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The Social and Citizen Participation of Older People as a Factor for Social Inclusion: Determinants and Challenges According to a Technical Expert Panel

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Abstract

The social and civic participation of older adults has proven to be an asset that positively influences the dynamics of social inclusion that affect them, and expert opinion from international organisations calls for its inclusion in the development of public policies in response to the increasing longevity worldwide. However, the characteristics of this participation have not been sufficiently analysed. The main objective of this study was to test the explanatory capacity of an operational proposal relating to the participation of older people based on a multidimensional participation structure. Four dimensions were established: two relating to social participation (associations and volunteering and public sociability) and two linked to citizen participation (political and electoral participation, as well as active citizenship and civic engagement). Based on the proposal, a technical expert panel (TEP) was asked to identify the main participation challenges faced by older people across the four dimensions identified. Consensus was sought using prioritisation matrices. The results showed, among other issues, the key role of the dimensions of citizen participation in identifying participation challenges that have an impact on social inclusion. The political and electoral participation dimension had a specific weight regarding the challenges linked to current problems and characteristics. On the other hand, the active citizenship and civic engagement dimension was oriented towards the challenges linked to desirable conditions and recommended initiatives in the future to improve the impact of older people's participation. The expert panel's statements coincide with the recommendations of international organisations on the need to involve older persons in policymaking from a perspective of comprehensive and person-centred care. This provides a concrete response to people's demands and fosters bottom-up planning policies that contribute to social cohesion.

Keywords: older people; social participation; citizen participation; social inclusion

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1. Introduction

The review of the specialised literature confirms that there is consensus on the beneficial impact of social and citizen participation on the quality of life of older people. Social participation is an indicator of healthy living and life satisfaction during the ageing process [1–8].

Broadly speaking, for older people, social participation has shown to produce multiple benefits. Participation increases life satisfaction [9], prevents functional deterioration [10],

mitigates psychological consequences in crisis situations [11], minimises situations of unwanted loneliness, slows down cognitive decline, reduces feelings of insecurity, and influences subjective well-being [6,12–15].

In view of the key role of participation, in this study, we analysed the participation challenges faced by older people seeking to guarantee and improve their social inclusion, or seen from the opposite side, to prevent dynamics of social exclusion in this population group. To this end, in this introduction, we first contextualise the realities of the participation of older people and its impact on social inclusion. A theoretical framework focusing on the challenges of participation is then presented. Lastly, we set out a proposal aimed at conceptually operationalising the different dimensions underlying the social and citizen participation of older people.

In a general research context, any attempt to approach the notion of participation requires focusing on the multiple typologies included in the concept and that reflect its complexity. When exploring the notion of participation, numerous categories appear, which all emphasise a specific aspect: the environment (participation within the home, neighbourhood, community, and civil society), the nature of the interaction (face-to-face or virtual), the degree of structuring (formal or informal), the objective (personal fulfilment, social contact, volunteer help or work, carrying out activities in groups or organisations, institutional collaboration, and protest), the field of social life (political, cultural, and economic), or other criteria that structure participation action. Operationalising a social reality that is both widespread and heterogeneous is, therefore, not an easy task.

In the case of older people, far from being simpler, the concept of participation presents an additional dimension [16–18]. We can generally refer to the social participation of older people as a specific object of research. This is because the way older people use their time in terms of work activity [19], resources, and possibilities for social interaction differs from that of the working-age civic population [20]. The older people's population, however, is far from being a uniform sociodemographic, socioeconomic, or sociocultural reality. On the contrary, the segment is highly heterogeneous in terms of age, health status, gender, coexistence situation, care requirements, ideological positions, or relational resources, to name but a few aspects of daily life.

In the case of Spain—the object of the empirical section of this study—these heterogeneous preferences and realities were demonstrated in a study conducted by the Pilares Foundation [21] on the autonomy, solidarity, and social participation of people aged between 50 and 69 years. The results of this study showed that 60 percent of older people would be interested in participating in coexistence programs with people who share their same concerns, and 77 percent would like to do so with people of all ages. There were significant internal gender differences, however, concerning the preferences. Women showed a greater interest in social participation and volunteer activities, as shown in other studies, such as that of Pinazo et al. [22]. This latter work highlighted that women participate more in the public sphere and informal care, while men are involved more in specific activities, such as sports. This preliminary example of an analysis linked to gender diversity shows how important it is to understand the dynamics of older people's participation when designing social policies as well as direct social intervention.

It is worth noting that discourses on the participation of older people do commonly refer to the apparent links between social participation, social inclusion, quality of life, and healthy ageing [23]. These three aspects determine participation and to a large extent are outcomes of participation. In fact, inclusion and participation constitute an inseparable and feedback loop. Broadly speaking, inclusion and social cohesion can be understood as principles that create opportunities for people to participate fully in all aspects of social life [24,25]. At the same time, the social and citizen participation of older people has been

shown to be crucial in reducing the risk of social exclusion in different age segments [26], particularly for vulnerable groups [27] and for older people [28]. In this sense, social cohesion constitutes the way in which narratives shape realities that allow us to contribute to a common goal. In this sense, they affirm that health itself is based on the interaction between community members and can be fostered by social cohesion. In the present case, this concept of social cohesion affirms the salutogenic aspects linked to social participation as a cohesive element.

In terms of specific impacts on social inclusion, participation contributes to reducing socioeconomic exclusion [29], promotes social cohesion in heterogeneous societies [30,31], is linked to the generation of social capital [32–34], leads to social recognition [35], produces individual and collective empowerment [36], and facilitates the exercise of civil rights [37].

The participation of older adults coincides with an increasing percentage of people reaching old age with better health, longer life expectancy, greater social rights, and more resources than previous generations [21]. In addition, they constitute a growing cohort in relative terms within population structures, both in Western and non-Western countries. Demographic projections indicate that by 2050, in almost all countries in Europe, North America, and China, the population aged over 60 years will account for at least 30 percent of the total population. Other large countries, such as Brazil or India, will see their share of the older people population multiply in less than 20 years [38]. This reality turns the older people segment into an electoral base of reference in the political sphere. At the institutional level, the segment is a key target, and public spending is growing. They also constitute a "silver economy", representing a highly significant segment in terms of consumption, as indicated by Klimczuk [39] or Rogelj and Bogataj [40]. Lastly, in the cultural domain, the demands of older people relating to their preferences, interests, and capacities are emerging. Furthermore, we must remember that the holistic person-centred care model, which supports people's life project and self-determination, is supported internationally [41]. This new model promotes people's autonomy by developing their capacities and expanding their domains of participation, allowing them to pursue and express their interests, as well as make decisions. This whole gerontological research approach has generated an increasing number of initiatives to promote maintaining control over one's own life and quality of life and develop an active role in society. The importance attributed to community approaches and ethical responsibility in care, understood by Tronto [42] as a political concept, also supports participation proposals, such as caregiving cities or age-friendly cities [43]. The aim of these programmes is that older persons continue to be recognised as members of the social, economic, cultural, spiritual, or political life of the communities they live in. In this sense, the older people's perception of residential environments has been found to be a good predictor of the various forms of participation [35,44]. This has led to a rising number of institutional initiatives aimed at generating contexts that allow healthy ageing, as in the case, for example, of age-friendly cities [43]. A user-friendly and well-equipped environment provides what Richard et al. [45] call "opportunity structures" for the participation and inclusion of older people. As highlighted by Rodríguez-Porrero and García-Milá [46], "universal, inclusive design or design for all people is a fundamental principle included in Human Rights strategies, conventions and regulations". Universal design, based on ubiquitous accessibility, is key to older people's possibilities of participation. Quality of life, linked to the opportunity of having an active role in the community, is especially taken into account by specialists in gerontological architecture [47,48].

Based on all the above, participation is clearly a decisive social factor in the dynamics of social inclusion of older people. Yet, despite its impact on the development of inclusive communities, the specific challenge of conceptualising and measuring the social participation of older people remains unsolved [20]. Adequate operationalisations of social

participation have long been a subject of empirical research [49,50]. These studies have used a battery of variables, underlying what we understand today as participation behaviours, such as association memberships, volunteer work in organisations, frequency of attendance at public events, personal interaction networks, or the frequency of contacts with friends and acquaintances. Yet, in reality, in the different works on the subject, participation behaviours—i.e., manifestations of participation or behaviours—share more in common than the conceptual delimitation of the very notion of social participation, which, for its part, varies greatly among authors [51]. A first reason for this lack of consensus is the distinct and multiple forms of participation [52]. A second reason is that the notion of participation also differs among cultures. And finally, a third reason is the interchangeable use of similar, although not univocal terms in discourses. Social involvement, community engagement, social interaction, community participation, or citizen participation are examples of concepts used to refer to social participation. But in practice, these terms are not synonymous.

It is particularly relevant in this study to differentiate the terms social participation and citizen participation—which sometimes have a metonymy relationship. If participation means "being part of something" or "taking part in something", then social participation essentially signifies "being part" (being a participant) of actions, collective processes developed in the public sphere of society [53]. As a result of different taxonomic efforts, Levasseur et al. [54] propose a more precise conceptualisation of social participation based on previous definitions. They specified that social participation refers to when subjects are involved "in activities that provide interactions with others in community life and in significant shared spheres, that evolve over time and according to available resources, based on the social context and what individuals regard as desirable and meaningful". While the latter is a *sine qua non* condition, it is not sufficient to define citizen participation. Attending a neighbourhood party or a social event, being a member of cultural or religious associations, or insertion into the social fabric of the place you live in are examples of collective activities that reflect the degree of social participation. They should not, however, be automatically classified as citizen participation, as these situations do not necessarily involve issues of public interest that affect the community. Citizen participation leads to "taking part" in public affairs, which implies a greater redistribution of power to citizens in those public affairs [55]. The latter implies an active exercise of participation, which inevitably entails a relationship with political or public institutions. It is, therefore, possible to describe citizen participation as a specific mode of social participation.

As one can observe, in recent years, new realities and institutional initiatives have emerged around the participation of older people [56]. These new logics of participation often transcend more traditional conceptions, making a precise understanding of the phenomenon difficult [57]. The definition of the concept of participation is often overlooked—the most serious consequence is perhaps the difficulty in establishing the conceptual limits of the term and the pragmatic dimensions in which it operates. The main challenge of this study is to test the explanatory capacity of a multidimensional participation structure in relation to older adults, in order to reveal the significant challenges and opportunities for the social inclusion of this population through participation. The aim is to operationalise, at least conceptually, the realities of the different dimensions of what we currently call participation.

All the classifications used in this study distinguish between actions that generate community capital and actions aimed at influencing political decisions and public affairs. Based on a literature review, Bracht and Tsouros [58] differentiated between citizen participation and community participation: citizen participation corresponds to a social process linked to the planning of public life, and community participation is more related to the contribu-

tion of citizens to the well-being of the community. Miranda, Castillo, and Sandoval [57] established this distinction using the terms civic and community participation. The notion of community participation, similar to the broad concept of social participation addressed above, refers to activities carried out by individuals aimed at improving community life. Community participation activities do not seek to expressly participate in, negotiate, or exert pressure on public decisions or political and institutional action. For its part, civic participation addresses all actions carried out by civil society or individual citizens, whether conventional or unconventional, formal or informal, that seek to influence or participate in public action, political agendas, or government decisions. Stern and Dillman [59] applied a similar dichotomy using the terms nominal participation and active participation. The first refers to membership in civic organisations or participation in community events. The second involves taking an active role in processes of social change, which entails displacing and mobilizing subjects beyond their own individual well-being and the different social spheres of everyday life in which they wish to participate. Along the same lines, Baum et al. [60] and Hodgkin [61] have delimited subdimensions within these two types of participation, which are linked to the type of participatory action in question.

According to these authors, community participation includes behaviours of informal social participation, attending public spaces, and participation in social or support groups. In civic participation, they distinguish between individual and collective civic participation. A positive correlation naturally exists in most contexts, as predispositions towards community participation and predispositions towards citizen participation mutually reinforce each other [62]. In any event, the division between these two forms of participation in older people would be further fuelled by the fact that community participation includes a notable dimension of voluntary help and work within the third sector, while civic participation channels older people's participation into the public debates and policy decisions that affect them [63–67].

Based on the research background above, we sought to build a comprehensive model of the different participation theories. Table 1 represents our multidimensional approach to the concept of participation. This dimensional structure is used in this study to analyse the realities of the participation of older people and the different areas of inclusion.

Table 1. Multidimensional structure of the participation of older people.

Tags/Domains	*Dimensions*	*Characteristics*	*Examples of Inclusive Participation*
Citizen participation Active participation Civic participation (linked to the notion of participation in public affairs)	*POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION*	Participating in political parties, voting, demonstrations, protests, etc.	Political party militancy, attending demonstrations, voting in elections, signing petitions
	ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	Expressing opinions on public affairs, public engagements, involvement in participatory democracy events, institutional decision-making, etc.	Participation in community workshops, participation in institutional participation processes, contacting politicians or officials
Social participation Community involvement Nominal participation (linked to the generation of community capital)	*ASSOCIATIONS AND VOLUNTEERING*	Membership of organisations, participation in association activities, volunteer work, etc.	Being a member of associations, volunteering, participating in activities organised by associations
	PUBLIC SOCIABILITY	Unorganised interaction in group contexts outside the private sphere, informal coexistence activities, etc.	Talking to people in the neighbourhood, attending a public event, attending a show, etc.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The main objective of this study is to define the concept of participation, taking into account the impact of participation of older people on social dynamics that allow them to guarantee or broaden their social inclusion. We define the concept of older people's participation by distinguishing two domains (social participation and citizen participation), and the four dimensions of the actions linked to each participation domain (political and electoral participation, active citizenship and civic engagement, associations and volunteering, and finally, public sociability). The operational productivity of the proposed concept is tested by a technical expert panel: they analyse the main conditioning factors and challenges to the participation of older people across the four identified subdimensions.

Based on the research objectives, three working hypotheses are put forward. The first hypothesis is that the four conceptual dimensions present different explanatory weights regarding the realities of participation of older people. The second, linked to the previous hypothesis, sets out that the active citizenship–civic engagement dimension has the major explanatory weight for the impact of participation on social inclusion. Finally, according to the third hypothesis, the dimensions of associationism–volunteering and political–electoral participation are more greatly orientated towards the current problems and characteristics of the participation of older people. Conversely, the active citizenship–community commitment dimension, as well as that of public sociability, are more highly oriented towards the desirable conditions and recommended initiatives for social inclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

We began with a review of the specialised literature on participation and its correlations relating to older people. Several classifications were used to support the conceptual operationalisation of the participation dimensions. They all distinguished participation actions, on the one hand, linked to the generation of community capital, and those oriented towards the influence on political decisions and public affairs on the other. An operationalisation proposal is presented in Table 1.

2.1. Selection Criteria and Composition of the Technical Expert Panel

Once the dimensions of social and citizen participation were operationally conceptualised, a technical expert panel (TEP) was developed to achieve the study objectives. A TEP is a group of people who provide expert insights and judgements to help propose and develop measures to improve the quality of intervention in a given field. In the TEP of this research, the experts have, therefore, contributed to provide input on the proposed key questions in the field of participation, make recommendations, as well as assess or review the ideas generated in the consultation process around the conceptualisation and challenges of older people's participation.

In this case, a panel of 8 participants was selected to participate in the nominal group, which put the number of participants above the minimum recommended for group consensus methods with experts [68,69]. Gender parity was respected in the panel.

The main selection criterion for the TEP was the accreditation of professional or research expertise in the field of participation of older people. Gerontology experts were thus selected in Spain. Together, they combined outstanding trajectories in three different fields: academia and research, the government, with responsibilities for defining both regional and nationwide socio-health policies, and the third sector, with experience in the creation of organisations providing services, as well as in the field of claiming the rights of older people. The relatively small size of the TEP, although solvent according to the methodological parameters of this technique, was due, as has been indicated, to the condition of its members as national reference experts in the field of gerontology and

the participation of older people. This provided a special legitimisation of the responses. Despite the heterogeneity of perspectives and assessments, the relatively modest scale of the TEP facilitated the establishment of a substantial consensus. However, the main limitation of the TEP's composition in this study is that all the experts were from the same country, Spain, which could affect the generalisation of results in sociodemographic contexts with significantly different characteristics.

2.2. Dynamics of the Technical Expert Panel

The dynamics of the panel's work developed nominal groups and approached prioritisation matrices through weighted voting. The nominal group technique consists of a participation planning tool that seeks to achieve an agreement or consensus in relation to a theme based on the participants' positions.

For this purpose, the experts were given an open questionnaire that was based on the four different dimensions (political and electoral participation, active citizenship and civic engagement, associations and volunteering, and public sociability). They were asked to contribute to the four following lines of analysis in the questionnaire: (1) the major problems affecting the participation of older people in this dimension, (2) the main characteristics defining the current situation or state-of-the-art in this dimension, (3) the recommended or necessary conditions for the citizen participation of older persons to be more effective and successful in this area, and finally, (4) concrete proposals or initiatives to improve the citizen participation of older persons in this domain.

Based on the responses, a third strategy was implemented to achieve expert consensus. Prioritisation matrices were used: each expert was presented with the set of items generated by the entire panel for each of the four lines of analysis (problems identified, defining characteristics of participation, desirable conditions for participation to develop successfully, and finally, initiatives or recommended actions to achieve this successful development). The items were undifferentiated in terms of conceptual dimensions. The experts had to individually select the 10 items within each analytical line that they deemed most important. In a second prioritisation task, they had to each freely distribute 100 points among the 10 chosen items according to the significance they attributed to each. Once the results were collected, the mean, dispersion, and total score obtained for each item were analysed in relation to the rest of the items of the same dimension, using these statistics as sorting criteria.

3. Results

Figure 1 and Table 2 present the main results of the analysis according to the conceptual dimensions of participation, based on the work of the TEP. Figure 1 presents the average weight assigned by the panel to the challenges that the expert group itself identified in the first phase of the fieldwork. The results were segmented according to the four basic dimensions considered: associations and volunteering, active citizenship and civic engagement, electoral political participation, and finally, public sociability. Table 2 contains a similar analysis, but this time segmented according to the lines defined to generate and assess the participation items by the TEP: problems identified, defining characteristics, desirable conditions, and recommended initiatives.

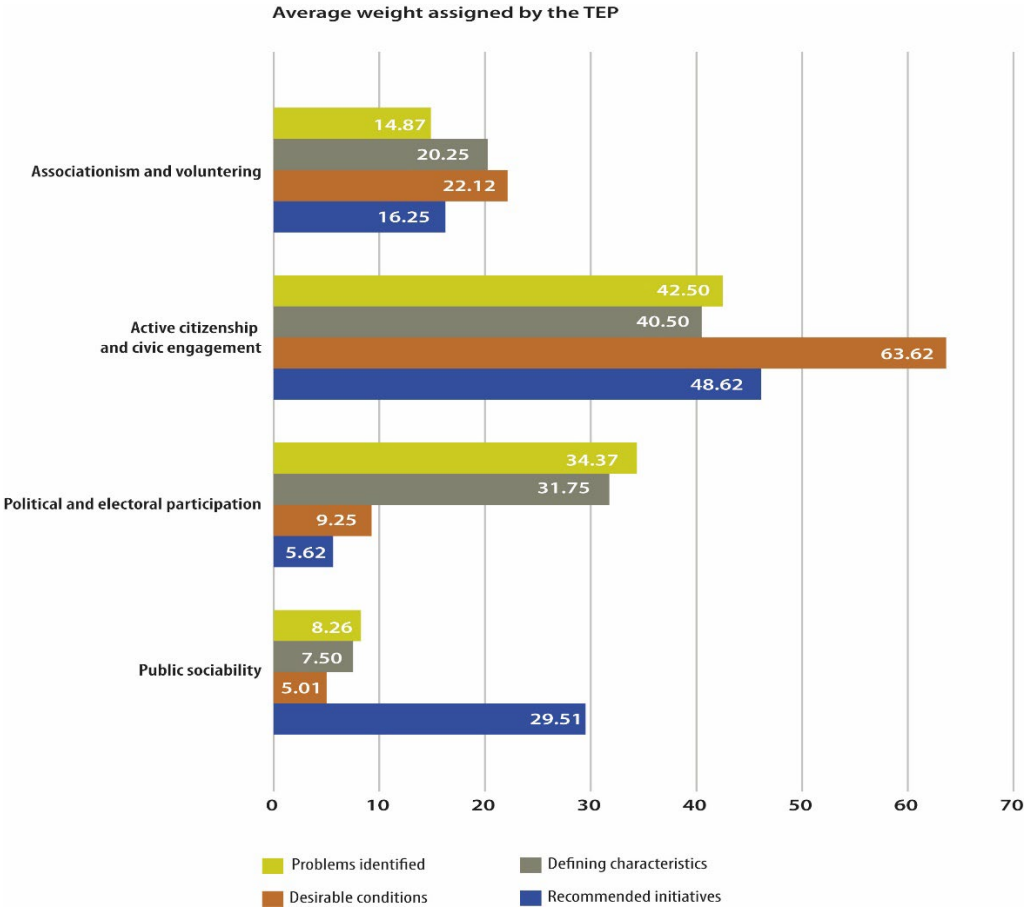

Figure 1. Average weight assigned by the TEP to the problems identified, defining characteristics, desirable conditions, and recommended initiatives for each dimension of older people's participation.

The total score in the different lines was 100 because the experts were asked to distribute 100 points among all the challenges of each dimension identified in the first phase.

The data breakdown by dimensions (Figure 1) revealed a number of clear findings. The challenges linked to the dimension of active citizenship and civic engagement concentrated the highest average scores. The pre-eminence of this dimension was reflected both in the problems related to participation of older people, as well as in the defining characteristics of the situation, the desirable conditions, or the recommended initiatives. The TEP was asked to propose and assess challenges related to four lines of analysis that sought to capture the dynamics of the participation of older people (the problems identified in the participation domain, the characteristics that define the situation of participation, the conditions that would be recommended to encourage participation, and what proposals they would consider as priorities to improve the current situation). Of all the lines, the challenges that received a higher average rating were those linked to the dimension of active citizenship and civic engagement. Notably, regarding the definition of the ideal conditions for successful participation, the challenges linked to the active citizenship dimension reached an average weight of 63.62 out of 100 possible points. Although this was the analytical line in which the civic engagement dimension was prominent, it also presented the highest scores in problem identification (42.50), determination of the characteristics that define participation (40.50), and elaboration and initiatives to promote participation (48.65). This was the most significant result. It is worth highlighting the significance of the political and electoral dimension to define both older people's participation problems (average score of 34.37 points) and the characteristics that define their current situation of participation (average of 31.75 points). On the other hand, the participation dimension corresponding

to associations and volunteering achieved moderate scores in the four lines of analysis. The maximum rating (22.12) in this dimension was given to the challenges linked to the conditions necessary for the older people to participate. Finally, the public sociability dimension received the lowest average score from experts on the subject of participation challenges. It should be noted at this point that an average dimension assessment does not necessarily relate to the significance of this domain in the participation of older people. An average assessment is linked to the magnitude and importance of the challenges included in this dimension. Thus, for example, a low average assessment of public sociability challenges does not minimise their value but means that the challenges included in this dimension weighed less according to the experts. In any event, it is significant that this dimension achieved a maximum average score of 29.51 in relation to the challenges of setting out concrete initiatives for the participation of older people.

Table 2. Average importance assigned by the TEP to the problems identified, defining characteristics, desirable conditions, and recommended initiatives for the participation of older people according to the dimensions of analysis.

Problems Identified in the Participation of Older People			
Dimension	**No. of Identified Challenges**	**Average Score of Challenges in Each Dimension**	**SD**
Associations and volunteering	7	14.87	5.86
Active citizenship and civic engagement	16	42.50	14.82
Political and electoral participation	11	34.37	13.30
Public sociability	6	8.26	5.06
TOTAL	40	100.00	
Defining Characteristics of the Participation of Older People			
Dimension	No. of Identified Challenges	Average Score for Challenges in Each Dimension	SD
Associations and volunteering	6	20.25	6.56
Active citizenship and civic engagement	11	40.50	12.25
Political and electoral participation	9	31.75	12.27
Public sociability	6	7.50	7.07
TOTAL	32	100.00	
Desirable Conditions for the Participation of Older People			
Dimension	No. of Identified Challenges	Average Score for Challenges in Each Dimension	SD
Associations and volunteering	8	22.12	12.75
Active citizenship and civic engagement	20	63.62	10.94
Political and electoral participation	4	9.25	4.68
Public sociability	6	5.01	8.00
TOTAL	38	100.00	
Recommended Initiatives for the Participation of Older People			
Dimension	No. of Identified Challenges	Average Score for Challenges in Each Dimension	SD
Associations and volunteering	9	16.25	9.73
Active citizenship and civic engagement	13	48.62	9.02
Political and electoral participation	7	5.62	6.43
Public sociability	9	29.51	11.23
TOTAL		100.00	

The key role of the active citizenship and civic engagement dimension had multiple implications. At the individual item level (due to space limitations, we presented here only those that obtained a score of 60 percent or above), the experts perceived a scarce presence or influence of older people in the public decision domain relating to their quality of life. This makes it difficult to give visibility to the needs and demands of the older people, in terms of both community life and social inclusion. Barriers to their influence on public policies were also considered by the TEP as an obstacle to the creation of the conditions required for older people to participate effectively. Added to this, the TEP also deemed that the older people's lack of trust and credibility towards political parties revealed dysfunctional political representation.

We identified here a common reference to the dysfunctions of political participation, through the challenges evoked by the experts. These specific dysfunctions were not limited to the possibilities and conditions in which older people may develop their political participation. The panel also somewhat agreed regarding the marginality or the limited influential power of older people, with respect both to the political agenda and to the definition of electoral strategies of political parties (see Table 3). Older people play a role as consumers of public policies and as voters. This role, however, is not reflected by any involvement of older people in political decision-making or as political party leaders. Issues such as healthy ageing or claims for the place of older people in community life are marginal issues in thematic political agendas—despite the fact that they represent the interests and preferences of a large segment of the population. The latter suggests the existence of prejudice or discrimination. In fact, age discrimination was highlighted by the TEP. They underscored ageism, and generally a vision of the older people as a passive consumer of socio-sanitary or sociocultural services. Moreover, bodies that focus explicitly on participation, such as consultative advisory boards for older people, fail to have a true impact (beyond their consultation or information functions). Table 3 reflects the broad consensus of the TEP on this issue. The high level of agreement among the experts on challenges relating to active participation and civic engagement supports the recommendations issued by major international organisations on strategies to give a voice to older people. Such attention needs to be paid both to specific issues, such as care and the shift to a model of healthy ageing or quality of life, as well as to social problems where older people can make valuable contributions through their skills. In this sense, the experts agreed with the assessment of the WHO [38], which points to a comprehensive perspective reflected in the panel's prioritisations, raising the issue of the key role of participation in facilitating ageing based on the concepts of intrinsic capacity and functional capacity. Thus, it defines the concept of "functional capacity" beyond its usual reference to daily living activities and applies it to interactions between individuals and their immediate environment.

Relating to this question, the theoretical contextualisation and research background approached participation as a key factor clave in the dynamics of social inclusion. The results had to show whether conditions of participation were sufficient to support participation behaviours and thus could favour the improvement of quality of life of this population. In this sense, it was relevant to analyse the specific challenges identified by the panel and to determine whether they were linked to the need for changes in the present, or whether they referred rather to changes in the future. To this end, Table 3 presents the challenges deemed relevant by more than 60 percent of experts for each line of analysis. The percentage of panel agreement indicates the percentage of experts who included the item within the 10 choices they could make among the total number of items identified by the set of experts in the first phase for each line of analysis.

Table 3. Challenges linked to the social and citizen participation of older people, agreed upon by at least 60 percent of the experts.

Analytical Lines	Challenges Identified by Experts	DIMENSION				Percent Panel Agreement
		Associations and Volunteering	Political and Electoral Participation	Active Citizenship and Civic Engagement	Public Sociability	
Problems identified	Lack of community vision of political representatives regarding the participation of older people		X			87.5%
	Very individualistic society with little appreciation of the community, which prevents active engagement			X		62.5%
	Digital divide in some segments of the older people population of access to certain mechanisms of political participation		X			62.5%
Defining characteristics	Lack of awareness of the potential of the older people, who are regarded as passive consumers			X		87.5%
	Institutional participation bodies have a consultative nature with little impact on political agendas		X			87.5%
	Little renewal in the leading positions of the groups of older people, which hinders the regeneration of associations	X				75.0%
	Political parties are interested in the older people segment of the population only in electoral periods		X			62.5%
Desirable conditions	Going beyond the consultative nature of most domains linked to the participation of the older people, seeking more effective participation			X		75.0%
	Greater role of older people in the design of programmes and policies, not only as recipients			X		75.0%
	Take advantage of the political capital deriving from the life experience and knowledge of older people		X			62.5%
	Elimination of stereotypes, myths, or social prejudices regarding ageing and older people			X		62.5%
	Design of public policies based on person-centred and appropriate care for an ageing society			X		62.5%
Recommended initiatives	Act on homes that generate isolation and create new housing solutions that favour coexistence				X	75.0%
	Find new formulas or mechanisms for the participation of older people that differ from traditional solutions			X		62.5%

The results in Table 3 allowed us to refer again to dimension differences when evaluating the participation situation. Most of the current challenges on which the experts agreed (regarding the lines of issues and defining characteristics) were part of the political and electoral participation dimension. To a lesser extent, they were also part of associations and volunteering. Major current challenges were linked to political–institutional participation opportunities, i.e., participation in elections and associations. This means that regarding the possibilities that participation offers to contribute to social inclusion, it is necessary to rethink the offer and internal dynamics of two classic sociopolitical agents: associations or citizen organisations, on the one hand, which in the case of older people should undergo, according to the experts, both an internal renewal and a reorientation of their public activity, and, on the other hand, political parties, which must address the demographic reality of the older people and also open their political agenda to ageing issues.

We now turn to the future and address the effective conditions and initiatives needed to promote the participation of older people. Table 3 shows that active citizenship and civic engagement participation emerged as explanatory dimensions, as well as public sociability—though to a lesser extent. Most of the challenges in achieving the ideal conditions for older people's participation relate to the need to expand their possibilities of civic engagement. Some experts refer to the greater role of older people in the design of programmes and policies that affect them, others to a greater influence on decisions related to ageing policies, or the overcoming of prejudice regarding the role of older people in society, giving the elder a greater role in public affairs. Table 3 also shows the significance of the public sociability dimension regarding the challenges linked to transformation and improvement initiatives in the future. These challenges involve developing initiatives to overcome barriers that hinder older people's formal or informal contacts with their daily environment, especially within their residential areas. Here, the TEP agreed on the challenge of actions that encourage coexistence, healthy living, and care. The creation of institutional conditions that guarantee the opportunity to participate would be a necessary condition, though an insufficient one in itself, to ensure successful participatory action. The participation proposal should also address issues that improve the quality of community life through continuous—and non-occasional—interactions of older people.

4. Conclusions

Participation affects the individual identity of older people. It also shapes their collective identity as a group or social actor. According to the TEP, participation, in this sense, unquestionably plays a key role in preventing isolation, exclusion, or discrimination. Participation is thus ultimately understood as a protective factor of social inclusion.

The results of the analysis, which was exploratory and linked to the TEP's proposals, showed that the participation dynamics of older people were largely conditioned by their social resources, as well as by their access to the institutional resources they are entitled to, or that are activated so that they can participate.

The present work demonstrated that the multidimensional structure proposal was instrumental for the conceptual and operational analysis of older people's participation. Based on the technical expert panel's work, the four dimensions proposed constituted a scheme that helped to raise multiple aspects and dimensions of participation, thus avoiding a scattered or one-dimensional approach. The experts' assessments also revealed that the participation dimensions involved in the relationships between participation and social inclusion had different explanatory weights. Not all dimensions explained the same phenomena, nor did they all allow us to think with the same intensity about collective spaces that encourage participation and, therefore, have a positive impact on the inclusive processes. The challenges of fostering participatory dynamics in older people have been

particularly important in the area of participation understood as active citizenship and civic engagement. If participation is an indicator of social inclusion, one of the fundamental challenges in this area is to increase the capacity of older people to influence the design of policies that particularly affect them. While it is true that sociability or cultural and leisure activities are very important for the well-being of older people, research has shown that problems and challenges concerning the role of older people in the conception and design of these social spaces need to be solved. We can affirm that current challenges to the participation of older people are largely due to the reconfiguration of the institutional weight they have in the public sphere and political influence. Despite the growing demographic weight of the older people, their possibilities of access to political influence are dysfunctional. The weight of participation in associations was not as significant as political participation regarding the assessment of current challenges for older people. In terms of future challenges, the active participation and civic engagement of older people had a significant weight in the assessment of desirable conditions and recommended initiatives for full inclusion. Public sociability issues, for their part, were less significant.

The present study allowed us to conceive the participation of the older people as an asset as well as a challenge that can be solved institutionally and socially. This result suggests that we need to focus on the need to coordinate institutional proposals that expand the opportunities and influence of older people to significantly influence ageing conditions. This result supports numerous declarations of international organisations and state policy approaches [23,56,70]. It also puts two key elements at the heart of the debate and allows setting forth ambitious participation models. The objective, on the one hand, is to guarantee the citizen rights of older people and to improve their political influence. On the other, the aim is to design mechanisms capable of involving older people in public issues that affect them, especially in terms of healthy ageing and quality of life. These two elements are included in the specialised literature and in the declarations of major international organisations, which are demanding the implementation of a comprehensive and person-centred care model focusing on the support and care of the older people and their wishes.

The results indicated that it is positive to promote assets, such as sociability, associations, or volunteering, among the older people. Yet, according to the multidimensional proposal set out above, the greatest participation challenges were linked more to the concept of citizen participation than to social participation. It is, therefore, especially important to conceive an older person as an agent capable of controlling and exercising institutional influence on public issues that improve their quality of life. It is not possible, however, to conceive the older people as a homogeneous population. Solutions must be sought, as already pointed out in the Introduction, through comprehensive, person-centred designs, as well as co-created participation strategies leading to the definition of bottom-up policies. Perhaps in this sense, one of the limitations of the study, and at the same time a proposal for a future line of work, is to extend the debate on the proposals and challenges that link participation the participation of older people with the design of intervention programmes in key areas of interest to them, such as physical and mental health, residential proposals, mobility, the prioritisation of social care services, different forms of care, or the creation of support networks. It is imperative that each of these areas is adapted to the characteristics of the actors involved and to the socioeconomic and cultural keys of the territory. However, in light of the findings of this study, it is highly recommendable to think about both methodological and institutional arrangements that allow the real influence and empowerment of older people on the social situations that affect them, as well as the responses formulated by the public sector to address these issues.

In short, both the research literature and institutional narratives commonly refer to participation as an important issue for older people. Nevertheless, political–institutional structures are leaving the older people outside the truly central spheres, i.e., the domains in which they could become genuinely active agents within the community. Participation is a cross-cutting component where the skills of older people are recognised, and their autonomy is enhanced. Therefore, focusing on ambitious participation models with older people also means investing in an asset that has a positive impact not only on their social inclusion and quality of life, but also on society as a whole.

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