

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVE AGEING

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ABSTRACT

Active ageing is a multi-dimensional concept which has received a lot of attention within the last decade due to recent demographic ageing trends and increased share of older people within the whole population. Political participation falls under one of these dimensions as a contributing factor to active ageing process. Given the change in demographic structure, political engagement of older people is very likely to be on the rise all around the world, especially in the fast ageing countries. However, research gives insufficient attention to the nature and importance of political participation for older people and their positive contribution to active ageing process. To address this gap, this paper aims to point out the link between political participation and active ageing process. Regardless of the nature and content of political participation, this paper argues that, political engagement of older people contributes to the active ageing process through social inclusion, empowerment, and strengthening intergenerational ties.

Key Words: Political Participation, Older People, Active Ageing

1. INTRODUCTION

Active ageing has many dimensions and social participation is one of them. Social participation is defined as participation in all kinds of social activities and participation in life events. However, there is no consensus on this rather broad definition, and each study makes its own definition of social participation for the operationalisation of the term. These definitions may include individual hobbies, cultural and artistic activities, voluntary civil society activities, active participation in the working life and political activities. Especially for aged individuals who are at increased risk of social exclusion in the aging process, social participation is a significant component in terms of welfare of older people.

Political participation is one of the many dimensions of social participation, which is also a part of active ageing process. With demographic ageing and increased share of older people within the whole population, the share of older people that are active in politics is also likely to increase in Turkey and all over the world. Political participation can take place in many forms including the right to elect and being elected, voting in referendums and plebiscites, affiliation with political parties and participating in social protests and demonstrations.

In many countries, including Turkey, older people are more politically active compared to their younger counterparts (Quintelier, 2007) due to their ongoing interest in public affairs as well as their desire to influence the political process (Peterson, 2002). Political engagement of older people is usually based on memberships to the political parties. Traditionally, politics are the middle-aged and older people's business in Turkish political culture. Recent history of prime ministers, presidents and other political party leaders show that most of these politicians are above the age of 65 when they come into power. Even though there is no specific information on the number and profile of 65+ voters, according to a post-election study conducted in 2015, 40% of the voters are over 44 years old (Konda, 2015). And yet, among all the retired people that participated in the study, only 1% had not voted in the 2015 general elections in Turkey (Konda, 2015). This high participation rate in such civic engagement is an important datum in the light of changing demographics. Like

in the US, the gray vote in Turkey is becoming an important factor in shaping political decisions, given the increasing share of older people within the whole population. Demographic projections show that the share of the older people in Turkey is expected to be 20.8 % by the year 2050 (TUIK, 2015). This projection highlights the growing significance of political participation by older people in the future.

According to Mannheim (1923), political activism is more likely to occur during a developmental stage where young people start to unite to form an identity. As one of the most disadvantaged groups in the society, young people are more eager to go out and defend their rights in case of political, social and economic oppression. Even though participating in demonstrations is not a popular form of political participation among older people they also engage in political movements (Quintelier, 2007). Activism in old age is not a new concept but the power of older people in civic engagements is underestimated. And yet, studies on the political activism of older people are limited (for example see Harvard School of Public Health, 2004; Sawchuk, 2009) and they focus on the organised movements. For instance, Gray Panthers, Older Women's League, Red Hat Society, Raging Grannies International are some examples of organised activist groups of older people. On the other hand, regardless of age, there have been certain political and social movements in history where all age groups have spontaneously come together for demonstrations and protests such as Civil Rights Movement in the US, protests during Arab Spring in North Africa and political rallies in Turkey.

Given the historical prevalence and rising importance of political participation of older people, this paper argues that any form of political participation by older people contributes to the active ageing process through social inclusion, empowerment, and strengthening intergenerational ties. After briefly discussing the notion of active ageing, these four areas (social inclusion, empowerment, and strengthening intergenerational ties) of contribution of political participation will be discussed.

2. ACTIVE AGEING

Ageing and old age has been identified with different bio-psycho-social theories such as disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), role theory (Rosow, 1974), activity theory (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953) and continuity theory (Atchley, 1989). Some of these theories are based on normative assumptions and has become “old-fashioned” in the gerontology literature. However, active ageing both in the medical arena and psycho-social realm has become the main focus in the last decade. World Health Organisation describes Active Ageing as the “process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” (WHO, 2017a). The word “active” refers to continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs, which is a part of political participation. Even though Activity Theory seems to overlap with Active Ageing Approach, there are fundamental differences between the two concepts. Activity Theory focuses on the period of old age whereas Active Ageing is a life-long process. Moreover, Activity Theory anticipates a replacement of social roles with others while Active Ageing Approach is about fulfilling physical and social potential for the individuals and groups.

It has been argued that civic and social engagements are important for successful ageing (McHugh, 2012). However, since successful ageing is relatively a vague concept, political and social engagements should be linked to active ageing, which is a precisely defined concept. Taking on a life-course approach, the concept of Active Ageing recognises six different types of factors that determine the Active Ageing process, which are: economic determinants, social determinants, personal determinants, behavioural determinants, physical environment, health and social services (WHO, 2002). Among these six determinants, political participation is highly related with social and personal determinants. Social determinants include ties with family, friends and relatives, social and civic participation, voluntary activities and refraining from social isolation. On the other hand, personal determinants include psychological aspects of ageing where mental health emerges as the most important component of active ageing process where empowerment becomes an important element.

3. SOCIAL INCLUSION

Social inclusion is a very hot topic in social policy practice that is being discussed and implemented all across Europe. Social inclusion is defined “as the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights” which has emerged in response to the notion of social exclusion (UN, 2016). As a socially vulnerable and disadvantaged group, older people are more prone to social isolation. As people get older and retire, their social network diminishes. Even though family ties become more important during old age, interactions with peers decrease over time. However, political participation gives older people the opportunity to go out and socialise with other people. In that respect, political participation can be considered as a way of

engaging with life for older people. All over EU and in other countries, social participation of older citizens is being encouraged to combat social exclusion and isolation.

The national Time Use Survey (2015) in Turkey show that voluntary work and civic engagement is very low among the older Turkish citizens and the main activity that people engage in old age is watching TV (TSI, 2015). Having a very static and pre-defined routine, older people in Turkey are expected to live a very calm and isolating life as suggested in the Disengagement Theory of Ageing (Cumming & Henry, 1961). For societies where older people are more withdrawn from the life, political participation becomes far more important. Political participation can be used as a tool to create a sense of community and hence, eventually contribute to active ageing process.

4. EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is defined as a process in which individuals, groups or communities become able to take control of their own goals, through which they work towards maximising the quality of their lives (Adams,1990:43). Quality of life, active ageing and empowerment are intertwined concepts that feed each other. Empowerment leads to a better and more active life while leading a more active life empowers older people. Engaging in political activities is an empowering process for all age groups in the society (Gill & Rehman, 2004), and therefore contributes to the active ageing process while increasing the quality of life.

Empowerment focuses on consciousness-raising, change, and collectivity in problem solving and action (Chapin & Cox, 2008). Political participation is a process that involves all these three dimensions of empowerment. For older people participating in political arena, voting, attending rallies and demonstrations contribute to change and collective problem solving. Engaging in politics helps with creating awareness and raising consciousness about the issues that concern themselves and the society as a whole. This process also helps them locate and understand their role as a change maker and become a part of a bigger, collective entity.

First of all, political participation contributes to the psychological empowerment of older people through identity creation. As suggested in the literature, political participation is a powerful tool for both collective and personal identity creation (Meekosha, 1999; Reger, Myers, & Einwohner, 2008). Developing self-acceptance and self-confidence emerges as a part of this empowerment process. The older people who engage in politics gain self-acceptance, which helps with coming to terms with ageing process. Accepting getting old is a challenging process for many older people; however, empowerment can be a remedy for this challenge. Engaging in and becoming a part of political sphere facilitate consolidation of self-confidence and recognition of self-worth. And yet, people start to take initiatives concerning their own lives and have their voice in the political realm.

Moreover, individual empowerment leads to community empowerment. Community empowerment refers to the process of enabling communities to increase control over their lives. "Communities" are described as groups of people that regardless of their spatial and geographical connection, people who share common interests, concerns or identities (WHO, 2017b). As indicated before, the interests of people will be emphasized more as their share within the whole population increase and the need for making their voices heard will also increase. To be able to address their needs and desires, community empowerment will play a significant role and help older people through ageing process.

As indicated above, both psychological and community empowerment might contribute to the active ageing process. With retirement and old age, people in Turkey lead a very inactive life and have integration problems to the retiree life. Many of them struggle with finding a meaningful purpose in life when they retire. For this reason, political engagements might serve as a medium for finding a meaning in life. And finding a meaning in life can help alleviate depression and other mental disorders that are common in later life. Becoming a member of a political party, participating in political rallies and demonstrations help older people find a meaning in life and create a collective identity that improves the psychological well-being of older people, which is a major contribution to the active ageing process.

5. STRENGTHENING INTERGENERATIONAL TIES AND RELATIONS

Intergenerational solidarity is a contested issue both at the macro and micro level. Solidarity among generations is a desired phenomenon by most of the countries as the welfare state is in decline in the entire world. For this reason, harmony and unity between the generations is important for both social coherence and economic well-being. Especially with ageism and discrimination against older people, uniting generations has become a difficult task. However, political participation can be used as a tool to bring generations together. Within the last decade, Turkish government has started to include young people more in the political arena through

strengthening youth branches and bringing down the age threshold for election. This attempt can be used as an opportunity to bring people from different generations together.

One of the dimensions of intergenerational solidarity at the micro level is frequency of contact between the generations (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991). This dimension can also be applied to intergenerational relationships at the macro level. The increase in personal contact between generations through political participation facilitates creating a common ground for understanding each other. Even if they come from different age groups and cultural backgrounds, political participation brings them together for a certain cause, which increases the solidarity among people. Sharing the same values and ideas bring the generations closer, both physically and mentally. In this case, both older people and younger people benefit from this social space created through political participation. And subsequently, this process contributes to active ageing.

Getting familiar with the unknown is the best strategy to break down the prejudices. The above mentioned intergenerational unity not only brings these generations together, but also helps alleviating and demolishing biases and prejudices against older people. In other words, interacting with older people is a strong tool for fighting against ageism. And yet, eliminating ageist attitudes helps the empowerment of older people. Seeing older people participate in political and social events might help them re-conceptualise the phenomenon of old age. The stereotypes of older people being inactive and withdrawn from the political and social realms can be diminished.

6. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

Political participation of older people, which is likely to rise in the near future due to demographic ageing and structural change in the population composition, is an underresearched field. On the other hand, research on active ageing has become very popular due to changing demographics. However, the literature that combines these two concepts is very limited and the need for more studies that focus on the link between active ageing and political participation is evident. Identifying this gap, this paper has attempted to contribute to the theoretical literature on political sociology and social gerontology and initialise a discussion on the less-accentuated dimension of active ageing.

Having laid out the importance of political participation for active ageing, this paper argues that political engagement of older people contributes to active ageing process through social inclusion, empowerment and strengthening intergenerational ties. Participating in elections, playing an active role in the political parties and participating in demonstrations and rallies help prevent social isolation of people, create self-consciousness and collective identity and bring people together from different generations. These three dimensions (social inclusion, empowerment and strengthening intergenerational ties) are vast topics that require close attention and empirical research for further elaboration of the subject matter. This article is an attempt to set a basis and starting point for future explorations of political participation of older people.

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