

Mediated Citizenship. Political Participation and Belonging of Elderly Women in Care Homes

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*** work in progress ***

Abstract

This paper aims to show that keeping elderly people politically involved can contribute to their sense of citizenship and belonging, including at an age when physical or mental decline has set in. It looks more specifically at the case of elderly dependent people living in care homes and how offering them opportunities to discuss politics in a “safe” and mediated setting can sustain their sense of self-determination, belonging and identity as citizens. The paper is based on a series of interviews with elderly people, mostly women, in six care or nursing homes in the canton of Geneva (Switzerland). Beyond this particular case, the article raises the question what it means to be a citizen, and what political science can contribute to the wider society.



Residents of a care home participating in an information meeting with political scientists from the University



Mrs Jaquier, 93, voting for the first time in 2005¹
photo : S. Udry.

¹ Photo used with the permission of Mrs Jaquier and her family

1. Introduction

With the ageing of the population in European countries, the number of dependent elderly is expected to grow exponentially. This demographic change has important consequences for health and social issues. The dominant political reaction to this new situation is the promotion of home-based long term care for dependent elderly, provided by members of the family (often women) and/or health care professionals. By the time elderly people enter a care home, they have often reached a state of strong dependency, and hence perceive care homes as places where people go to die. Unsurprisingly, many elderly hence retreat from civic engagement after having entered a care home (see Thomas 1996): they often give up their voting rights, do not feel concerned by public affairs any more and focus their attention on the minutia of everyday life (health issues, meals, visits by family members etc.) – a kind of “social death” often occurs well before the actual physical passing away, including in people who still have their full intellectual capacities.

This paper thematises this gradual exclusion of elderly dependent people, women in particular, from political citizenship once they enter a care home. It is based on a series of interviews with elderly people in six care homes in the canton of Geneva (Switzerland), carried out between October 2008 and January 2009². These interviews were carried out in connection with a pilot project whose aim was to keep residents of care homes in touch with politics: shortly before upcoming popular votes, political scientists of the University of Geneva went to a selected range of care homes for an information and discussion session in connection with the issues to be voted. The assumption behind this project (Loren and Lucas 2009) was that the “crumbling” of political citizenship in residents of care homes is not an inevitable fatality due to the physiological condition of the residents *per se*, but the result of gendered institutional and political. Hence, this gradual exclusion can be challenged: the pilot project (see also section 3 below) attempted to do so by proposing the above-mentioned information/discussion sessions as a form of “political mediation”, with the goal of sustaining political citizenship. As our interviews with elderly people show, this experience can be considered successful: below we show that keeping elderly people politically involved through this particular form of “political mediation” contributes to their sense of citizenship and belonging, including at advanced stages of physical and/or mental decline. Our interviews also highlight the specific gender bias of elderly women’s ordinary experience of political citizenship.

In the next section we first discuss the concept of inclusive citizenship as a way of understanding the issue of political rights of dependent elderly people, in particular women, and elaborate its three analytical dimensions (self-determination, belonging and recognition). Section 3 gives a more detailed picture of the pilot project of political mediation carried out in Geneva, followed by section 4 that presents the methodology of data collection of this article. Section 5 presents our main findings and we then conclude on some more general thoughts.

² The Swiss context offers particularly good grounds for the study of political citizenship since the citizens are called to vote on a variety of issues four times a year, in addition to regular federal, cantonal and local elections. In most cantons, including Geneva, the vote can nowadays be cast by postal mail and is therefore accessible also to residents of care homes.

2. Inclusive Citizenship : The Case of Elderly Women in Care Homes

Citizenship is about inclusion and exclusion of individuals from the political community of citizens bound together by institutions, traditions, values, a (more or less) common history, possibly also by a common language. Traditionally, the concept of citizenship carried the promise of universal equality among citizens (see for instance Marshall 1950). Recently, various challenges to this universal promise have contributed to a renewal of the conceptualisation of citizenship. According to Lister (2007), two main issues have been emphasised in recent re-conceptualisations of citizenship (Lister 2007). The first issue is the fact that inclusion has always been a *struggle*. Works concerned with the process through which inclusion has been reached often focus on marginalised groups that look at citizenship from the standpoint of the excluded. The second issue which is emphasised is a more context-bound understanding of citizenship, now increasingly understood as a *spatially located concept* grounded in the specific contexts and practices, rather than a universal reality. Hence, recent works do not consider citizenship as abstract and static any more. Besides being more contextualised, they also citizenship as a “lived experience” (Lister 2007) that people fill with meaning.

From Inclusion to Participation

Regarding inclusion, the universal promises of Marshall’s conception of citizenship are directly challenged by the recent shift of European social security frames from social *protection* to social *investment* (“social investment state”). In the “social investment paradigm”, priority is given to expenses that can be seen as “investments” for economic growth. Hence « [w]ith an eye on citizenship and social rights, such an approach can mean that those rights will make less progress that are concerning groups and goals without positive economic by-effects, like security in old age and elderly care » (Evers 2006 : 9). Under this frame, groups such as heavily dependent elderly people living in care homes or Alzheimer’s patients run the risk of being marginalised and excluded with regard to their social rights. These categories of citizens are also particularly vulnerable in terms of *active citizenship*. Compared to other categories of politically less powerful or marginalised people (women, disabled, children, black and ethnic minorities), the dependant elderly are today considered as the *least likely* to have an influence on decision-making and are seldom seen as partners in policy planning (Braye 2000, Means 2007). Although the social investment state paradigm emphasises the “activation” of citizenship rights and the enabling of individuals, it is unlikely that heavily dependent elderly or ill people will benefit from empowerment measures. Given the increasing medicalisation of care and its high costs, there is a serious risk that inclusion will be defined very restrictively in terms of adequate medical provision, with a focus on people’s deficiencies (cf. also Bartlett and O’Connor 2010). At best, elderly and/or ill people will earn recognition for their implication in everyday life (Ryan et al. 2008). As we will see below, this is a very restrictive understanding of inclusion that neglects elderly people’s needs for equal participation in the wider polity and their right to recognition as equal *citizens*. Other approaches are possible that aim to empower vulnerable citizens by providing them with adequate support (for example to support their political involvement). From mere “inclusion” we then move to a more active understanding of citizenship as “participation”, which opens up a range of possibilities for action, including with regard to politics. Putting the emphasis on participation also draws attention to citizenship as a *lived experience* that can be experienced very differently by different people.

Political Citizenship in Context : Gender, Age, Dependency

If we comprehend citizenship as both a spatially located concept and as a lived experience, then we need to consider political citizenship beyond formal rights: how do different categories of citizens engage with the formal rights they are endowed with? Do they claim and exercise them, or do they contest, ignore or somehow re-interpret them? Indeed the idea of active citizenship includes not only the right to vote and to be elected but also the citizens' general attitude towards the rights they have, or claim to obtain.

The case of elderly women in Switzerland is a particularly interesting case to reflect upon active citizenship. With regard to the European context, Switzerland appears to be an exemplary case of active citizenship: Switzerland was one of the first European countries to have adopted universal male suffrage. Its direct democratic institutions (constitutional initiative and legislative referendum), created in the 19th century are a cornerstone of the Swiss political system (Kriesi 1992). However, women have traditionally been "second class citizens", and elderly women in particular are until today affected by a political culture dominated by men with regard to which women have long remained "alien" (Studer 1996: 363).

Formally speaking, women and men have equal political rights today. But female suffrage at the federal level was introduced late (1971), and this has affected the political socialisation and mobilisation of women, in particular those generations of women that are over 75, and who received the right to vote when they were well into adult age (Sciarini et al. 2001, Wernli 2001). Although women massively participated in the first federal election that was open to them in 1971 (Inglehart 1979), this tendency did not last: today the Swiss women participate overall less in federal elections and votes than men (Engeli et al. 2006, Kriesi 2005)³.

Formally speaking, elderly people, even if heavily dependent, have the same political rights as all other citizens. Only under very specific conditions can someone be deprived of his/her political rights, i.e. when s/he durably loses his/her capacity to make conscious rational decisions, such as in the case of advanced stages of dementia for example (Leuba/Tritten 2006). Depriving someone of her/his political rights involves a lengthy procedure, including a psychiatric expertise and a court decision. In practice, the level of political participation significantly declines once people reach the age of 75-80, and this decline is even sharper for women (Sciarini et al. 2001). Data for France suggest that the decline of people's political involvement is particularly strong in people who enter care homes (Thomas 1996, Thomas and Saint-Jean 2003). Intuitively this decline might seem "logical", i.e. due to the declining physiological condition of elderly people reaching a certain age. But there are good reasons to believe that it is actually due to *other* factors, namely institutional and contextual conditions that discourage people from continuing to be politically interested and involved. A French study (Thomas 1996) shows that elderly people do *not* discontinue their usual habits such as reading newspapers or watching the news on TV, and that their political interest does *not* decline as they get older nor even when they enter a care home. However, their political *involvement* (such as voting, discussing politics with others, etc) decreases. This leads us to the hypothesis that more attention should be paid to the institutional conditions under which citizenship rights are actively used (or not), and that elderly citizens' political involvement could be supported if adequate measures were put in place. Based on this hypothesis, one of us (B. Lucas) set up the above-mentioned pilot project "Voting in care homes" in Geneva that used mediation as a tool for sustaining elderly people's interest in politics and use of their political rights. This project attempted to counter-balance the political (self-)exclusion of elderly people, women in particular, that we assume to be due to the subjective *experience* of

³ In the 1971 elections the gender gap was of 20%, in 1995 it was reduced to 7%, but in the 1999 elections it increased again to 14% (Engeli et al. 2006).

dependency as an obstacle to political involvement, rather than as an objective effect of physical dependency.

Dimensions of a Lived Political Citizenship

As Isin and Turner pointed out (2007 : 16), we have to assess the « vitality and importance of citizenship as both legal and lived experience ». Obviously, each category of the population develops a specific relation with its civic rights, and this relation can only be understood if we observe the interaction in a specific context and listen to the way people give sense to their citizenship. Regarding political rights, we consider that this experiential nature of political citizenship is constituted by three main dimensions : self determination, belonging and recognition. This perspective is very close to the definition that Lister (2007 : 55) gives of « lived citizenship », namely: “how people understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation (...) ». All three dimensions refer to the involvement of the individual in the larger political public sphere.

• *Self-Determination. The Instrumental Dimension*

Political citizenship is about making an active use of civic rights through participation in the political public sphere (like building and expressing political opinions, participating in political debates, voting or being elected). This concrete appropriation of civic right refers to an instrumental dimension of citizenship because it supposes various competencies such as a capacity to understand issues of public debate, talking in public, knowing the political system and the concrete rules of voting etc.. In this paper, we understand competence as meaning more than just objective factual knowledge: more fundamentally it is a condition for *self-determination*, or “people’s ability to exercise some degree of control over their lives” (Kaneer 2005 quoted in Lister 2007: 50). In the case of political rights, self-determination includes the individual’s capacity to form an (informed) opinion of her/his own, with some degree of understanding of the issues at stake, and of the implications of her/his choice. This first dimension refers to the “objective conditions” of what Nancy Fraser (2003) calls a “participatory parity”. Reaching some degree of parity in the participation of different categories of citizens supposes a redistribution of such “objective conditions”, for example by making sure that all categories of citizens have a sufficient access to information and that this information comes in a form that is understandable to them. For elderly dependent citizens, this might mean providing information that is accessible also for people who cannot see or hear very well any more, and that is “digestible” also for people whose memory and concentration may be declining. It may also mean paying a particular attention to the general state of vulnerability of these people, due to their being uprooted from their homes and former friends and neighbours, and now living with neighbours that they hardly know, having fewer social contacts with the outside world, and being in a strong state of dependency for many of their daily activities, including intimate ones such as personal hygiene. This vulnerability might affect the elderly people’s ability and/or motivation to remain interested in public affairs.

The pilot project “Voting in care homes”, this was “translated” in the form of information sessions led by political scientists from the university who had the mandate to provide an impartial information about the upcoming popular votes, to respect the principle of neutrality during the discussions and whose role was defined as being “mediators” between the residents of the care home and the wider polity, but also between the elderly and the staff of the care home – a role that turned out to be very important (see findings below).

• *Belonging: The Social Dimension*

An inclusive understanding of the civic dimension of citizenship should go beyond conceived the possibility for all categories of adults to punctually exercise their civic rights (be it in a perspective of every day struggle for self determination). Citizenship is also constituted by different forms of belonging (Isin & Wood 1999, quoted by Lister). In the case of political rights, belonging can refer to the different scales of inclusion of the individual and mobilise different forms of solidarity.

The first scale is territorial one, as shaped by political institutions. In Switzerland, a federalist country, inclusion can take the form of local, cantonal or national belonging (or a mixture of those). But feelings of belonging can also arise with regard to other levels, such as the care home or the international community (a “cosmopolitan” sense of belonging). They can also arise with regard to (non spatial) categories of people (women, a particular generation, etc.). Eventually, belonging can take the more active form of solidarity, e.g. “the capacity to identify with others and to act in unity with them in their claims for justice and recognition” (Kaneer 2005, in Lister 2007: 50).

Belonging as a dimension of inclusive citizenship has to do with public debate. Indeed, as William and Money (2008) pointed out in the case of welfare, the experience of territorial citizenship is linked to how people frame public debates (and, we could add public interests at stake). When people discuss politics or decide to vote, they implicitly also express a sense of belonging, a conception of public interest and a sense of solidarity.

As we will see below, the pilot project “Voting in care homes” clearly touched upon this dimension of citizenship as well. One could even say that the sense of belonging (to a particular group gathered for discussion, to the wider polity) was a crucial dimension that significantly contributed to the success of the project.

• *Recognition: the Intersubjective Dimension*

The civic dimension of citizenship is not only about making an active use of civic rights through some form of participation or, more symbolically, by mobilising some sense of social belonging. It is also a matter of recognition. For dependent elderly to act as citizens, they must be recognised as equal partners in the discussion – less as a matter of self-realisation (as in the conception of Taylor or Honneth) than of *justice* (Fraser 2003). In Fraser’s perspective, recognition is a matter of justice because it is about *social status* and *relative standings* of social actors with regard to each other, more than about realising “undistorted subjectivities” or enacting self-identities. Therefore *misrecognition* can be understood as “an institutionalised relation of subordination and a violation of justice” (Fraser 2003 : 29).

Fraser understands recognition as the second, intersubjective, dimension of what she calls a parity of participation (the first dimension being the objective conditions of participation). It “requires that institutionalised patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem” (Fraser 2003 : 36).

Today, elderly residents of care homes often lack recognition as *citizens*. A preliminary study prior to the pilot project “Voting in care homes” showed that most care homes in Geneva offer very little intellectual, let alone political activities to their residents. They commonly organise cultural and social activities (such as concerts, common cooking, gym, etc.), but only a few offered activities in connection with public affairs, such as inviting politicians to talk about elections or popular votes, press reviews, or presentations about political issues by members of staff.

As part of our evaluation of the project, we also routinely asked the members of staff of the care homes how they handled the voting material of the home’s residents. It turned out that the voting material was not always handled correctly: it was sometimes handed over to family members or withheld from elderly people who were deemed to be unable to vote by the

members of staff (without having been formally deprived of their political rights by the official procedure). Both are illegal according to Swiss law and both leave quite some space for arbitrary decisions about who is still a citizen and who is not, taken by care staff that has no legitimacy to take such decisions⁴.

One of the aims of the pilot project “Voting in care homes” was to create space for a political discussion in which the elderly dependent people were seen as equal participants. As our finding below show, many elderly people were very sensitive to this aspect.

To sum up, the idea of an inclusive citizenship, applied to elderly people living in care homes, should take into account (1) the fact that the elderly still feel competent and empowered enough to have some control over their life, and that they are still able (if they wish) to participate in democratic events such as popular votes; (2) a sense of belonging anchored in the social sphere (beyond the family), thanks to which the elderly may still feel concerned by public issues; (3) the necessity for full recognition of elderly dependent citizens as equal partners in the democratic debate and as human beings.

The question following from there is: how can this be achieved? The pilot project “Voting in care homes” that will be presented in the next section was an attempt to support elderly dependent people’s civic citizenship in all its three dimensions. The evaluation of this project upon which our findings (section 5 below) are based shows that all three dimensions appear to be crucial, *but* that none of them is currently sufficiently supported. Our study will also show why techniques and attitudes stemming from *mediation* are adequate tools when it comes to sustaining elderly (vulnerable) people’s sense of citizenship and ability to effectively use their rights.

3. An Experiment in the Mediation of Political Citizenship

Against the background of a concern for an inclusive understanding of elderly dependent people’s lived citizenship emerged the idea of the pilot project “Voting in care homes: Network of political scientists for the political information of the elderly”⁵, that was launched in 2007 by Barbara Lucas (political scientist, University of Geneva), Sabine Udry (socio-cultural animator at an elder care home in Geneva) and Marco Bandler (political scientist, University of Geneva). The idea of this project was to bring political information to the elderly living in institutional settings in the form of information and discussion sessions animated by professional political scientists, in the hope to provide a space of *mediation* between the elderly people and the public sphere.

These sessions took place shortly before the (federal) popular votes that are usually scheduled four times a year in Switzerland, and that set the agenda for the sessions. At each information session, all or a selection of the topics submitted to a popular vote would be treated: firstly in the form of a presentation given by one or two political scientist(s), then in the form of a general discussion with questions and answers. The information sessions were conceived as a collaboration between professional political scientists with expert knowledge and professional socio-cultural animators working in the care home who know the senior citizens living there and know how best to convey information to them, including those who are somehow impaired in their sensorial or cognitive capacities. The content of the session was defined by the political scientist(s), whereas the socio-cultural animator facilitated the

⁴ According to the Swiss legislation, citizens can be deprived of their political rights only upon a psychiatric expertise showing that a person has durably lost her capacity to make autonomous decisions, and only if a tribunal decides so, after a lengthy procedure. Members of staff of care homes have no competencies whatsoever to decide over a person’s ability to exercise their political rights.

⁵ Voter en EMS! Réseau de politologues pour l’animation politique auprès des personnes âgées.

communication process (for example by reformulating questions for the elderly, or by making sure that elderly people who wished to contribute to the discussion could do so). A typical information and discussion session was conceived as lasting about one and a half hour. Both during the presentation part and during the moderation of the discussion, the political scientists were supposed to apply the principles of neutrality (regarding issues and opinions) and impartiality (regarding participants).

A first experimental phase of this project started in 2007 and involved only one care home. The sessions were then directed by the project initiators themselves. The positive experiences with this experimental phase led to the more extensive *pilot project* “Voting in elder care homes” that lasted from 2008 to 2009. It involved up to six care homes and fifteen political scientists from the Department of Political Science of the University of Geneva, most of them research or teaching assistants and PhD candidates. All political scientists were recruited on a voluntary basis and all received a basic training in communication and presentation skills. They received an honorarium for their presentations, and gave their presentations in pairs. The involved care home varied considerably in terms of size and profile of their residents. The smallest care home had about 50 residents, many of them with strong cognitive impairment (degenerative illnesses at various stages), whereas the biggest care home had about 200 residents amongst which many who still have some degree of mental and physical autonomy. One middle-sized care home was a Jewish care home with many residents who did not have Swiss citizenship, although many of them had lived in Switzerland for many decades.

All but one care home participated in the whole pilot project. One care home joined the pilot project at its last stage, and one was dropped after two information sessions because both the political scientists and the staff of the care home reached the conclusion that the majority of residents were too affected by dementia or other cognitive impairments to be meaningfully included in the project. Overall, 140 elderly people attended these information sessions, out of which about 100 women. The number of people attending each session varied greatly, from 7 to 33. Some sessions were also attended by members of staff (other than the socio-cultural animator who co-chaired the session): from 2 to 11 members depending on the context and the day.

The topics treated during these information sessions were very diverse. They included questions related to social policy (reform of health insurance, reform of old-age pensions), legal-moral issues such as the punishment of paedophilia, the legalisation of cannabis and the regulation of hard drugs, and rather technical issues of procedural rights of (namely environmental) organisations with regard to big public construction projects. The total budget of this pilot project was of about 10'000 Euros and was funded by the Leenaards Foundation.

The pilot project “Voting in elderly care home” 2008-09 was subjected to an in-depth evaluation that took place between November 2009 and February 2010. It was directed by one of us (Lea Sgier) and carried out mostly by a class of her Master’s students. The findings that we present below in section 5 are based on part of the data collected during this evaluation.

4. Methodology

As part of this evaluation of the pilot project “Voting in elder care home”, 37 elderly people (24 women and 13 men) living in the involved care home were interviewed⁶, most of them by postgraduate students who participated in a methods seminar at the University of Geneva,

⁶ The evaluation also consisted in observation sessions and in interviews with other key actors of the pilot project « Voting in care home » : the directors and some staff of the involved care home, the political scientists who had been in charge of the presentations for the elderly, and some other key actors. All in all, our data comprise 67 interviews and 6 observations.

taught by one of us (L. Sgier)⁷. The vast majority of interviewees had participated in at least one information session of the project “Voting in care homes”, only a few people who had not participated could also be interviewed. All interviews were all based on the same (indicative) topic guide that the class had elaborated together and who contained general questions about the elderly people’s political interest and involvement, and more specific evaluation questions in connection with the pilot project under evaluation. The general questions such as “Do you sometimes discuss about politics with your fellow residents?”, “What does voting mean to you?” or “In general are you interested in politics?” yielded the most material for this article: they consistently triggered responses - some short and factual, some more elaborate - that give us hints about the elderly people’s conception of politics, themselves and their place in society, and their view of care home as institutions. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed. Most of them lasted about half an hour, some less (20 minutes), some more (up to 50 minutes), and yielded about 8-10 pages of transcript each on average, about 330 pages of transcripts in total. Most of these relative short interviews do not live up to the ideal of the “great interview” (Hermanowicz 2002) that yield rich and deep data that uncover deeper layers of the interviewee’s worldview: many of them remain rather factual, for three reasons. Firstly, most interviews took place right after the information sessions of the political scientists, e.g. at a stage when the elderly people’s concentration had already been strained, and - for some of them - shortly before they had to go and have dinner. Their capacity to elaborate was therefore limited. Secondly, the interviewers were beginners in interview methodology. They had some initial training before going out for “real” interviews, but did not yet have all the necessary skills to push the interviews far enough to reach the stage of “great interviews”. Finally, the main goal of these interviews was practical and centred on the evaluation of the pilot project: the topic guide included a number of very down-to-earth questions (“Was the presentation clear enough?”, “How did you find the time slot?”, “Did the presentations help you making up your mind on how to vote?” etc.) that were not designed to yield data on citizenship, but simply to get a feedback on the information sessions.

Despite these limitations, the interviews with the elderly nevertheless yielded a material that turned out to be rich enough to push us to draw some substantive conclusions with regard to elderly people’s - and namely elderly women’s - citizenship. One of the first questions of our topic guide in particular turned to be an excellent trigger for relevant material, e.g. the questions “Do you sometimes discuss about politics with your fellow residents?”. But other parts of the interviews yielded interesting material as well, sometimes directly (questions about the elderly’s habits in terms of political information for instance), sometimes indirectly (such as spontaneous, sometimes rather elaborate comments of some interviewees with regard to specific political issues).

5. Findings: a Crumbling Citizenship

Generally speaking, our findings clearly support the idea that using popular votes as an opportunity to get in touch with elderly people living in care homes can be a way of enhancing, and sometimes re-claiming, active citizenship in all its three dimensions: political information as enhancing the elderly’s capacity to make informed decisions (self-determination); as an opportunity to create social bonds through communication and to feel that they still belong to the wider polity (the social dimension); and finally as reaching beyond all practical purposes and conveying a sense of still “existing” as a human being and of being

⁷ « Qualitative research methods », MA seminar, University of Geneva, autumn semester 2008-09, attended by 25 students, mainly from the Political Science Department and the Gender Studies Department, and by some students of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. The full list of students who contributed to this study is in the appendix.

a legitimate member of the political community. In practice, these three dimensions are usually strongly interconnected and also intermingled.

Self-Determination: the Appropriation of a Civic Right

« Some issues we have to vote about are so badly explained and so complicated that I don't understand whether I should tick yes or no on the voting form ! »⁸

The first dimension of citizenship to which the pilot project « Voting in elder care home » has contributed is the instrumental dimension of opinion formation and ability to make conscious and self-determined political choices. Several of our interviewees have insisted on this aspect, saying that the information and discussion sessions helped them “to make up [their] mind” – which can actually mean at least three different things.

Firstly and most fundamentally, “making up their mind” can mean *understanding what the referendum is all about*. This aspect of voting was most clearly expressed by a 97 year old lady who had voted only a few times in her life: she explained that she had been obliged to leave school at the age of 14 and had then spent most of her life as a servant (for peasant families first, later for wealthy families), with few possibilities to ever take part in any discussion: “With the peasants we didn't discuss things like that [politics], we had so much work. Later I worked for French diplomats, I was a housekeeper there, so... logically we didn't discuss either” (S12). Although she has read the newspapers and watched the television news, she does not feel competent enough in political matters to forge an opinion and feel confident to express it: “I didn't understand anything, I didn't know the candidates [standing for election], so why would I have gone voting?” (S12:2). For this lady, these information sessions do not seem to be a trigger to actually participate in a vote today, but she clearly considers them useful for *others*. The information and discussion sessions offered by the project “Voting in care homes” operated for her as a kind of late “correction” of class and gender inequalities that had deprived her of the possibility of participating in political decision-making.

Secondly, for some residents, making up their mind mostly means *clarifying their voting preferences*. This case is much more frequent than the first one in our data. It concerns all people who already have some kind of opinion but appreciate a succinct summary of the objects of the referendum and of the most important arguments in favour and against the proposed legislative change. A summary is particularly also useful for all elderly people for whom reading the newspaper or the official voting brochure is becoming difficult.

Thirdly, for some senior citizens, a difficulty to make up their mind arises for practical reasons related to the Swiss political system. Swiss direct democracy requires the citizens to give their opinion on two types of objects: a) *innovations* impulsed by a group of citizens⁹ b) “vetos” *against* bills voted by the parliament¹⁰. The “veto” objects in particular are sometimes conducive to confusions on the part of the citizens. By definition, a referendum is always launched *against* a bill voted by the parliament. When going to vote the citizen is required to express her/his opinion with regard to the *referendum*, not with regard to the passed bill. For

⁸ S-20, p. 11.

⁹ The technical expression for this is « initiative populaire » (popular initiative). At the federal level, popular initiatives always concern the *constitution*, at the cantonal level they may also concern the level of the law.

¹⁰ The technical expression here is « referendum ». Referendums are always at the level of the law.

the citizen this means that if s/he is *in favour* of the content of the original bill, s/he has to say “no” to the referendum; (i.e. accept the veto) if s/he is against the original bill, s/he has to say “yes” to the referendum (i.e. accept the veto). So far most citizens have a good understanding of this mechanism. However, it gets more complicated if the original bill passed by parliament *abolished* a legislative measure, or if a referendum or initiative has a somewhat convoluted formulation or uses unfamiliar terms, as it was the case for a popular initiative that proposed to abolish the legal prescriptibility of sexual offences against children. As expressed by an 83 year-old lady to the question “How did you find this morning’s presentation [by the political scientists]?”: “It was clear, I now know how to vote. I was in favour of this initiative [for the imprescriptibility of sexual offences against children], but I didn’t understand whether I was supposed to vote yes or no. Now I understand that I have to vote ‘yes’ if I want sexual offences to be sued regardless of how much time has passed since the offence was committed” (S13:4). In these cases, the role of the political scientists is to clarify *how* a person can correctly express her/his opinion in a given context.

This dimension is of particular importance for elderly women who, traditionally, were not socialised into the habits of public discussion and are often less familiar with the intricacies of institutional politics. Our observations and interviews show that women who repeatedly participated in the sessions offered by the project “Voting in care homes” sometimes became progressively “bolder”: at the beginning they hardly dared speaking, whereas after a few sessions – and with a growing familiarity with the political scientists in charge of the sessions – they had the courage to speak up, voice their opinions or ask questions.

This first instrumental dimension of the project “Voting in elder care home” is obviously important to help senior citizens making active use of their political rights. Several of our interviewees would actually have wished for longer and more detailed information sessions with the political scientist, or would have appreciated to have the opportunity to discuss individually with one of the presenters. Some of them expressed their regret that not all objects of the vote could be discussed in one and a half hour¹¹, and that not all their questions had been satisfactorily answered (S21, S23).

Mediated civic participation

However this first dimension is not the most salient nor – in our understanding – the most central when it comes to the “lived” citizenship of senior citizens. As we shall see below, other dimensions are more striking and more pervasive in the data. Some of the senior citizens who attended the information session quickly forgot all about their content and sometimes their existence. For them, these sessions have clearly little instrumental importance and do not contribute anything to the formation or expression of their political preferences. As we will see, this does not mean that they have no importance at all, on the contrary.

The limited scope of our data does now allow us to say anything about the impact of these information sessions in terms of actually voting behaviour (content and the fact of voting or refraining from voting). Our general impression, however, is that for most interviewees, these information sessions were useful mainly to confirm their pre-existing opinions or to clarify their options. Only one interviewee said that she had changed her mind as a result of having participated in these meetings (S13). Several interviewees assert that they have gained a “better understanding” of the stakes of the vote.

In these interviews we can see that many elderly, including people over 95, still seem to have a general interest in political and social affairs. Many of them still read the newspapers, watch TV or listen to radio news (see also Lalive d’Epinay/Cavalli xx). As we will see in the next

¹¹ One single popular vote can sometimes comprise ten or even more objects to be voted, sometimes at different political levels (federal, cantonal, local) and under different rules.

section, this widely shared general interest contrasts with the quasi-absence of actual *discussions* about political and social issues in their everyday life. In that sense, this first, instrumental dimension of political information can also inform us about the fact that being old does not *per se* imply a lack of interest in public affairs. It does - however - imply a practical retreat from *discussions* about public affairs.

Belonging: Beyond Family Ties

« **Do you sometimes discuss with your fellow resident ?**

No.

No ?

Almost never.

Never ?

I'm here all the time. During the meals we hardly talk because... well... we are all more or less deaf (...). Actually we talk very little.

Do you never talk about politics with the others residents?

Never.

Never ?

Never.

And with the staff ?

We discuss as little as possible. »¹²

« **Do you sometimes discuss about politics with the other pensioners ?**

No, we avoid topics that could... create problems among us.

Do you discuss about something else then ?

Yes, about everyday life, events, but.. we avoid politics »¹³

A second dimension of political information as a way of reinforcing or re-creating some sense of citizenship as a concrete and lived experience is the *social* dimension, i.e. communication, bonding and, ultimately, the feeling of *belonging* to a group or collectivity beyond family ties. As elaborated above, this sense of belonging may refer to various scales (local, cantonal, national, supra-national, categories of people, the care home, etc.). From other studies (Thomas 1996 in particular) we know that entering a care home often means relying on a much reduced network of social contacts. After the initial period of settlement and acclimation to the new environment, social contacts with the outside world tend to become fewer. The impairments of old age (reduced eye-sight, limited mobility, etc.) sometimes further contribute to a constriction of people's world. As our interviews show, many elderly people suffer from loneliness and lack opportunities to have a real discussion with others, much the less to "argue" with others over diverging opinions, a key dimension of democratic politics. Finally, the fact that many care homes offer little or no activities related to public affairs also adds to the overall context that makes it more difficult for elderly dependent people to still feel a sense of belonging beyond their family ties (or instead of family ties for those who do not have any family). Our data suggest that communication is a key issue with regard to this dimension, and that sessions devoted to political information can be a site of communication in at least three ways: everyday horizontal (and vertical) communication that seems to be often deficient in care home; intergenerational communication, and communication as a deeper sharing and confrontation of ideas, including over political issues.

"To have the possibility to talk [about something else]"

¹² Interview S-4.

¹³ Interview S-19.

When asked about why they had decided to attend the political information sessions, many of our interviewees replied that it was an opportunity “to talk”, or to “talk about something else”, by which they usually meant talking about something else than everyday topics such as meals, health problems, visits of relatives, grand-children or similar topics. This form of communication – on everyday “trivia” – seems by far the dominant form of communication among residents of care home, and it apparently often takes place during the meals. For most interviewees, this type of superficial communication does not count as “proper” talk: these everyday conversations lack depth, tend to be repetitive and, for some interviewees, are somewhat depressing in that they often confront them with illnesses, their own (such as hearing impairments or fatigue) or others’ (the painful awareness of the effects of ageing on people). Outside of meal-time, many of our respondents retreat to their rooms and prefer spending time on their own, or then they talk to their family or engage in collective activities such as gym or collective cultural activities. Properly *intellectual* exchanges of ideas, or possibly even of arguments, seem to be rare (for example S1, S3, S4, S6, S7, S11, etc.). Debates over some kind of intellectual contents, in particular political contents, are apparently exceptional. The question “Do you sometimes discuss with your fellow residents about politics?” was systematically asked, usually early in the interviews. Strikingly, nearly *all* interviewees responded by “no” – most of the time spontaneously and decidedly. Only two interviews answered vaguely positively, saying that “when I have the opportunity, I sometimes do” (S29), or “Yes, sometimes I discuss with Mr. X about financial markets – he used to be into finance” (S31). None of your 37 interviewees said that yes, s/he did routinely discuss politics with fellow residents. The few who still do discuss political issues usually do so with their children or other family members.

Of all those who say that they never discuss politics with other residents, many also say they still *do* read the newspapers, are informed about votes or (sometimes) that they occasionally discuss politics with their family members. Some of them also say that they would like to have political discussions from time to time. In other words, the absence of political discussion among residents does not seem to be a sign of a general lack of interest for political issues, but probably has specific reasons.

In this sense, the recurrent answer “I come to these information sessions because they are an opportunity to *talk*” can be understood as a way of striving for communication over topics other than everyday trivia: communication that brings fresh ideas stimulates the intellect and connects to the world outside of the care home. In this context, politics is a trigger: a reason to converse and exchange ideas. Topics of common interest other than the upcoming referenda could have exactly the same function in the initiation of debates, and indeed several of our interviews say that they would like to have more discussions on issues of general interest. However, the variety of topics addressed in the votes turn out to be a very *useful* trigger. Some of them turned out to be good reasons for the elderly to talk about their own lives and experiences – sometimes somewhat surprisingly. For example, during one of the information sessions devoted to new provisions concerning drug consumption in Switzerland, the discussion suddenly shifted to the question of the war in Iraq and the role of the army: a rather passionate discussion about the army followed, during which several seniors talked about their experiences during the Second World War. Similarly, a discussion over a reform of the Swiss legislation on old age pensions triggered a discussion over the living conditions that the elderly people had experienced during their long lives. The central topics of the debate got lost in the process, but these discussions were among the most lively and passionate ones. Our observations during these sessions showed that occasionally discussion got “out of hand” and were overtaken by members of staff who discussed somewhat “above the heads” of the senior citizens. The elderly people to whom we talked afterwards did seem to have minded very much: on the contrary, they had apparently enjoyed being once again part (be it

only passively) in a *passionate* debate. In this sense, these information sessions before the popular votes can be seen as opportunities to create a dialogue that gets too often lost otherwise. Its instrumental use for the referenda as such may not always be very clear, but their *social* utility seems obvious at least for those among the senior citizens who attend mainly because they seek to escape boredom or because they are eager for some sort of intellectual exchange.

More specifically, these information sessions also have another aspect: the creation of some inter-generational dialogue and of a new relationship between seniors and staff. Indeed, various residents explicitly mention how much they enjoy “seeing young faces” (S17) and how much they appreciate seeing that “young people care about us” or “take the time to come and see us” (S21). The personal contact between the political scientists in charge of the sessions and the elderly is usually rather limited. Nevertheless, the elderly people apparently consider a presentation given for a group as a way of being in touch with a different generation.

These sessions also to some degree open up (tiny) relational spaces between the staff and the residents of the care home. In our interviews with the staff (N=9), several members of staff said that having attended these information session had given them the opportunity to “discover other facets of the senior citizens” (Px) and to enter a type of dialogue that they never have in their everyday life. This dialogue does not seem to continue once the information session is over. Nevertheless, it *does* reveal an additional aspect of the senior citizens’ personality and experience, an aspect in which they are not in need of help as assistance – as often in their everyday life – but in which they can *assert* themselves and speak of their own experiences.

Mediated Thus Non Threatening Communication

As mentioned above, most senior citizens that we have interviewed say that they never discuss politics with fellow residents. The most superficial reason given for this is that the others – other *women* in particular - “have no interest in politics, they have no knowledge about these things, they don’t read” (S8:2-3), that “they are losing their minds and you can’t discuss properly with them any more” (S13), that “most of us are more or less deaf, it’s very difficult to keep a discussion going under these circumstances” (S28), or that “if you try to talk to other residents, they tell you about their health problems. But I would like to talk about something else – but it’s not possible any more, it’s over” (S9:2). This last quote gives an indication that this loss of dialogue is often perceived as a *fatality* somehow inherent in the condition of the ageing person. Strikingly, many elderly often imply that *the others* are losing their mind, but they themselves still *have* the ability to discuss.

When digging a bit deeper, however, more fundamental reasons appear why elderly people in care home might not engage in discussions (any more): it is related to the potential *conflictuality* of political discussions. Many of our interviewees explicitly said that they *avoid* talking about politics because politics could create tensions, or make people angry with each other, or even lead to insults or aggressive comments by other residents (S19:2). Some elderly people also say that they discuss as little as possible because they “don’t want to bother other people” (S18:2).

This fear of potential conflicts extends also to the members of staff. During our interviews we were struck by a discrepancy between the perspectives of the elderly and of the members of staff concerning the type of relationship that they have: the elderly consistently speak of an *absence* of real relationships with the staff, that is said to be “very kind” or “available” but also very distant (“I don’t even know the names of these ladies, they come and go”, S9). The members of staff on the hand – e.g. the socio-cultural animators who see these elderly every

day – often speak of them like “being like family”. This discrepancy probably signals that the elderly people are much more aware of the strong *power relation* that exists between them – often heavily dependent - and the staff. Under condition of a strong power asymmetry, tackling conflict-laden issues is dangerous, and therefore best avoided.

The relative lack of deeper dialogue among residents of the care home and also between residents and staff can apparently be explained by more than just objective functional features of old age that make a dialogue more difficult: it is probably due to the type of *social relations* that are characteristic of relatively closed institutions¹⁴ such as care home: institutions where the residents have to get along with each other under conditions of relative closure towards the outside world, strong dependence and without having chosen each other. Under these conditions, social relations tend to remain *distant* in order to avoid needless frictions and conflicts – and conversations drift into banality and superficiality, or remain limited to functional communication (with the staff in particular).

In this context, the information sessions by the political scientists seem to offer (limited) opportunities for a *real dialogue* that allow the elderly people “to talk” (about something else than everyday matters). The political scientist as people external to the institution itself apparently play the role of “mediators” thanks to whom conflictual issues *can* be addressed: if conflicts arise, they are not carried out in a direct contact between residents or between residents and staff: they are *mediated* by an instance that is neutral (in terms of power relationships) and that will absorb conflicts. Under these conditions of “monitored” conflictuality, the risk of entering potentially conflictual grounds without risking to jeopardise fragile but vital social bonds can apparently be taken. Under these circumstances, even elderly people who usually remain rather passive seem to be encouraged to express themselves, or at least to “wake up”. Indeed, many of our interviewees speak about these information sessions and about the debates that sometimes followed with a deep satisfaction, as something that they are evidently missing.

As our data show, the possibility to participate in a debate is particularly important to elderly *women*: several of our female interviewees mention that they are not used to expressing their opinions in public and that they would not dare speaking up in front a group of people. Political scientists who did several information sessions in the same elder care home remarked that after the second or third time, some women become more confident about these debates and sometime dare asking questions or making comments. In that sense, and in a feminist perspective, these information sessions can also be seen as opportunities to offer discursive spaces to a category of people who have traditionally been silenced.

To sum up, we can say that this second (social) dimension of these political information sessions apparently contributes to providing elderly people with a (punctual) opportunity to experience a sense of belonging to entities other than their family: to a group of people still interested in public affairs; to the wider society (symbolised by the – young - political scientists who, by coming to the care homes, signal that elderly people still “count”); and to the community of citizens to which they still pertain.

As the third and last dimension which will be considered in the next session suggests, the *subjective* benefit that some elderly people derive from these information sessions by far extends both the instrumental dimension political information and even the social dimension of belonging.

¹⁴ They are closed mainly because of the profile of the residents who are often very old and not very mobile any more, and whose social relations tend to decrease as they enter a care home, due also to their impossibility to sustain balanced relations of mutual social exchange (Thomas 1996 : 134ss).

Recognition: Existing as a Member of the (Political) Community

« **Is voting important for you ?**

It's feeling that I'm a citizen...it's important, it means something.

What ?

That I exist »¹⁵.

« **What motivated you to join yesterday's presentation?**

I like to be in touch with life.

So yesterday was 'life' ?

Yes. »¹⁶

Finally, providing political information to elderly dependent people may also be a way to recognise them as members of the social and political community in their full right. Beyond allowing to “talk”, the information sessions provided by “Voting in care homes!” also give elderly people a much appreciated opportunity to be in contact with the world outside the care home. For many residents, contact with the outside world seems to be restricted to their family (if they have one) and to watching TV. Several of our interviewees said that they somehow feel like being “outside life” (S25, S10), like “old iron”¹⁷ (S16) or like “objects in a museum” (sic!). Data from a French study (Thomas 1996) corroborate the finding that elderly people's social networks tend to dramatically decrease once they enter a care home. Not being able to reciprocate visits and thereby to participate in the social game of exchanges and mutual gifts puts the elderly people in a position of social asymmetry. As a consequence, their social contacts progressively “dry up”. Furthermore, our interviews and informal conversations with elderly people also gave us the impression that many of them do not interact much with the outside world any more even if they could. For instance, they seem not to go to shops or cafés any more, even if these are within walking distance from the care home¹⁸ and even if they are still in a rather good physical condition.

The fact of having young political scientists come to their care homes “just” to talk to them was seen by many of your interviewees as an extraordinarily positive sign that they still “exist” and have not simply been “forgotten” by the outside world, and also that they are still “worthy” enough to be allotted time and attention. Some of them were clearly flattered and impressed by the fact of being given attention by “people from the University”, and many of them appreciated the contact with *young* people (most of the political scientists participating in the project were around the age of 25-30).

As the opening quote of this sections shows, this need to be recognised as a valid member of the community is sometimes explicitly framed in political terms: some residents said that by having the opportunity to discuss politics, they felt recognised *as citizens*.

The very setting of the project “Voting in care homes!” takes into account the dimension of *recognition*: by entrusting political *scientists* (rather than politicians for instance) with the information sessions, it provides a helpful and relatively neutral *mediation* between the elderly people and the public sphere, on the one hand, and between the elderly people and the staff of the care homes. Although a member of the staff was actively involved in each

¹⁵ Interview S-23 : 3.

¹⁶ S25 : 6.

¹⁷ A French expression meaning “useless”.

¹⁸ Several of the care homes included in the project “Voting in care homes!” are located in the city centre of Geneva, with shops and cafés within walking distance (less than 200m away).

information session, namely to help with the discussion, the political scientists were there to “mediate” delicate questions, to smoothen the conversation between elderly people, and sometimes to balance out power asymmetries between the members of staff and the elderly people. This mediation clearly allowed for discussions that (as shown at the beginning of our analysis) are not possible in the institution’s everyday life. By making them possible, the information sessions contribute to recognising the elderly people as equal citizens who should be correctly informed and have space for questions and for discussion, as any other citizens.

6. Conclusion

Citizenship is more than an abstract concept: it is a contextualised, spatially bound and “lived” experienced whose actual “actualisation” depends on a series of enabling conditions. Gender-specific socialisation patterns and socio-economic conditions have by now received some scholarly attention as potential obstacles to women’s full realisation of their civic rights. Less attention has been devoted to *age*-related obstacles, in particular when it comes to *old* age. At the intersection of gender and (old) age, we have elderly dependent women who do not make much use of their political rights.

Our findings from the evaluation of the pilot project “Voting in care homes!” show that elderly people in care homes (women in particular) are often far away from being *full* citizens in the sense of our understanding of inclusive citizenship. Firstly, their ability for self-determination in making political choices does not receive much support, and their age-related difficulties in accessing information is often not really taken into account – care homes centre their attention on care activities and on cultural social activities, with little space for intellectual activities. Secondly, residents of care homes often feel far away from the political community or even have a sense of “non-existence”. Thirdly, they hardly feel that they are still citizens or that anyone is still interested in knowing their political opinions. Many of the elderly people that we interviewed expressed some *frustration* about this state of affairs: they have a *need* for political information, for intellectual activities and for space to discuss about public affairs.

The pilot project “Voting in care homes!” also shows that improvements are possible: a setting that offers *mediated* information and discussion can contribute to creating a space in which debates become possible, in which elderly people can develop a sense of belonging and in which they feel recognised as human beings, members of society and citizens. Presentations of issues of popular votes can be seen as a possible way to reactive “bits” of lived citizenship in the three dimensions of self-determination, belonging and recognition.

Our results have their limits. They are based on a series of interviews and observations whose representativity we cannot assess. We may therefore have over-interpreted some of our results and be overly optimistic about the possibilities to empower elderly dependent citizens. Furthermore, we need to take into account that our interviews were initially carried out with the aim of providing an evaluation of the project “Voting in care homes!” – not with the aim of assessing lived citizenship. Therefore our data may be incomplete and in need of further corroboration. Finally, our own involvement with the project may not give us all the necessary distance with regard to our data.

Nevertheless, our data as well as our personal experiences in the field lead us to believe that mediating political information is a way to sustain elderly dependent people’s civic citizenship, and that it deserves further exploration, both for practical purposes and as a contribution to the citizenship literature. The recent citizenship literature shows a renewed interest in the *active* dimension of citizenship. However, often this comes down to discussions

over civic *virtues* (Siim 2000:25) and to the issue of an active political participation. The conditions necessary to a successful enactment of civic virtues is much less discussed. As Kymlicka and Norman observe, many authors “focus more on describing desirable qualities of citizens, and less on what policies should be adopted to encourage or compel citizens, to adopt these desirable virtues and practices” (Kymlicka et Norman 2000 : 217).

If citizenship is to become truly *empowering*, then it needs to become more radical: it ought to focus on building personal capacities and skills but also aim to enforce collective action and political participation. With Thomson (in Bray 2000:11) we could say that “emancipatory practices have two components –life politics, where empowerment lies in identifying and addressing barriers to self actualisation, and emancipatory politics, where it addresses barriers to equality and social justice”. Mediated political information lies at the intersection of the two dimensions and can sustain dependent elderly people in their sense of self and in their status as full members of the political community.

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**Table 1 : List of interviews with different actors in connection with the pilot project
« Voting in care homes »**

	Socio-cultural animators		Elderly		Directors of Care homes		Political scientists		Total
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	
EMS Arénières	2	-	8	2	-	1	2	1	16
EMS Beauregard	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	1	4
EMS Lauriers	2	1	3	3	-	1	2	-	12
EMS Mandement	1	-	4	2	1	-	2	2	12
EMS Marronniers	-	1	7	2	-	1	1	1	13
EMS Vessy	1	-	2	3	1	-	2	-	9
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
Total	9		37		5		15¹⁹		67

¹⁹ 15 interviews with 11 people (some interviewees having been interviewed more than once because they were in charge of discussions in several care homes).