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Original Article

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OF OLDER ADULTS IN A NORTHERN CITY OF CANADA

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### ABSTRACT

Civic engagement is considered virtuous for the citizens as it enhances individual and social well-being. With age, interest and capability of participation in civic activities may decline. This study is part of a larger study on quality of life of older adults in Greater Sudbury. It is based on interviews with 20 citizens over the age of 80 years and examines their civic engagement. The participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling designs. During the face-to-face interviews, they were asked questions about the rights of citizens in general and their own involvement in political and voluntary activities. The findings of the study indicate that the older adults in the city consider it their duty to cast vote in elections at all levels, however, they are disappointed with the politicians who either fail to keep their promises or adopt policies that counter social welfare, particularly the welfare of older adults. They also expressed their concerns about many local issues. Their participation in voluntary activities waned down to mostly helping their family and friends, though some of them still supported their community in different ways. Their active participation in civic activities could be enhanced by overcoming some of the age-related challenges.

**Keywords:** Civic engagement, quality of life, social welfare, older adults, poverty, Canada, Northern Ontario

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement refers to various civic acts, such as electoral participation, individual voluntarism and group involvement (American Psychological Association, 2009; Arriagada et al., 2022). Civic activities are intended to help others or induce political participation (Serrat et al., 2023; Vega-Tinoco et al., 2022; Serrat et al., 2020). Through volunteer activities, individuals can improve the lives of other people and their community, and through political participation, they can impact the decision-making process (Serrat et al., 2023). Political participation, apart from voting and contesting in elections, includes expressing views on social media, signing petitions, contacting politicians, participating in demonstrations and boycotting products (Arriagada et al., 2022; Vega-Tinoco et al., 2022). Political participation enables individuals to influence the selection of their leaders, formation of governments, and change public opinion and policies.

Kafkova and colleagues (2018) consider civic engagement as having knowledge, beliefs and opinions about political and civic matters. Through their knowledge, beliefs and actions individuals connect themselves to their communities and establish cooperative behaviour (O’Neil, 2006). Such actions bring positive results for the individuals as well as their communities. Civic participation has a positive impact on the health, happiness and life satisfaction (Vega-Tinoco et al., 2022).

Civic participation and employment are included in one of the domains of the Age-Friendly Communities (AFC) identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Seniors’ Advisory Panel, 2017). They focus on the extent to which senior citizens are involved in politics, community events and organizations, and employment for those who are still in the labour market, either by choice or by necessity. In Canada, senior citizens face barriers to civic and political participation, in both formal and informal avenues of democratic engagement at all levels of government (Marchand, 2018; Sherman & Timony, 2011; Schugurensky & Myers 2008; Bryant et al., 2004). These barriers increase with the advancement of age leading to a decline in civic participation. Disenchantment with the political and social setup can also lead to disengagement.

The present study attempts to discover the civic participation of older adults in Greater Sudbury, a northern city in Canada. For this study, older adults are considered people over the age of 80 years. The data are taken from a series of face-to-face interviews conducted in late 2018 and early 2019 for an exploratory study on the quality of life of older adults in Greater Sudbury. This study collected data on housing, health, financial situation, social life, civic engagement and other indicators of the quality of life. We must acknowledge that public discourse around seniors has changed since then as a result of the pandemic. Public awareness

and advocacy around senior citizenship and human rights have been shifting since the beginning of COVID-19, as the county's long-term care homes (and treatment of senior citizens generally) became very explicit sites of the consequences of ageism and neoliberal policies that focused on the privatization of seniors' care (Shimoni, 2023; El-Bialy et al., 2022; Airth & Oelke, 2020).

Greater Sudbury, the regional capital of northeastern Ontario, is the largest city in the province. Its geographical area covers more than 3,600 square kilometers, including 330 lakes within its municipal boundaries. It is located 390 km north of Toronto, the financial capital of Canada, and 483 km west of Ottawa, the national capital of the country. According to the 2021 Census, Greater Sudbury has a population of 166,005, including 20.3% senior citizens (65+) and 5.3% older adults (80+) (Statistics Canada, 2023). Situated north of the Great Lakes, this city experiences long, cold and snowy winters where the average temperature remains below zero from November to March. The summer is pleasant but short. The harsh winter conditions curtail the outdoor activities of older adults for several months affecting their civic engagement (Nangia and Gingrich, 2022).

## **2. BACKGROUND OF THIS RESEARCH**

### **2.1 Literature review**

There is a notable gap in the literature surrounding the civic participation of older adults (80+) in Canada. This literature review focuses on the available literature concerning the civic and democratic participation of seniors and the potential barriers to their participation. Much of the available literature either focuses on the 'Baby Boomer' generation or seniors more broadly as a 65+ age category; therefore, differences in experiences across this age range are difficult to discern despite being made up of distinct generations with unique life experiences and challenges. Citizens have certain rights and responsibilities, but senior citizens have specific social and physical barriers to being able to realize these. Social and health inequalities also create barriers – explicit or implicit – for seniors later in life, reducing opportunities to participate in activities that are included in the mainstream discourse of 'active citizenship', including participation in political activities other than voting (Marchand, 2018; Trentham & Neysmith, 2018; Serrat et al., 2020).

There is increasing critical analysis of dominant discourses of aging in Canadian society. Such discourses are embedded within neoliberal economic frameworks (El-Bialy et al., 2022; Airth & Oelke, 2020; Barrio et al., 2018; Katz & Calasanti, 2015; Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Rozanova, 2010; Liang & Luo, 2012). This reinforces the reality that 'citizenship' in liberal democracies has limited actual democratic participation by its citizens, and participation is typically framed in individualist and consumerist rhetoric. Industries have erupted around 'successful aging', constructing the discourse of the threat of non-successful

aging, or ‘badly aging’ (Trentham & Neysmith, 2018). Achieving this image entails activities that are defined economically; consuming or producing goods and services becomes the epitome of citizenship and democratic participation. While this is not far from the scope of citizenship that is pushed for society at large, senior citizens have particular images - ‘retirees’ for example - they are expected to emulate. The emphasis on individual choice in the discourse of successful aging creates a neoliberal illusion often that ignores social inequalities, which compound our senior citizen population because age and disability intersect with other dimensions of inequality, including race, class, gender and language (Katz & Calasanti, 2015; Nangia & Arora, 2021). Canadians from different ethnocultural backgrounds have different constructs of ‘healthy aging’ and its constituents (Shooshtari et al, 2020).

The impact of neoliberalism on policy and public discourse erodes protections for all vulnerable populations, and senior citizens are not immune to this (Liang & Luo, 2012; Rozanova, 2010; Martinson & Berridge, 2015). Ageist discourse normalizes “what old people are “supposed to be doing” in a capitalist society. These normalizing forces have been shown to serve neo-liberal policy interests with their emphasis on individualism, independence, and responsibility for one’s own ageing” (Trentham & Neysmith, 2018, p. 175). Trentham & Neysmith (2018) looked at how aging and ageism are experienced in today’s neoliberal context focused on lifestyle choices individuals make to avoid becoming dependent or ‘aging badly’ at all costs, lest they become a ‘burden’ or personal ‘failure’. To combat this view of older populations, they argue that a different discourse, one that utilizes a critical lens, can construct an ‘active citizenship’, i.e. senior citizen as an advocate.

Communication and information are aspects of Age-Friendly Communities (AFCs) that can be overlooked compared to other more obvious aspects such as housing and health. It involves how information is dispersed throughout the community, especially important government and civic information and how accessible it is to older adults (Seniors’ Advisory Panel, 2017). This is important because seniors can miss out on community information that is taken for granted by the general public, thereby denying them the choice to participate socially and politically. Seniors, particularly older adults in Canada, are often excluded from current discourse due to a lack of access to information in the community and society more broadly (Trentham & Neysmith, 2018; Schugurensky & Myers, 2008).

The literature makes it clear that ageism is a continuing problem in Canada that creates barriers for seniors in a variety of ways that negatively impact their quality of life, including their ability to participate in democratic and political processes and exercise their full citizenship (Trentham & Neysmith, 2018; Schugurensky & Myers, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to ageist discourses around the country (El-Bialy et al., 2022; Levasseur et al, 2020); however, it has also brought some public awareness to and advocacy for the human rights of senior citizens. Canadian society should be working on societal awareness, namely of ageism and mental health, and how to maintain a sense of community across generations (National Seniors Council, 2014; Airth & Oelke, 2020). Some studies (Naud et al, 2019; Levasseur et al, 2020) have suggested that locally constructed strategies

and interventions, specific to local places rather than across-the-board general strategies, are necessary to meet the specific needs of senior citizens. Such strategies may differ by region, population density, and provincial as well as federal government's assistance programs. Most importantly, seniors should be actively included in policy-forming roles to help policy and community decisions to better reflect the needs of this age group (Marchand, 2018; Trentham & Neysmith, 2018; Bryant et al, 2004; Schugurensky & Myers, 2008; Raymond et al., 2013).

## **2.2 Methods**

This paper is based on a study on the quality of life of older adults (Nangia & Gingrich, 2020). This study was conducted in 2018-2019 in Greater Sudbury, a city located in the northern part of Ontario, Canada. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of Laurentian University (REB # 6013669). In this qualitative research project, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 older adults (age 80+) and information was gathered on various aspects of the quality of their life. Using a purposive sampling approach participants were recruited from independent living places and group homes. In various retirement homes, community centres, and other places frequently visited by older people posters were placed with an invitation to participate in this study. Only twelve people volunteered to participate despite repeated advertisements in various places, therefore, it was decided to recruit some additional participants through snowball sampling.

In the face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to provide information on their background, housing, financial situation, health, mobility, socialization, use of technology, safety, security, recreation, cultural needs, and demographic characteristics. They were also asked questions related to their civic concerns and participation in voluntary and political activities. Probing techniques were used to get more specific information on the issues of research interests. Each interview usually lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was audio recorded with the permission of the participant. The recordings were transcribed and read over multiple times to develop codes and themes.

Out of the twenty participants in this study, sixteen were females and four were males. Six participants were married, two lived common-law, and twelve were widowed. Their age varied from 80 to 95 years, with 16 participants in their eighties and the rest in their nineties. Thirteen participants were living in independent houses, five in apartments, and two in retirement homes.

This paper is based on a set of questions asked to older adults about their social and democratic participation and experiences of citizenship.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are categorized by the following themes: human and democratic rights, democratic participation and citizenship, disenchantment with politicians, local issues, and volunteering. Pseudonyms are used to conceal the identity of participants.

#### 3.1 Human and democratic rights

Participants often made little distinction between human rights and democratic rights, often grouping them as Canadian freedoms. It was common that when asked what they considered to be human and democratic rights, many had difficulty defining them:

“Um, now that’s, that’s a question I wouldn’t really know how to answer that” – Mary

“Basic human rights. \*laughs\*...that’s kind of an entangled type of question...Just being able to do your own thing. Free speech, and all of these things” - Harold

“That’s a big question...That’s, what you make, what you worked for. And...you mean more or less quality of life” – Grace

“Well, all the rights we have, you know. I wouldn’t want to change them...So, we, obviously have our freedom and we have our healthcare, you know, like that. It’s hard to remember everything” – Helen

These rights were often taken for granted and therefore difficult to name, often considered about countries outside of Canada for comparison, such as the US and ‘other places’ (industrializing nations), with Canada being considered superior. The most common rights to be named by our participants included: the right to free speech, the right to practice any religion, the right to good healthcare, the freedom to live where and how one desires, the right to vote, the right to respect, and the market-driven right to choose any education that you can afford (emphasis added). When asked whether they distinguished between human rights and democratic rights, many participants responded with some ambiguity:

“Well, I was pretty much lumping the two together when I said, the right to... all of the things, all of the good things in our lives that we take for granted are basic human rights and we just haven’t thought in those terms” – Shirley

“When you say democratic, are you talking about political? Yeah, I think they’re all the same” – Barbara

Despite the difficulty in distinguishing between human and democratic rights, study participants reflected individualism in their connotation of rights: the right to do what one wants as long as it does not harm others and to do it with no outside interference (from other individuals or government):

“Basic human rights. The right to have a job, the right to have private property, the right to do your own thing without too much interference from government sources, as long as you’re not interfering with neighbours and friends and other people. I like being able to do my own thing and at my own pace” – Edward

Individualism continued throughout discussions around various aspects of democratic participation, civic engagement, citizenship, and politics. We discuss this in detail in the following sections.

### **3.2 Democratic participation and citizenship**

In this study, questions on democratic participation and citizenship focused on policies towards seniors, diversity and attitudes towards the government and politics more generally. While a few of the study participants were well-versed in political issues varying across the political ideological spectrum, most identified themselves as not being knowledgeable enough to be comfortable speaking about politics, indicating low level of political engagement (Kafkova et al., 2018). Many stated that they were “just not interested in politics”:

“Politics doesn’t interest me at all, I’m afraid” – Norma

“I probably should be more interested in that, but, I have to say, I’m not too knowledgeable on all that” – Mary

Those who were engaged in politics usually did so through ‘thin’ democratic practices (McAvoy & Hess, 2013) through ‘formal’ channels, such as voting at election time and consuming media news. While this is not unusual for citizens of liberal democracies, this needs to be considered in the context of the other ways that seniors can be marginalized or removed from the rest of society, physically and socially, by ageist neoliberal frameworks. Individualism was again a theme in the response regarding democratic participation and citizenship. According to Statistics Canada (Turcotte, 2015), seniors aged 75+ had the least variance in the likelihood of voting between those who were very interested in politics and those who were not interested in politics. Our findings indeed reflect this, as all of our participants expressed the importance of voting, regardless of their self-described interest or disinterest in politics.

Voting is an important and perhaps the most explicit aspect of democracy. In the Canadian context, education level is highly associated with the likelihood of voting, party membership and participation in other political activities, but among seniors aged 75+, there is less variance in this regard (Turcotte, 2015). A large majority of our study participants felt a sense of duty around voting, a sense of pride that they vote in every election. When asked about participation in voting, all participants said that they voted regularly and were often

enthusiastic and proud of this. They saw it as their duty to vote, regardless of how involved they were in politics otherwise. In this context, Turcotte (2015) noted that “it is possible that the perception that voting is a civic duty...is more common among seniors” (p. 15). However, most also felt that voting was “enough” and did not feel the need to engage more politically:

“A lot of times I don’t quite agree with politicians, not what they do but the way they do it...But then again, I’m not active in it to say too much. ... So, I think if I just go and do my voting, for me that’s good enough.” – Marlene

Another important finding regarding voting was the frequent comments on dissatisfaction of study participants with current options at the poll, leading to difficulty in choosing who to vote for:

“Oh absolutely! I would never not vote. This was the most difficult time of voting I think I can ever experience” – Ruth

Finally, it is important to mention here that interviews for this study were conducted throughout a provincial election in Ontario, splitting interviews pre- and post-election. Although many spoke specifically about being wary of the election resulting in a Conservative government, some participants had the opportunity to speak leading up to the election, which could have facilitated more discussion on the matter of politics than those that did not. Barrio and colleagues (2018) noted that the older generation is the one that has lived through societal transformations, and social movements, and has more experience with fighting for rights and social justice. Further research on voting compared to more active forms of citizenship among senior citizens in the context of this would be generative.

### **3.3 Disenchantment with politicians**

Interview responses overlapping several areas of questions have been categorized as the overarching themes of ‘attitudes towards power’ and ‘disenchantment with politicians’. Attitude towards power has been divided into ‘status quo’ attitudes that reflect an acceptance of ‘the way things are’ and ‘hopeful’ attitudes that reflect a ‘desire for change’. The former leads from the previous section, with confusion over party lines. Participants felt that increasingly, there are no satisfactory options on the ballot box:

“[Voting] is a little harder this time...but who knows? It’s very hard to say. Well, what happens, happens...[Voting is] very important but the right people don’t get in. Once they’re in they do what they want. That’s the way I look at it.” - Elaine



This builds on another theme of disenchantment at the distrust in government. This is particularly clear in comments made about politicians taking money, deals being made ‘under the table’, dishonesty during elections and the government not being ‘for the people’. As noted above, there were enough worried comments about the incoming Conservative government that being weary of this in itself was a theme that emerged across these interviews. Despite many participants stating that they often vote for Ontario’s Conservative Party or dislike the Liberal Party, they did seem to be cautious of such populist appeals, with no positive comments made about the incoming Conservative government. Similarly, all of those interviewed commented – jokingly or frightened – about former President Trump and where America is headed, along with the attitude of Canadian superiority (“at least we’re not as bad as the US”). Most participants said that they did not feel like they could solve political problems (“I am not a genius”, “I don’t have the answer”, “That’s just the way it is”). We can see a distrust of formal politics reflected in participants’ comments:

“The problem in politics isn’t the people, it’s the system” - Harold

“I’m afraid I don’t have a great deal of trust in the government... They seem to go for whatever will get them elected and then when they’re elected, they kind of forget about... I’m not convinced ... The governments are not for the people, they’re for the politicians” – Shirley

“When you look at who voted for Trudeau or Ford, as the education went up, the numbers went down” – Harold

Previous research has also found gaps in what seniors need and want and what politicians say and do when they form the government. A study of seven cities by Bryant et al (2004) found sentiments among its senior participants that echo those of the present study: “It was generally felt that the individual has little influence on politics. Participants were skeptical about the willingness of politicians to listen. They were very concerned about provincial politics and hope to have a larger role in this realm than they currently think they do” (p. 31). Bryant and colleagues (2004) also noted that the participation of seniors in policy formulation and the government’s ability to hear their voices has been drastically reduced by budget cuts and cost reduction. The authors specifically referred to the Conservative Party’s policies in Ontario in the early 2000s, but this has become a relevant concern again under this government. The findings from Trentham & Neysmith (2018) echo the findings of Bryant et al (2004), suggesting that senior citizens are still not having their needs met across Canada. The present study confirms that this is still the case in the study area.

This study inquired specifically about policies that affect seniors. To this, multiple participants acknowledged that they are not in the best position to offer criticism or suggestions for policies because they simply have not had to look into them since they are financially secure and privileged. They were aware that they did not have enough information to speak to such questions because of their position. However, there was discussion of policies

made by the federal and provincial governments more generally. The main theme that emerged from these comments was that participants disapproved of major cuts, major spending or major administration by the government. Perhaps having lived through several governments and multiple economic crises, this generation is now weary of any drastic changes made by the government, regardless of which government was making said changes. We can see this sentiment in the following quotes:

“I’m lucky...but I want other people my age to be, not to worry that they have enough to eat or to pay their rent. But you should be held to account sometimes too”  
– Grace

“Don’t want to depress you but I’m for small government, keep out of my face and quit wasting so damn much money” – Edward

“I feel that [the government] spend[s] too much money. I’m not too happy about that. They’re giving it away and they need it, where are they going to get it from? But there’s not much we can do. They’re in there” – Elaine

Here again, in the context of policy, was a sense of individualism and personal responsibility, but alongside a sense of generosity and accommodation for the less fortunate, especially seniors with disabilities and young children. The participants also conveyed their displeasure with the wasteful expenditure by the government.

### 3.4 Local issues

A few of our participants, however, had worked to make change on small local issues (making phone calls or letters to the editor), whereas they had felt hopeless about broader political issues and democratic participation. Perhaps one feels more power acting alone if the issue is smaller and one more of logistics rather than politics. Once the connection from the personal to the social is made, however, it is perceived as an inevitable part of society and “that’s just the way it is”. This view would fit the individualized idea of politics under neoliberal ageism (Trentham & Neysmith, 2018; Airth & Oelke, 2020). Otherwise, participants did have faith in younger generations coming into positions of government and leadership. Interestingly, there were a few comments from participants indicating that fellow older adults did not engage in enough advocacy or activist work:

“They’re not interested in really doing. They might be one level, but they have to pander to these guys who are forceful or have money...and so, not a great deal gets done. Especially for our generation who don’t speak up” (emphasis added) – Barbara

In terms of political issues on a local scale involving Greater Sudbury, issues of development were common, especially the development of the city's downtown core and a potential casino were spoken about, with a clear need for revitalization and funding for the city's downtown and opinions both for and against the building of a proposed casino, citing benefits and harms for the population. Specific to seniors, some concerns were raised about casinos targeting seniors because they are viewed as vulnerable. Those participants who spoke about shopping for food and clothing disapproved of big box shopping centers, favouring smaller shops. Like other cities, Greater Sudbury is not immune to the rapid profit-driven development of shopping centers that displace small local businesses.

"The Mayor gave his inaugural speech, saying he's gonna do something about the downtown core. Well, I'll believe it when I see it" – Barbara

"Um, big box stores too, I was always against that. They just kill any downtown, which is a shame" – Eleanor

Most of those interviewed who lived outside of the city core, in outlying areas, voiced concern about these outlying areas being a low priority in local politics and municipal services. One participant noted that snow and waste removal services dropped significantly when their town was amalgamated into the City of Greater Sudbury. This reflects the findings of other studies that show that senior citizens in rural areas experience greater barriers and consequently have lower rates of social participation (Naud et al., 2019; Levasseur et al., 2020). One of the study participants said,

"Oh, I think it's a great place to live...but I didn't like when they amalgamated Lively and all of us [other towns] and made us the City of Greater Sudbury..... Because we're not part of Sudbury, they treat us like the poor cousins, you know..... We have [our representative] but there's only so much that they can do...But, Sudbury comes first... The only thing that I would find fault with Sudbury is when they don't look after us....Because when we were the town of Walden, we had snowplowing, we had garbage [collection] and we had everything, same as all the other little kind of towns. But now we're one of the last ones to receive it" – Edith

Our discussion of democratic participation and citizenship needs to be situated within the polarizing climate of liberal democracies. This generation has lived through many governments, political climates and events. We believe that this certainly gives them a unique set of perspectives on democracy and the roles and responsibilities of governments, but might also prevent them from penetrating current political issues and conversations. Many of these conversations are happening online, which may be another barrier, leaving these groups to traditional 'official channels' of politics, leading them to miss out on the boom of informal politics that is emerging, particularly among young Canadians. This means that those only

participating in ‘formal’ democratic practices, which are often more passive, are missing a significant part of current civic participation. This combined with some of the other barriers to full participation, such as health and activity levels and their subsequent subjectivities, may work to limit the sense of agency or power that these groups feel. That being said, we must also acknowledge the activist work being done by senior advocacy groups, such as that in Trentham & Neysmith’s (2018) participatory action research.

This data, although necessarily partial, indicates that older adults in Northern Ontario may feel disengaged from full participation in democracy, in both formal and informal politics. This creates barriers to ‘active citizenship’ by senior citizens (Barrio et al., 2018). More research is required to further explore and address these potential gaps, across dimensions of social inequality that older adults experience. Importantly, one participant recognized the need for a space for seniors to come together in solidarity to share knowledge and solve problems together from their knowledge:

“Sometimes there should be a location to come together and face together the problems we still sometimes have, and have somebody knowledgeable among them that they could go home a little bit more secure. That might help a little” – Grace

### 3.5 Volunteering

A popular activity for seniors, volunteering is often an important component in their quality of life for physical and mental health, social life and democratic and community participation. Most participants in this study volunteered formally immediately after their retirement, but less at their current age, except for helping out at their churches and church-related activities. A major argument regarding volunteering was that older adults participated in informal volunteering, which took the form of helping family, friends, and neighbours, for example, giving rides to those who had stopped driving or bringing groceries for friends. This kind of informal volunteering is generally not counted as volunteer work, as commonly stated in the literature. Volunteering, in its many forms, is often excluded from dominant deficit discourses of senior citizens, such as that of ‘successful aging’ (Barrio et al., 2018; Martinson & Berridge, 2015; Shooshtari et al., 2020). Such discourses fail to acknowledge that seniors actively participate and contribute to society in a variety of ways. Seniors put in more unpaid time in informal ways than formal; seniors (age 55 and over) contribute disproportionately more unpaid informal help and time than everyone over the age of 25 in Canada (Trentham & Neysmith, 2018). Indeed, older adults have been citizens all their lives and continue to be throughout their older age.

Marchand (2018) notes that care in the context of participation can be divided into formal and informal, with informal caring and volunteering traditionally being excluded from the discourse of active citizenship and more value placed on formal caring work. Senior women from all walks of life tend to include some form of caretaking in their notions of citizenship

and societal participation. Senior women tend to volunteer informally, ‘helping out’ when it is needed rather than an organized form of activity. This gendered informal volunteering is less likely to be credited as volunteering (Marchand, 2018; Martinez, et al., 2011; Arriagada, 2018). In the present study, participants, particularly widowed women, largely participated in informal caring work or volunteering. They often did not think of this caring work (mostly for other elderly friends) as counting as volunteering:

“Well, the only thing volunteer is if I pick the ladies up and bring them home. I would call that volunteer, yeah. I never used to call that volunteer, but somebody pointed out... ‘Well, you do this and this and this for people’, ‘Well that’s a volunteer’. Well, I never looked at it that way” – Marlene

This may shape the way these women think about their societal participation and citizenship. Participants who were men or still living with a spouse tended to be more active in formalized settings, such as organized clubs. The main exception was that many women noted that they had or still do volunteer at elections, working in polling stations. This reinforces that citizenship is primarily conceptualized around ‘thin’ democratic practices (McAvoy & Hess, 2013) and formal politics, i.e. voting as the single major civic duty.

Marchand (2018) argues that senior women have a unique position when it comes to citizenship because their lives involve women entering the workforce and finding a work-life balance for the first time. This puts them in a unique position to experience different forms of citizenship via the relationship between the public sphere and the private sphere and what that means to citizenship in a neoliberal democracy. The participants of the present study were split here, as all of the men had had full-time employment throughout their lives and while many of the women had worked, several had not or had only participated in part-time employment, instead being primary caretakers. Further research would benefit from specifically exploring the differences and similarities of citizenship for older adult women who had worked full-time and those who did not because of the emphasis on citizenship as an economic contribution discussed previously. This would be particularly relevant not just to learn about what citizenship means to each of these groups, but because women tend to have longer life expectancies and are often widowed and end up living alone. It would be helpful to see how this view of citizenship and social participation impacts their experiences moving forward.

Health and activity levels can be barriers to the formal volunteering that many organizations require, but seniors may still do what they can in an informal setting. Society needs to recognize the contributions that senior citizens continue to make to society in the form of informal and formal volunteering and helping, in addition to their economic contribution as consumers and taxpayers (Martinez et al, 2011; Arriagada, 2018). The present study supports that regarding volunteering, older adults participate in informal volunteering, which often takes the form of helping friends and other seniors.

Marchand (2018) introduced the concept of ‘individualized citizenship’, the retired seniors who feel they ‘have given enough’ to society. These seniors stay away from politics or formal civic and volunteering spaces. They still tend to engage in informal caring work and volunteering for family and friends. This perspective supports the notion of an individualist consumer-citizen that is still dominant in Canada. This group most closely resembles those in the present study: they participate in more ‘ordinary’ day-to-day activities, focus on the private sphere, participate mostly in informal volunteering or care work (friends and family), they do not ask or wish for more than what they have except perhaps more social contact with existing social relationships and most do not take active interest in politics.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study support existing research on the democratic participation of Canadian senior citizens. This group of older adults largely did not participate in politics other than voting at election time, which they do more consistently than Canadians generally (Turcotte, 2015). Older adults saw a sense of duty and pride in casting votes at elections even though, at times, they did not find any suitable candidate. Many study participants stated that they were not interested in politics as they did not trust the politicians. Overall, the findings suggest that older adults often have mixed feelings about the Canadian government and are resigned to the feeling of ‘that’s just the way things are’. But they do express a desire to make a change. Some of our study participants raised their voices on smaller local issues by making phone calls or writing letters to the editors.

Despite discourse that relegates seniors to passive consumers of society, they can be active participants. For the seniors in research conducted by Schugurensky & Myers (2008), formal citizenship through educational opportunities and informal learning through democracy (Sant, 2019) at the municipal level are largely mutually exclusive, reinforcing the gap between formal and informal political practices that characterize liberal democracies. This reinforces the idea that in liberal democracies, citizens are not actively or routinely learning how to engage in participatory democratic practices, thereby maintaining a ‘thin’ democracy (McAvoy & Hess, 2013) perpetuated by limited involvement of the citizens beyond voting in regular elections and otherwise ‘doing their own thing’ and reproducing the neoliberal status quo of individualism and ageism.

Participation in voluntary activities declines with age as most participants reported that they were volunteering in formal setups immediately after their retirement but not so much at their current age. They felt they had given enough to society and now it was time to stay away from more active civic engagement. About 40% of the study participants were in their nineties or late eighties, lacked interest in civic engagement and experienced several barriers to civic participation, particularly related to health, activity limitations and restrictions imposed by climatic conditions.

Further research on the ability of older adults to participate actively in politics or at least participate by learning about politics more comprehensively beyond watching the news, could be useful in reducing any barriers to such participation and fostering a greater sense of hope, agency and collective efficacy for senior citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic, worsened by chronic underfunding and neglect, had a devastating impact on senior citizens and their families (Shimoni, 2023). But, like many other social issues, the systemic maintenance of ageist neoliberalism and devaluing of senior citizens came to light to the public in a dramatic, tangible way. We hope that this study can contribute to the opportunity that the pandemic has created to rebuild and recreate communities across Canada in ways that respect, honour, and value older adults as actively informed and engaged citizens.

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