family and work commitments eased off. Women's narratives clearly position their political engagement after retirement within a broader picture, which also includes their roles as workers, wives, and housekeepers. In this vein, role strain appears to be a central theme of women's midlife stories (Creary and Gordon 2016), and retirement a source of opportunities to invest time in other endeavours. As a Board member of a neighbourhood association stated:

> "My husband was a very political person but I had no time to devote to politics because it has always been my work, my house, my kids… I worked all my life, from 12 years old until 65 when I retired… What happened is that when I retired, the kids grew older, and I became a widow too, I started to have a bit more spare time…" (Woman, 76 years old, neighbourhood organisation).

For some of them, political participation provided a sense of meaning and purpose after retirement. One women who was actively involved in the Board of a neighbourhood association commented: "At a personal level, it makes me feel useful and fulfilled" (Woman, 75 years old, neighbourhood association), and a former trade unionist and current participant in *Podemos* political party said: "Retirement arrived and I had two options: stay at home … or fight for my community and expand my social consciousness" (Woman, 66 years old, political party).

Entering the labour force

Entering the labour force appeared more often in men's than in women's narratives, probably reflecting older Spanish women's lower overall participation in the labour force during their young adulthood. It is important to take into account that this generation of older women made the transition to adulthood under Franco's dictatorship, a regime that put into place numerous policies against women's participation in the labour market, including marriage bars and the inability to sign labour contracts without their husband's permission (Valiente 2002). So it is not surprising that quotes about the role of starting a working life in relation to political participation appeared less frequently in women's narratives.

In previous research, labour force participation was associated with higher rates of political participation (Highton and Wolfinger 2001; Quintelier 2007), and this was confirmed by our results. The workplace plays an important role as an agent of politicisation,

exposing participants – in some cases for the first time in their lives – to political issues and opportunities for political engagement (Verba *et al.* 1995; Verba and Nie 1972). This is clearly illustrated in the following quote from our interview with an older trade unionist:

> My parents did not have any political affiliation, they were left-wingers and republicans but nothing else… I did not have any relatives marking out a political position, I did not have anybody…And at the factory, I started to identify like-minded workmates and to have discussions on politics… this was the start of my political training (Man, 83 years old, trade union).

Even for those who were politically socialised by their families, exposure to a highly politicised work environment provided them with the opportunity to revise and eventually change their views on politics. As expressed by a former trade unionist, who is now a Board member of a neighbourhood association:

> I started to be active at the political level when I started working in xxxx, as there was an important workers' movement there... This changed my life because my life-story is not the story of a left-wing family but rather a right-wing one, and entering the world of work made me completely change my ideas (Woman, 69 years old, neighbourhood association).

Dismissal

Dismissal is closely linked in these life-stories with the extremely difficult conditions for political participation that participants experienced under Franco's dictatorship. It is important to note that political parties and independent trade unions were banned during the Francoist regime (Encarnación 2008), so participants had to take huge risks to stand up for their rights as workers, including dismissal and even incarceration. This is particularly evident in the case of Ricardo, a former activist of the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC, illegal party until the return of democracy in 1975), and a current trade unionist:

> In 1957 I was chosen as shop steward of the official trade union… I joined the PSUC thereafter … at that time the commitment of belonging to a political party was important, because if you fell into the wrong hands, they sent you to [the prison of] Burgos, and you could spend years there … In 1964, at the time of our first assembly, I was dismissed from the company I worked for, they went after me because I represented the workers in the trade union… I spent more than two months in jail (Man, 85 years old, trade union).

Previous studies have associated unemployment with lower rates of political participation (Kinder 2006; Rosenstone 1982). However, for the participants in our sample, unemployment was rather a consequence of going beyond what was considered acceptable under the limited possibilities for political participation set up by Franco's dictatorship. This finding suggests that, at least for highly-engaged activists, it is worth considering not only how life-course transitions affect political participation but also the opposite effect, as there are many personal costs associated with intensive political activism, particularly under undemocratic regimes such as the one experienced by our participants.

Life course-transitions in the family domain

Parenthood

Having children appeared far more often in women's than in men's narratives. For a man who mentioned this life-stage, becoming a parent gave him the reason to start participating, as he was confronted with the necessity of standing up for more public schools in his neighbourhood:

> I had two little kids and there were not enough schools in the neighbourhood … Where was I supposed to take my children? That was the starting point… the first thing we had to do in order to have some influence was to create a parents' association… (Man, 70 years old, political party).

As we know from previous research, parenthood could foster political participation, as it can provide new incentives to participate as well as increased opportunities for exposure to political issues (Jennings and Niemi 1981). However, it could also have a detrimental effect on political participation, as commitment to family responsibilities may reduce the individual's time available for participation (Burns *et al.* 1997; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008), in line with McAdam's (1986) idea of biographical availability. The latter is the case for the women in our sample who brought up this theme during interviews. This is clearly illustrated in the following quote from a Board member of a neighbourhood association:

> Women are generally at home... I was very busy all the time, I had no time for public life… family and work responsibilities leave no time for political participation… I have been concerned about changing things for many years… but I could not do many things before… (Woman, 67 years old, neighbourhood association).

Again, we find here the public-private gendered division of labour. It should be noted that in Spain the male breadwinner–female homemaker family model has been predominant until fairly recently. As we know from feminist scholarship, household inequalities could lead to political inequalities (Phillips 1991), as the public/private gender divide makes women's participatory resources and exposure to political socialisation agents lower than men's. While men can sustain a continuous commitment to politics throughout their lifecycle, women's attention shifts to home and family matters when they become mothers. This was clearly confirmed by our results, which showed that for highly committed political activists, becoming mothers implies ceasing, at least temporarily, their political engagement.

Taking care of relatives

Although taking care of relatives appeared both in men's and women's narratives, there were at least three important differences in the effect of this life-stage on political trajectories according to gender.

First, for men, taking care of relatives entailed reducing, but not completely stopping, the time committed to political participation. A man who sat on the Board of a neighbourhood association, for instance, explained the effect of taking care of his parents with Alzheimer's disease on his political engagement: "I had a period of reducing [participation] when I had my parents at home, because you have to be there, of course, and this commitment makes you in some way reduce your level of participation…" (Man, 65 years old, neighbourhood association).

Second, men spoke of single episodes of caregiving, which contrasts with the multiplicity of intensive caregiving roles that appeared in women's life-stories. This is clearly illustrated in the following quote from an older woman who was a Board member of the pensioners' section of one of the major Spanish trade unions: "Then arrived the time when my parents grew old and started to experience health issues, so I devoted myself to my family… Some years later my little sister had cancer, and I returned home again…" (Woman, 67 years old, trade union).

Finally, regularly taking care of grandchildren only appeared in women's narratives, and in all cases required an intensive commitment until the grandchildren had grown up. It is important to highlight that, compared to men, women not only narrate their decisions concerning political participation against a broader background of social and family roles, but also that these decisions are in most cases contingent on the needs of their families. As expressed by a Board member of a neighbourhood association:

> I had two grandchildren to take care of, I was very busy with my two grandkids… So I committed myself to them, to dropping them off and picking them up from school, feeding them… (Woman, 80 years old, neighbourhood association).

Widowhood

Although previous studies have found that widowhood decreases political participation (Hobbs *et al.* 2014; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008), our results showed the opposite relationship. For women in our sample, widowhood provided the opportunity to commit time to political participation, mainly because of their liberation from family duties, which opened up new possibilities for participation. This is clearly expressed in the following quote from an active member of neighbourhood association:

> The most important point of my life was the day I lost my husband… I hardly knew the neighbourhood before that, I went from work to home, and from home to work, I did not participate much, because I spent all day clinging to my husband and my husband to me, and then, you know, that was a train wreck… till I came out of the doldrums and started participating. That was 25 years ago (Woman, 80 years old, neighbourhood association).

Divorce

Divorce was spontaneously mentioned in the life-stories of a man and a woman. In both cases pursuing their own political beliefs was narrated as the cause of divorce, although the type of marital conflict described was quite different. For María, a current trade unionist, getting in contact with the feminist movement during the last years of Franco's dictatorship marked a major turning point in her life. Becoming an activist not only subverted her views on marriage but also redefined her own identity as a woman. The serious and long-lasting consequences that she attributes to her adulthood militancy are still the subject of her regrets in old age:

> If I had not got in touch [with the feminist movement], I would be a homemaker, and I would surely be married… We came from Franco's time, and we were very submissive women, very shy, I didn't dare to raise my voice at home when I was married… So I separated… and my husband also lost his company… he broke down and he committed suicide… I am one of the ones that paid for it dearly, everybody else remained married with their husbands… Fights are not neutral, there is a cost, and in our times the cost was everything… (Woman, 66 years old, trade union).

For the man who brought up the issue of divorce during the interview, the reason for breaking up the relationship was a change in his wife's religious beliefs, which ran in direct contradiction to his communist values:

> My wife was taken by Jehovah's Witnesses, and was converted into a Jehovah's Witness… and that was an internal fight that hurt me badly… the idea that a communist must be an example for society was difficult to accept… I had an internal war at home and another outside… (Man, 85 years old, trade union).

Marriage

Marriage had negative consequences for the political engagement of one of our interviewees. It is clear from her words that she lost the freedom to make her own decisions after marriage, as she described how she had to please and humble herself in front of her husband in order to keep doing what she wanted to do:

> Let me tell you… I have always been an independent woman… my husband didn't want me to work, and he has never participated in the [neighbourhood] association… my husband didn't want me to go to the neighbourhood association because we started [the meetings] after the workday, normally at nights, and he got angry… and I told my daughters 'I am as malleable as a reed, I humble myself in front of your father when I have

to do it… but then I get up, and I go, and I do'. So, I finished [working], I served the dinner for my husband, I served the dinner for my daughters, and I went to the neighbourhood association (Woman, 67 years old, neighbourhood association).

On reading this excerpt, one must recall that a husband's control over women's decisions was legally supported in Spain until 1975, as women needed their husband's permission for almost any decision of significance for public life, from obtaining a driver's license or opening a bank account to signing a work contract (Davidson 2011). This recalls Pateman's (1988) concept of the marriage contract as fundamental for patriarchy and women's oppression, as marriage may make women dependent on their husband's control over their decisions.

Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to analyse how life-course transitions affect participation in political organisations over the lifecycle, from a gendered perspective. Our aim was to contribute to previous research on life-span aspects of political participation (e.g., Corrigall-Brown 2012; McAdam 1986; Voorpostel and Coffé 2012) using retrospective narrative data. A general conclusion arising from the data presented here is that political participation trajectories are highly influenced by life-course transitions both in the family domain and in the work domain. Moreover, there were two life-course transitions that appeared spontaneously in our participants' narratives (retirement and taking care of grandchildren) that have not been explored previously. However, these transitions had a notable effect on the participation in political organisations of our interviewees. This suggests the need to look beyond youth and adulthood and to explore the effect of life-transitions taking place in later life.

Another significant conclusion from this study is that we need to challenge our assumption that the direction of influence always comes from life-course transitions to

political participation, as we found that at least in the case of individuals engaged in political organisations the opposite direction may also be possible. Indeed, dismissal and separation appeared in our participants' life-stories as consequences rather than causes of their political engagement, showing that continuous political participation may affect life-course dynamics. This result highlights the high and often long-lasting personal costs associated with intensive institutionalised political participation, which counteract the 'win-win' narrative that has often dominated the literature on older people's civic participation (Hirshorn and Settersten 2013; Martinson and Halpern 2011). This is an interesting and underexplored topic that future research should explore further.

This study adds to previous research on life-span aspects of political participation by showing that the consideration of biographical, gendered, and historical aspects is key to understanding the relationship between life transitions and participation in political organisations across the life course. Regarding biographical aspects, our results show that life-course transitions affect participation in political organisations in highly personalized ways, highlighting therefore the importance of considering how participants make sense of their political trajectories through creating and sharing life-stories (Hammack and Pilecki 2012; Mayer 2014) when exploring the links between life-course transitions and political participation. This study adds to previous research by showing that the effect of transitions may be broader than just moving into and out of participation. As our results show, transitions could affect participation in more subtle, although no less important, ways. For instance, people could reduce or increase their participation, feel compelled to step back from power positions as they age, or experience a sense of personal growth and purpose in life during retirement once work and family commitments have eased off and they have more time to commit to political participation.

With regards to gender aspects, our study shows that gender not only affects the incidence but also the impact of life-course transitions on participation in political organisations. Thus, we found that life-course transitions in the family domain were far more frequent among women than among men in our sample, reflecting therefore the public/private gendered division of labour and confirming feminists' belief that household inequalities lead to political inequalities (Phillips 1991). In addition, and beyond the relative frequency of transitions related to work and family domains in men's and women's life-stories, role strain appeared as a central theme in women's narratives (Creary and Gordon 2016), as they placed their roles as political activists against a broader background including their roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers. It is clear from our data that women have to overcome higher personal costs than men in order to play an active role in the political arena. Importantly, our study also shows that retirement and widowhood are experienced as a kind of liberation for women, as they get rid of work and family commitments that have prevented them from having a more active role in politics.

Finally, the effect of life-course transitions on participation in political organisations must be understood against the background of social structures and historical changes in which life-stories are embedded (Moen and Spencer 2006). Our Spanish interviewees started and developed part of their political trajectory under Franco's dictatorship, and had to face huge risks to pursue their political ideas, including dismissal and even incarceration. Barriers against women's political participation were especially severe, as women's rights were extremely limited until the return of democracy in the mid-70s (Threlfall 2005; Valiente 2002), and women relied upon their husband's permission for almost any decision of significance for public life (Davidson 2011). Many things have changed since the death of Franco, and it is clear that the effect of life-course transitions on political participation may be different for subsequent generations of women. However, for many of our participants, the

long-lasting effects of having experienced such striking gender inequalities during the formative years of adulthood could still be seen in old age. All in all, these multilayered influences on political participation illustrate how individual trajectories reflect, at least, an age-graded and history-graded structure of opportunities and constraints (Baltes 1987; Heckhausen 1999).

This study has a number of limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The focus on Spanish data from older political activists is innovative and adds to the growing body of research on life-course transitions and political participation. However, we acknowledge that this is just one small cross-sectional study comprising 40 Spanish participants from different political organisations, a circumstance that limits the generalisability of the results to other geographical, cultural, and historical settings. The selection of participants on the basis of their political activism in old age also limits our conclusions, as we did not consider those who may have stopped participating at earlier stages of the lifecycle. Also, our focus on participants who were actively involved in political organisations prevents from generalizing our results to other types of political activities. Despite these limitations, however, our study expands on previous research on life-span-related aspects of political participation by showing that biographical, gendered, and historical aspects are key to understanding the relationships between life transitions and participation in political organisations across the life course.

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