



Brain-be

Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks

POLICY BRIEF

Policy Brief n° 1

CIVEX: Exclusion from civic engagement of a diverse older population: Features, experiences, and policy implications

This document summarises the key policy messages arising from CIVEX (www.civex.eu), organised into **four main areas**: recognising the multidimensionality of civic engagement, addressing contextual influences, considering the life-course, and embracing the diversity of older people.

This policy brief highlights **four key recommendations** for enhancing civic engagement among diverse older populations:

1. **Recognize the Multidimensionality of Civic Engagement:** Broaden the definition of civic engagement to include informal help, associational, and digital contributions, while aligning opportunities with personal motivations to foster sustained participation.
2. **Enhance Accessibility and Equity:** Implement age-friendly and digitally inclusive programs, while promoting good practices across regions to address disparities in participation rates.
3. **Adopt a Life-Course Perspective:** Develop flexible policies that account for how life experiences, transitions, and inequalities influence civic engagement trajectories over time.
4. **Embrace Diversity in Older Populations:** Recognize and address the unique barriers faced by marginalized groups while valuing diverse perspectives on what civic engagement means.

These recommendations aim to create inclusive and equitable pathways for all older people to actively participate in their communities, shaping policies and practices that reflect their diverse contributions and needs.

Context and question(s) of research

Multidimensionality of civic engagement

Civic engagement is a multidimensional concept, encompassing a range of activities:

- Informal helping behaviours
- Associational membership
- Formal volunteering

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The research is funded under the [BRAIN-be](http://www.brain-be.be) program of the Federal Science Policy (BELSPO).

BRAIN-BE is a multiannual research framework program launched by BELSPO in 2012 which strengthens the scientific base for policy making and reinforces the

- Political participation
- Digital engagement

These activities highlight the diversity of civic engagement, with each reflecting different ways people contribute to their communities and influence collective decisions.

Recognize Diverse Contributions: Policies must acknowledge all forms of civic engagement, from informal helping to political activism, ensuring activities align with personal interests. A multidimensional approach to civic engagement policies is therefore encouraged, incorporating diverse forms of engagement and enabling individuals to connect with causes and activities that resonate with them.

Ease Participation Barriers: Engaging in civic activities, such as informal caregiving, requires a commitment of time and energy, which often limits involvement in other forms of civic engagement. Policies must offer targeted support such as respite care, flexible schedules, or other support mechanisms for volunteers and participants in other civic activities.

Update Measurement Frameworks: A critical challenge in civic engagement is accurately measuring it, which is essential for understanding how to sustain participation throughout an individual's life. Traditional measures tend to emphasise formal participation (e.g., voting, volunteering) and may overlook more informal forms of engagement. To better understand civic engagement, measurement frameworks would benefit from being updated to capture informal, political, and digital forms of engagement. These activities often go unrecognised yet play a critical role in older people's civic contributions.

Contextual influences on late life civic engagement

Civic engagement in later life is shaped by individual characteristics (e.g., education, motivation), community factors, and broader societal systems like welfare policies. Participation rates vary across Europe, with Northern and Western countries leading. This disparity underscores the need to share successful strategies across regions. While national policies provide a foundation, local organizations and communities play a vital role in creating accessible opportunities for older adults to engage.

strategy and potential of the Federal Scientific Institutions (FSI).

BRAIN-be supports single partner and network projects with a duration of 2 or 4 years. Project selection is based on scientific excellence and the fulfillment of national and international research priorities as well as Federal policy needs.

BRAIN-be covers a wide spectrum of thematics going from sciences systems over cultural heritage, through a number of societal challenges.

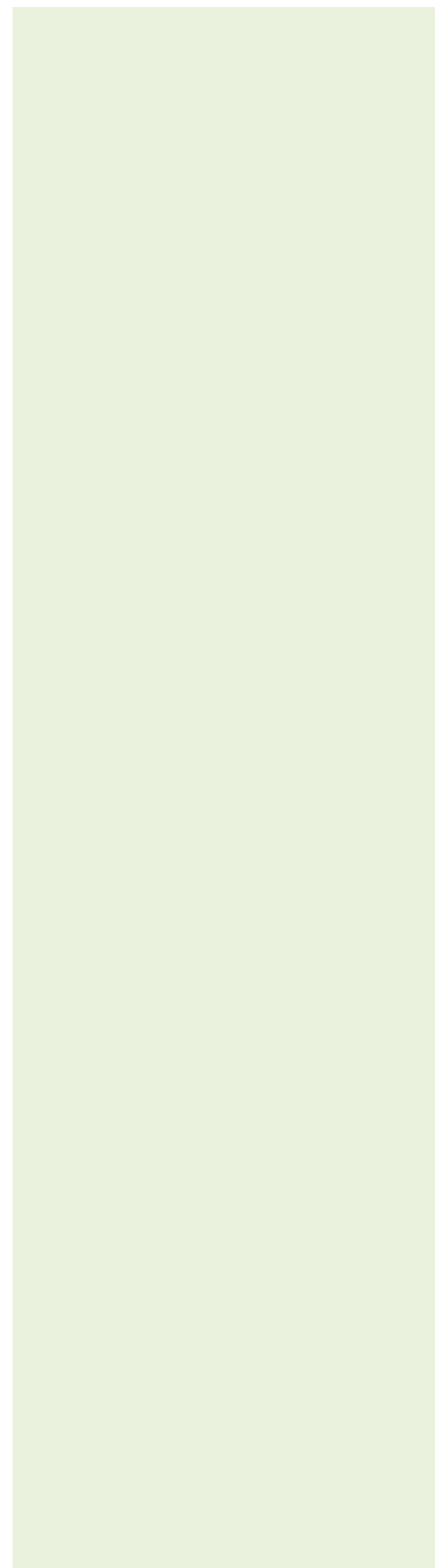
Increase Accessibility: This includes implementing age friendly programs that encourage older people's participation in civic activities, such as volunteering or associational engagement and ensuring that civic engagement platforms (such as voting locations and community events) are physically accessible. The digital context is becoming increasingly relevant, especially for people with mobility issues and those living in remote areas. This is also true for civic engagement, meaning that these activities should be made accessible to everyone. Digital literacy programs that teach older people how to navigate technology can be implemented to increase inclusion.

Share Good Practices Across Europe: Encourage the exchange of good practices between countries to promote equal access, to civic activities for older people. While Northern and Western Europe show higher participation rates especially in volunteering associational membership and political participation, efforts should be made to support and develop civic engagement initiatives in regions where rates are lower. This includes tailoring programs to fit local contexts, enhancing support for local organisations, and fostering collaborations that adapt successful strategies to varying societal, cultural, and economic environments across Europe.

Life-course influences on late life civic engagement

To enhance civic engagement among older people, it is important to look beyond the current circumstances and acknowledge the influence that their life experiences may have on their engagement. Studying a person's life course increases our understanding of changes and adaptations over time in a person's life and helps us compile life events and life phases as impactful experiences that may affect civic engagement trajectories and levels of engagement.

Integrate Life-Course Perspectives: Policies should reflect how civic engagement evolves over time, influenced by historical and individual life paths. Developments over time in people's lives are not universal, but they can take on different patterns, depending on when and where a person lived. Current surveys fail to incorporate measures to identify and understand different paths



and changes in civic engagement during the life course, making it difficult to relate to other micro-, meso- or macro-level variables. Building bridges between researchers focused on civic engagement at different life stages could help develop a more comprehensive and integrated view of the dynamics of civic engagement across the life course.

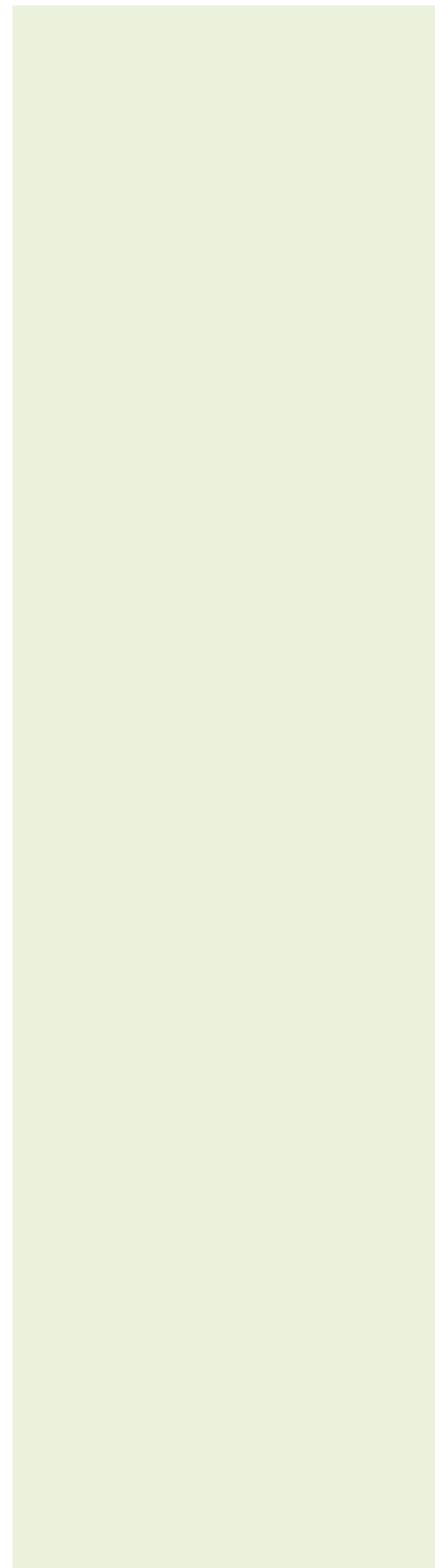
Accommodate Shifting Contexts: Influence of contextual factors and life phases. Contextual factors, such as those related to social, economic, political or environmental spheres, affect and vary throughout life, and what is called the “life course of place”, changes in ecological systems over time. Individuals adapt to these shifts in unique ways, influencing how they approach civic engagement in the present and in the future, depending on the life paths a person navigates. Flexibility in civic engagement activities is essential to accommodate the different experiences older people face throughout their lives.

Address Cumulative Inequalities: Life course trajectories often align with social inequalities, with differing impacts based on gender, race, educational level, and other factors. Life events such as migration, marital status, and employment history may compound over time, multiplying effects on an individual’s ability to engage civically. Community-based actors should be allocated resources to identify and address the cumulative effects of social inequalities on civic engagement. Policies should prioritize recruitment strategies that acknowledge the lifelong and fluctuating needs and diversity of the targeted population.

Older people’s diversity

CIVEX focuses on the experiences of older persons that are seldom included in research about civic engagement in later life. By doing so, the project highlights the need for an inclusive approach in policy that incorporates the voice of these diverse groups of older persons and the different meanings that they attribute to their civic engagement.

Include Marginalized Voices: CIVEX shows how older migrants from non-European backgrounds give meaning to their civic engagement in various ways. When developing policy around civic engagement in later life, a broad approach should be



adopted. The project urges policies aiming to promote civic engagement to be aware of the fact that older persons' definitions of what civic engagement entails may differ. For instance, older persons might want to contribute to society, have an ecological mindset, or they want to keep themselves updated. Through expanding the imagination of civic engagement in this way, policy and practice will be able to counter the often-limited perceptions of civic engagement that obscure the contributions of older persons and recognize that they might find civic engagement meaningful for a variety of reasons that have until now been ignored.

Balance Individual and Group Needs: CIVEX shows how older persons have a lot in common when it comes to what promotes and hinders engagement during the life course. However, policies could certainly benefit from working around group-specific factors that have an impact. CIVEX therefore encourages policymaking that is able to manage the balancing act, which is about seeing that older persons are a diverse group with individual needs, desires and different understandings of what civic engagement means, while at the same time being aware that certain groups of older persons are more likely to face specific types of obstacles when it comes to their civic engagement.

Read More

See both websites: [CIVEX](#) and [Society and Ageing Research Lab](#)

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