



Elder Civic Engagement and Rural Community Development

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Abstract

Rural areas are becoming more and more concerned about their aging population and perceived loss of youth. Analysts see the older members of communities as a burden, and focus their development strategies on attracting and retaining the young. In doing so, they may be missing the value that elders' civic engagement can provide to rural community development. This qualitative study, based on interviews with 40 elders in mostly rural areas of Wisconsin, in the United States, shows the benefits that their civic engagement brings to rural areas. They have biographical availability, political and economic freedom, and life-long experience to offer. They do face some challenges, including occasional health issues, lack of technological agility, and change-resistant peers. The paper concludes by considering how communities can better access and honour elder civic engagement, including understanding elders' motivations and skills for civic engagement.

Introduction

As birth rates decline, lifetimes lengthen, and the Baby Boomer generation nears retirement, the United States population is aging (Vespa, 2018). This so-called 'Greying of America,' however, is not felt equally across states or communities. 'Rust Belt' states witnessing industrial decline, agricultural instability and out-migration have seen considerable growth in their median age and senior populations. Within these states, rural communities have aged particularly fast as young people move to cities and other states (Carr & Kefalas, 2010; Smith & Trevelyan, 2019). The state of Wisconsin, in the U.S.'s Upper Midwest, represents this pattern well: seniors now make up 16% of the population and many of the oldest and fastest aging counties are also among the most rural (Applied Population Laboratory, 2009).

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In media coverage, political discourse, and even some community development circles, aging rural places are all too often treated as dying communities. Much of the literature paints a dire picture of communities where the costs of caring for the “elderly” are going up while fiscal resources decline (Stallman et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2009). Local leaders have fretted about how to bolster the services and infrastructure seniors require as the labour force and tax-base evaporate. Research and development initiatives have focused on how to recruit and retain young people in rural, aging places. The overriding assumptions behind these narratives are that young people are key to a thriving, healthy community and elders are, at best, necessary burdens.

We question these assumptions, looking at elder civic engagement and we use the term elder because it connotes community-based authority and status across a variety of cultures. In its simplest sense, civic engagement is ‘individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern’ (American Psychological Association, 2009). Our more narrow focus looks at those individual and collective actions on the local level, in geographic communities. Consequently, we are concerned with elder civic engagement that identifies and addresses *local* issues, not agendas of state, regional, national, or international organizations. Drawing on 40 in-depth interviews with elder civic leaders in rural communities across Wisconsin, we address the following questions: What unique capacities do elders bring to civic engagement? What facilitates elder civic engagement and what limits it? And what can communities do to ensure that aging places retain a thriving and engaged elder population?

What the Literature Says about Elders in Communities

In this paper, we seek to intervene in this literature in three ways: first, we challenge several of the biases that cause many to overlook or underestimate the significance of elder activists; second, we invert the approach of many studies to view the propensity of elders for civic engagement as an individual question and instead consider it as a communal question; finally, we move beyond the question of what enables seniors to become civically involved to explore what sustains senior involvement and what senior involvement can contribute to organizations and communities.

Why We Overlook Elder Civic Engagement

We do not know very much about elder civic engagement (Bacsu et al., 2012) with the exception of the Aging Activisms network that has focused on the activism of elder women (Chazan, n.d.). The standard image portrays elders in civil society as conservative, and staid (Peterson et al., 2020). Mass media tends to portray civically engaged elders as the conservative ‘old guard.’ But the proposition that old people are more conservative is complicated at best. People are more likely to identify as conservative as they get older, but conservatives are not necessarily in the majority among older people (Campbell & Strait, 1981; Saad, 2019).

Another reason why elder civic engagement may be under-studied is that it is so commonplace that it doesn’t seem to need explanation or analysis. Many of us can

conjure images of church-ladies who help cook for special events or older men who volunteer handyman and maintenance skills for local schools and libraries. Many of us expect that this is what elders naturally do if they are blessed with good health in retirement. But treating this type of engagement as natural and inevitable has two serious shortcomings. First, ignoring the fact that only some elders are engaged prevents us from exploring what individual and communal factors facilitate or limit elder engagement. Second, these stereotypes confine elder activism to a relatively tame role of playing grandparents to the community, ignoring the professional, innovative and even radical work that many elders do.

Another explanation for neglecting the civic engagement of elders is perhaps because so much of our attention is focused on youth civic engagement, based on the unspoken bias that elders are too old for such things (Richards, 2012). But there have been some famous examples of elder activism and civic engagement. The most documented group of elder activists have been the Gray Panthers (Sanjek, 2011), perhaps followed by The Raging Grannies (Sawchuk, 2009), but both have been more of an urban phenomenon. McHugh (2012) considers the case of women elders as opening up the idea of activism to quieter more backstage forms of civic engagement. Others have just begun to document a wide range of activism by elder women (Chazan et al., 2018; Collins, 2019). In this paper we seek to build on these recent examples to show elder activism and civic engagement in its full diversity and vibrancy.

Elder Engagement as a Communal Phenomenon

Many authors (see Warburton & Stirling, 2007) examine the individual characteristics of elders that may enable or impede their personal civic engagement, while others look at the benefits that engagement may bring to individual elders (Gottlieb & Gillespie, 2008). But they neglect the beneficial effects that elder civic engagement can have on the community, instead looking at the burdens that elders impose on the community. And, indeed, as longevity outpaces improvements in quality of life, and societal values put economic considerations before human considerations, families and communities have a heavy burden to bear to provide care for the increasing number of people whose quantity of life is outlasting their quality of life. But the singular focus on the burden of the 'elderly' ignores not just the potential economic benefits they may bring (Canada Housing & Mortgage Corporation, 2018; Shibata, 2019) but also the deeper civic contributions they may make.

A second approach in the literature on elder civic engagement in rural areas focuses on elders serving elders. Skinner and colleagues (2016) discussed how elder volunteers may provide much of the workforce for meeting the needs of elders in aging rural communities, and how such volunteerism may also be good for the elders who are volunteering (Georges et al., 2018; McHugh, 2012; Skinner et al., 2016). But Skinner and colleagues also note that voluntarism that excludes elders from leadership roles and treats them only as service recipients can actually make things worse. This limited approach to understanding elder civic engagement neglects the many other ways that elders can benefit and transform rural communities.

Digging Deeper into Elder Civic Engagement

Finally, our work seeks to build on literature examining why and how elders become civically active. One concept that can help explain elder civic engagement is biographical availability (McAdam, 1986; Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006). Biographical availability refers to a set of life circumstances that make it easier for individuals to engage in voluntary civic action. This concept was first focused on young adult activists in the 1960s without mortgages, children, or 60 hour a week professional jobs. In other words, these were people with time on their hands. But it is also true that many elders have paid off their mortgages, raised their children, retired from their jobs, and can pay their bills from their pensions. They also have control over their time, and many put that time to work in civic engagement (Chazan et al., 2015). The biographical availability of elders becomes even more crucial for civic engagement as advances in healthcare allow people to remain active as they age. For there is a sweet spot in aging for elders whose minds and bodies are still perfectly capable of making contributions (McHugh, 2012). Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter have extended that sweet spot perhaps better than anyone, and at the ages of 91 and 89 were out working on a Habitat for Humanity house as late as August of 2016 (Murgatroyd, 2016).

Biographical availability presents a necessary but not sufficient condition for elder civic engagement. Not all elders with such availability are civically engaged, so other variables are at play. But what are they? Warburton and Stirling (2007) found that neither ‘social capital’ variables (organizational involvement, religious engagement, immigration status, etc.) nor ‘sociostructural’ variables (education, income, health) reliably predicted elder voluntarism in an Australian context. Others, like McHugh (2012) showed how older women’s biographical availability combines with an ethic of care that extends outward into faith-based community settings. She also emphasizes that mentoring is important for elder women activists regardless of other socio-environmental factors. Elder civic engagement may also be a response to the threat and precarity that too many elders face today. When the U.S. Postal Service planned to close the post office in West Newbury, Vermont, elder activists came out in force to oppose the plan. One of the main reasons for their opposition was that the post office was an important social connector in the community (Nye, 2016; Postal, 2013). Even the physical challenges that accompanies aging may motivate, rather than hinder, elder civic engagement (Chazan et al., 2015).

Academic approaches that use relatively constant variables—retirement, ethics of care, social capital—to predict elder engagement risk a critical omission. Civic engagement in general ebbs and flows; people lose motivation, burn out, and become inspired to engage again. As we move forward with our analysis, we seek to explain not only what factors predict elder engagement, but what sustains it; what leads some elders to withdraw and others to pursue remarkable, durable careers of local activism.

The intersection of rural aging and elder civic engagement with community issues is one of the most important areas needing research (Burholt & Dobbs, 2012). How do elders become involved in the many policy issues surrounding land use and protection, stewardship of natural areas, and related issues? Does their involvement differ from the involvement of local elected officials, who are also often elders in rural areas? What can and do elders contribute to rural community development? It is

important to address both the ‘can’ and ‘do’ parts of the question. Because it may be that elders can contribute more than they do. And that leads to the ancillary question: How can communities organize to gain the most benefit from the potential contributions of elders? By studying these issues, we can build models that both rural and urban communities can draw upon to build community capacity by more effectively engaging elder community members.

Data and Methods

This is a qualitative *intensive research* study. Sayer (2010) distinguishes *extensive research*—appropriate for mapping population characteristics using large samples and statistical methods—from *intensive research* appropriate for studying how and why questions using small samples or even single cases. Extensive research, because of its large number of subjects, can only study people superficially. Intensive research, studying only one or a few people or cases, can dig intensively to learn how and why things happen. Our purpose was to understand the hows and whys of elder civic engagement, not the distribution of civic engagement across populations.

We conducted in-depth interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) with 40 rural elder activists across Wisconsin. In recruiting our participants, consistent with intensive research, we strove not for a ‘statistically representative’ sample, but rather for enough interview participants to have confidence that our findings reflected both some commonality and some variation. We also were looking for elders who had extensive civic engagement experience so we could learn from them the deeply informed lessons that come from deeply experience. Below we describe the basic descriptive characteristics of our participants, how that contextualizes our findings and what other communities could be fruitful for further study.

We recruited our subjects through a variety of networks. We contacted University of Wisconsin Extension educators for referrals to elders they saw as most civically engaged in their communities. These educators were located in counties across the state and each had intimate knowledge of the people and organizations in their counties. We found others through the Wisconsin Grassroots Network, arguably the largest network of locally civically engaged people in the state. Finally, we asked each interviewee to suggest others. This may have produced a more progressive group of elders than one might expect, but it is also possible that elders with a more progressive identity are more likely to be involved in local voluntary collective civic action. As a consequence of this approach, our subjects were effectively spread across the state. All were from communities of less than 75,000 residents and only three were living in communities of greater than 10,000. More than half were in communities of fewer than 5,000 residents.

We did not ask participants their ages nor put any firm age threshold on participation. Many offered such information and we could estimate ages for others based on when they said they retired and whether they retired early. Nearly a quarter of our participants were likely in their seventies and as many as a fifth were in their eighties. Only one person was an early retiree still in their fifties, though a handful of other

interview participants had retired early a number of years earlier and were now in their sixties or seventies.

There were 26 women and 14 men among our interview participants. Given what we know about women's greater involvement in local civic engagement compared to men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009; Marcelo et al., 2007), the gender distribution of our interviewees may reflect the actual population.

Our sample contained no visible racial diversity. This is not unexpected for two reasons. First, rural Wisconsin is overwhelmingly white, so it is not surprising that elder activists in those communities would be as well. Second, many of the things that we found enabled elder activism – pensions, high-paying professional careers, sufficient health care, jobs that don't destroy the body – have long been denied to the rural indigenous, Black, Hmong and Latinx communities that do exist in Wisconsin. Such benefits also are not common for farmers, and even farmers involved in civic agriculture do not show strong civic engagement attitudes (Schoolman, 2020), making them less likely to be visibly civically engaged in retirement. Consequently, they were not represented among our interviewees.

While our interviews cannot speak directly to this topic, it is important to consider the potential barriers within civic organizations to participation for elders of color, poor and low-income elders, and farmers and farmworkers. The near exclusive whiteness of local organizations and the potential for implicit and explicit racism in these groups, may prevent rural Hmong, Latinx, Black and Indigenous elders from participating. Furthermore, as we will show in this article, seeking out elders with particular professional skills plays a significant role in recruiting participation in local civic activities. It is possible that poor and working-class elders are often overlooked in these recruitment processes. Finally, even in very rural places there is a growing political divide between small cities and rural farm communities. Much of the local civic engagement we document takes place in these small cities and it is possible that farmers, farmworkers and other more rural populations are excluded from or politically opposed to this kind of community work.

Most of our participants came from white collar professional backgrounds, but not all. Seventeen people had worked in K-12 education. Seven people had retired from health care, three from higher education, and three from civil service. Three had been independent professionals, two were business owners, two were skilled craft workers. The others had retired from the ministry, elected office, and various mixed career paths including time spent out of the paid labour force.

Our sample clearly contains higher proportions of women, white people and professionals than the elder population as a whole. Given the limitations of our sample, we cannot speak to what the experiences of those elders of color, working-class elders and retirees from agriculture may look like and how they may differ from the experiences of those we interviewed. However, future research may choose to specifically explore the experiences of these communities. Additionally, leaders in elder civic engagement may consider what barriers exist in their organizations and communities that limit the participation of certain elders.

We conducted the interviews in 2017 and 2018. The interviews were semi-structured, following a similar interview guide for each person but allowing them to also take the conversation in their own direction. We analysed interviews for themes and coded those

themes that arose across interviewees. We adapted a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2009) for the analysis. We began by coding a few interviews separately, comparing our results and reconciling differences to create an initial list of codes. As we coded more interviews we adjusted some of the initial codes and added new ones. Because this was a qualitative study, we resolved coding differences along the way, discussing our different interpretations until we arrived at agreement, rather than using a quantitative inter-coder reliability method that can actually distract from seeing deep meaning in the data (Olson et al., 2016). Because we know so little about elder civic engagement, our interest is in building theory rather than testing it. In that vein, we focus on identifying and explicating broad themes rather than quantifying the frequencies and correlations of various observations,

Additionally, we did not simply extract data from elder activists to take away and interpret without any accountability to the people who provided the data. Instead, we asked them to review our interpretations, using an established method called member checking or respondent validation (Doyle, 2007; Torrance, 2012). Our approach used a two-step process. First, we returned a transcript to each individual we interviewed so they could correct inaccuracies. Second, we asked them to review a draft report so they could see their quotes in context. In each case we gave them a two-week time limit. Most interviewees had no corrections, and those that did were minor word changes or general reflections.

Findings: Why Elders can be the Backbone of Rural Civic Life

Rural places and small towns lack the resource base for expensive professionalized services available in cities. By the same token, they often lack the multi-layered bureaucracies that make civic engagement difficult in cities (Holton et al., 2017). Both informal community life and essentials, like fire and ambulance services, requires a strong volunteer base in rural communities. But the workforce in small towns often leaves the community for work, dramatically depleting that volunteer resource base. Elders thus become not just the de facto volunteer labour pool, but the skilled volunteer labour pool available to literally maintain and innovate community life.

Nearly all of our interview participants mentioned being involved in multiple activities, on average about three different civic engagements per person. People were also involved in a number of state-wide organizations and political party activities in addition to their local civic engagement. Many were involved in local progressive groups to support the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, then shifted to the 2012 fight against the state government's legislative priorities, and then shifted to local issues. So on the whole these are very involved people.

Our interview participants were involved in a very wide range of local civic activities. Church, often of particular importance for older and more rural communities, was mentioned frequently. Many were also engaged in developing and delivering services and activities for elders, from creating new senior centres to advocating for health care services to organizing recreational activities. A large number of our interviewees were involved in land and water conservation. Some were engaged in local opposition to

powerlines and fracking; some were clearing and/or maintaining trails for silent sports. Some were involved in more traditional social services, from organizing after-school programs for children to providing food for families to supporting immigrants. A few of our interviewees worked on the development of local cultural activities—from concerts to theatres to libraries. Again, the type of work done by our subjects may not be representative of all of the work done by elder activists in rural communities, but they show the diversity of work elders do across communities.

Among the many elders we interviewed for this project, two broad categories of elder civic engagement emerged: those who were passionate about organizational work itself and those who were passionate about specific local issues. The first group was more likely to be men while the second group was more likely to be women. We interviewed individuals who had developed a wealth of skills in organizational areas such as by-laws writing, communications, strategic planning and fundraising. Many of these elders brought specific skills from careers in business or local government to the civic activism they pursued in retirement. While they had specific issues they were working on at the moment that they felt a personal connection to, several of these subjects expressed an interest and willingness to move from issue to issue, organization to organization, as the need for their specific skills arose.

But are elders recognized for these skills and knowledges? In this section we report first on how elders perceive themselves to be viewed by their community and the unique perspectives and assets elders believe they offer.

Viewing Elders as an Asset, Not a Burden

We somewhat naively expected that our elders would talk more about how aging in a society seemingly designed for youth would inhibit their civic engagement. We thought they would report feeling undervalued and overlooked, viewed primarily as beneficiaries of volunteer services and not as engines of civic life. While a few subjects mentioned a general feeling of being looked down upon for their age, the vast majority reported that they felt their age was either irrelevant to or regarded with respect by those in their community.

For some, age may simply not be significant to how they are treated or how they understand their role in civic activities. One person said ‘I don’t think they know how old I am.’ Another elaborated, ‘I don’t see that they see it [age] at all, I think they’re just happy to get anybody. I don’t think they look and say you’re too old or you’re too young, they just look at your interest level and what you think you’d like to do and what you’re capable of doing.’

Others, however, viewed their age as a critical part of what they had to offer their community. More importantly, they felt as though the people they worked with—even those much younger—recognized the value that elders brought.

One benefit elders saw themselves offer was a sense of history that the broader civic community values. ‘[Younger activists] were just fascinated to hear about organization from the anti-war movement, right? Because they didn’t have anything to relate to,’ One elder activist explained. ‘They’d never seen that amount... of people getting together, and they were just totally energized by that. They were thinking,

‘wow we can actually do something.’ Others reported that they offered an institutional memory about what types of initiatives had worked, what had made a particular organization thrive in the past. ‘I think [elder status is] very much respected and valued and that’s why I was sought out for these projects.’

Another elder leader explained. ‘I have never felt any kind of age discrimination, or anything, very valued and people come to me and ask me ‘what have you done in the past, what worked before.’’.

Biographical Availability for Civic Engagement

For elders in these communities, retirement becomes more of a transition from one form of engagement to another—rather than a withdrawal from work, it is a redirection of elders’ energy and talent to civic and communal life. Retirement makes one available for civic work. One interview participant echoed a sentiment shared by many, saying ‘I don’t feel retired at all.’ Our interview participants spoke mostly of the advantages that retirement and age brought to their civic engagement.

Our respondents reflected on the things that had stood in their way of deeper civic engagement in earlier years: raising children, working full time, caring for aging relatives, managing a home and more. Others discussed how their civic engagement when younger had focused on supporting their children’s’ activities: fundraising through PTAs, coaching soccer teams, teaching Sunday school. As one subject described the difference that retirement made:

‘My experience has been it’s hard to find younger people who want to get involved, for the same reason that I had--they’re working, they have families, they have kids. It seems to me that retired people are the core of a lot of volunteer activity; everywhere I go where people are volunteering they all have grey hair or they’re getting there.’

The biographical availability granted by retirement is about more than just having a more open schedule. Several subjects reflected that their age and retirement status had granted them a patience to deal with some of the challenges of organizational work and take a big picture view of the problems in their community. Others reported that, in retirement, they could better balance civic work with the self-care that kept them going. One person explained that retirement facilitated engagement by, ‘Just having the time to organize my life in ways that make sense and get exercise and eat and sleep and all that kind of stuff.’

This renewed capacity for civic engagement led many to rethink the definition of retirement and what it means to be in an aging community. One elder activist argued that people should reframe their assumptions about the burdens of aging, ‘I don’t like it when people have an attitude that ‘you are a drain’ because you’re collecting social security, you’re not working anymore, because we are.’ Another saw their experience in retirement as a call to others to get more engaged, ‘I think we have to redefine what retirement should be.... How do we change that to mean, gee, come on and continue to contribute, especially If you can do that in the area that you have the knowledge in?’.

We do not normally think systematically about how elders provide the civic backbone of rural communities. It is clear across our sample—across different communities and different backgrounds—that the biographical availability granted to elders in retirement enables many to become the workhorses of our civic life.

Freedom for Civic Engagement

Elders value their post-retirement freedom to choose, and take charge of daily life, setting their own pace and their own expectations in a way not possible while they were in the work world. And this sense of taking charge extends to how people treat their civic engagement. As one person reflected: ‘Because retired people have time and can meet on a Sunday or whatever. They tended to be the primary movers or attendees at the meetings.’

For others retirement meant getting to focus on exactly what they want to do and not get dragged into issues or tasks they preferred to avoid. One subject explained that they were much more involved during retirement because, unlike traditional work, it was all self-directed. ‘Retirement is the best job I ever had....’ one person exclaimed. ‘Retirement is the first time that you can think about what you want to do, and then you can do it. And after you’ve done it, you can think about what you did.’

Especially for those former civil servants and teachers who experienced the severe right turn in Wisconsin’s government in the early 2010s, retirement also brought a sense of political freedom. We encountered a number of people who retired from public sector knowledge work where they felt their speech stifled by both official policies and a changing culture in government, schools, and higher education that prevented them from freely presenting knowledge. As one former civil servant explained:

‘There are so many people who have retired from the [civil service] before they were ready to, or because they were pushed out or felt they couldn’t do their jobs anymore, that their dedication to public service has not been exhausted. So that’s one of the things that’s kind of remarkable...is that there’s all these really highly qualified people who are taking these things on in their retirement.’

We met so many retired teachers and other public employees who found a second civic life after retiring from the public sector. They knew so much about the issues confronting their communities, they had a career’s worth of skills to commit to these causes, and they had the freedom to use their voice. ‘The door opens. You know you’re no longer being paid by the state,’ reflected one former public employee. ‘you’re more emboldened to carry out what’s in your heart on a more active basis once you’re retired.’ Another person put it even more bluntly, saying ‘It was like my shackles were removed and I was getting out of prison.’

A community built on a backbone of elder civic engagement then, has the potential to be one of the most participatory and innovative settings available, as people contribute to civic life freely based on their skills, interests, and motivations.

The Benefits of Age

Elders have both life experience and professional experience. Our Interview participants saw their age providing important advantages to their civic engagement. They know that one resource they bring is experience. They felt a desire and even a responsibility to contribute from that experience while they could. As one subject said, 'I have far less life trajectory left than those who are younger than me and I am giving to them what other people gave to me in many ways.' Another saw this experience as their primary asset for their community, 'I think first of all, the life experiences that I've had, that I can bring to the table.'

Elders also feel a sense of patience and perspective. 'I think older people have that ability to let things go,' one elder activist explained. They know that good results do not often come quickly, and they are practiced at not letting the small bumps in the road and difficult people bother them as much. And they are reflective about how to impart their experience as an offering rather than an admonition.

'Well I think there is something to be said for having some wisdom as you age and some sense of the big picture in a community... I have begun to be less judgmental of others, more accepting, and seeing more the big picture and that things take time, things don't change overnight and that there is progress being made.'

And in these politically polarized times, perhaps especially in Wisconsin, for some people aging brings an ability to work across difference.

'Since retiring I've had to let some of that [political resentment] stuff go, and because it just doesn't help.... also not letting like differences...like the conservatives and the progressives [and] being able to work with each other and become more content, that there are those differences and accepting.'

It is possible to get a vision of community from these elders that is inviting, inclusive, and knowledge-based.

Findings: What can Stand in Elders' Way

This idyllic vision, however, is difficult to achieve. Elders can't do everything that the community needs. And not all community members share the vision of inclusivity and innovation that our interview participants bring. So there are many challenges facing both elders and their communities in making the most of elders' time and talents.

The Challenges of Retirement

Some of the challenges that elders face in civic engagement grow directly out of their newfound retirement status. Retirement can mean that one is simultaneously disconnected from the rhythms and relationship that have shaped one's work-life, overwhelmed by new opportunities and demands for one's time, and still relied on to

help support a home and family. Perhaps partly because we do not think systematically about elder civic engagement in community settings, there are few tools available to help people navigate this transition.

Several interview participants reflected on the learning curve they faced when transitioning from paid employment to civic activism. Some talked about diving headlong into civic engagement in ways that recreated some of the destructive parts of working-life: 'I think when I retired I almost put myself into that same position [as work] by finding so many things to do and not being willing to say no to anything that I remember at one-point thinking, wait a minute I'm not having any fun anymore.' Conversely, others emphasized the need to get out of the isolation that retirement can bring and get involved. 'I just urge people to, when they do retire, to get out and do things and all you have to do is learn to say yes when people ask.' For many, the key was striking a balance—taking a few moments, or even a few months, to discern what they really wanted to do and what was really worth their time.

Once people do choose their civic engagement, the demands on their time can become intense. For one interview participant, 'Frankly every single day or night there is some sort of volunteer meeting that I'm involved in.' Because it is so difficult to recruit younger adults for civil society pursuits, many groups are on the lookout for recent retirees. Many interview participants discussed the challenge of managing their civic engagement workload when they saw the need for more than they could offer, and there was no one else setting boundaries on their work. Some of the pressure to become over-engaged comes from the community itself. As one retiree reflected:

'I think one of the problems however is there's no beginning or end to it, so it's like, you never feel like you're done because there's no sidebars on your work day. Like, you know, why not work on Saturday?... I think that's a little bit of a challenge because you don't have that organized structure.'

The expanding demands on elders' time can be exacerbated in aging, rural communities where it's not clear that there is anyone else available to do the work. One elder commented, 'I wonder, how would the world work now if all these retirees weren't volunteering? I go to things all the time and there's no young people there.' Another explained that the situation was particularly bad in communities with sparse and shrinking populations, 'I mean I don't know how many people live in this county but not very many. And there are only a handful of people who are doing most of the volunteer work. So as soon as they find out there's someone in town they're on you.'

Biographical availability is a major factor enabling elder civic activism. But elders can still struggle to balance civic engagement with family commitments. Some balanced their civic commitments with caregiving responsibilities for partners, friends and family members. Several said that their busy volunteer schedules had become a bit of a conflict in their marriages. Others complained that they were so busy they couldn't find time to take a vacation. Given this, many described a retirement that didn't feel like retirement at all, as one subject summarized it, 'I feel I'm just as busy as when I wasn't retired. Only I'm not getting paid for it.'

The Challenges of Age

One of the other things we wondered about when we began this research project was how much the aging process itself (already being experienced by the first author) might inhibit elders' civic engagement. So we asked them about it. Declining vision, hearing and mobility were chief among the concerns that our elders raised. Many interviewees felt themselves slowing down in appropriate ways, and some were experiencing more serious health conditions that led them to think about ways to adapt their civic engagement. Some avoided meetings at night because of poor night vision, or in the winter when walking was too treacherous. Many had difficulty seeing presentations or hearing conversations at meetings. Others struggled with aspects of civic work that involved walking long distances or hard, physical labour.

But none of this stopped the elders we talked to. Most reported that they were met with patience and accommodation by their colleagues in civic organizations. As one elder activist described, 'Do they perceive me as too old? No, I think they perceive me as okay he can't do this and he can't do that because of his physical condition or things like that.'

Not all of the barriers to engagement that come with aging relate to health. Technology, especially social media, can also be a generational challenge. Many of our interview participants reported struggling to keep up with the technology required for civic engagement even as they still actively sought to learn and develop their skills. Some reported frustration at having to depend on young people, when they could be recruited, to handle the technological aspects of civic engagement. 'We have one young gal that does our Facebook page and I know that's where Millennials go,' one elder activist explained. 'I guess it's knowing the technology that would appeal to people to get them involved. That frustrates me that I don't know.' Others expressed pride in being able to keep up and learn new skills in retirement. One activist described using technological skills-building as an opportunity to engage new volunteers, 'I just had a seminar from some younger person that's part of the group now, on how to use social media better.' Another emphasized that online work was a way to keep involved even as their physical condition worsened, 'I'm like I can do a little bit less, do more of the stuff online and the forms and all that kind of thing, I'm good at that now; that was a learning curve but I got it.'

The health challenges and technological barriers described above point to what some interviewees described as a division between the 'young old' and the 'old old.' Newer retirees were often seen as bringing fresh ideas and new energy to civic organizations. Sometimes younger retirees could perform physical tasks—or a focus on issues like outdoor, physical recreation—that were no longer possible for older activists. Many older retirees welcomed the enthusiasm of new retirees as an opportunity to slow down a little bit, as one participant reflected, 'The older you get, as I've gotten older through this process, I had to adjust to what I can realistically expect myself to be able to do.'

We must reiterate, however, that age is not linear and it doesn't disqualify anyone from contributing. We had interview participants in their 90s who seemed as active as the young old, and encountered much younger people already feeling their limitations. Most elders we interviewed seemed pretty good at knowing and respecting

their limits and the limits of others. One important question that deserves follow-up research is the relationship between the challenges of aging and the gender and socio-economic class imbalance we found in our sample. Typical aging patterns may suggest that both men and working-class people experience more health limitations earlier in the aging process. It is also possible that the skills that men and people who retired from manual labour might bring to civic engagement are less durable in old age. Perhaps we see so many women and retired professionals remain active because the types of organizational work, relationship building and communication that many of them did in their professional lives are skills that can survive illness and increasing physical limitations.

New Old Guard vs. Old Old Guard

Another stereotype about elders is that they are more likely to be barriers to community development than catalysts for it. We tend to portray them as conservative rather than progressive. We have no shortage of colloquialisms for this stereotype: ‘stick in the mud,’ ‘old codger,’ ‘set in their ways’ and, among others, ‘old guard.’ Our interview participants fit none of these stereotypes, though they certainly knew other people their age who did. Consequently, our elders didn’t find it always easy to put their civic engagement skills and motivations into motion. ‘Old guard,’ a commonly used phrase in rural places, came up most often in our interviews. People normally used it to refer to older, usually white male, adults in government and business who are organized into a kind of regime that controls decisions in the community. In many cases, our interview participants saw their civic engagement as butting heads with the old guard. In some cases that is because our elders were migrants to a community, going up against life-long residents. In other cases, it was just because our elders were bringing new ideas. Solar panels, new libraries with community meeting space, senior centres, flood control rules, and other innovations all had to confront the ‘old old guard’ resistant to change from ideas supported by other elders.

As one elder activist described their experience, ‘[With] some of the old time groups that have been around a long time, there might be some of the feeling like, you know, we’ve always done it this way, you know we don’t really need anybody to come and tell us what to do, whatever.’ Even as they reflected on this frustration and the challenge of civic engagement in such a context, they were already looking toward change, ‘I guess what we’re hoping is that that will carry over into that old boys network so that we kind of change the composition to be more open to things. Then it’s like they’re saying this is how we’ve always done it and this is how we want to do it. We’re hoping we’ll be able to change their minds to say, maybe we could try it a different way.’

The resistance of the ‘old guard’ not only can dissuade people from getting involved in the first place, but it can exacerbate burnout, social conflict and other aspects of engagement that can limit elders’ civic engagement. Elders know that their activism is largely optional and can come at the cost of family and leisure—for some, resistance and hostility just isn’t worth dealing with. How to overcome a stubborn, resistant ‘old

guard' and foster an inclusive and open-minded community is one thing that communities and organizations seeking to engage retirees should consider.

Findings: What Communities Can Do

Elder engagement is a communal phenomenon—it grows out of particular communal institutions and it solves specific communal needs. To that end, we asked our elders to share recommendations for how communities can maximize the resources elders had to offer.

Too often our broader cultural attitudes toward and perceptions of elders discourage and dismiss their potential contributions to community development, presuming that their interests are too parochial or their limitations too significant. As we've recounted, even the scholarly literature focuses on elders as a resource drain rather than a resource enhancement. As one subject recounted:

I went [to an aging conference]. I was feeling like again, the tone was sort of a downer. You know, aging, aging friendly, and then they started talking about dementia friendly, and I was like you know, there's younger people who don't see themselves that way.

Our goal in this final section is to push past these stereotypes and share the perspectives of elders on what they need from communities to support engagement. This begins with better understanding elders' motivations, identifying the skills elders have to offer and building institutional structures to facilitate civic activity.

Understanding Elders' Motivations for Civic Engagement

Too often civic engagement is pitched to elders as a way to help themselves: keep busy, overcome social isolation, stay connected to friends. That framing conflates civic activity with a wide range of other ways to use retirement (fishing, knitting, traveling) and misunderstands the real motivations driving elder activism. For many of our participants, civic engagement was something special, a form of paying it forward, often described as 'giving back' but mostly meaning giving to others as part of an obligation to honour what one has received.

Some were motivated by a universal sense that it was their duty to give back and serve others, 'The reasons that motivate me is because I'm a human being,' one elder said. 'It's more a decision from the heart, more than the head.' Others were driven by a sense that they owed something to a particular community or institution that had helped them earlier in their lives, 'The community and the town has been good to me, and I believe we owe something back.'

Several elders were indeed motivated by a sense that they needed greater connection to the community and more social interaction during retirement. In the words of one elder activist, 'Well let's just say if there wasn't a chance to be locally engaged I'd be one mighty bored retiree.' In the words of another, 'This kind of volunteering in a community gives you a place '

But other retirees were driven by reflecting on how much they had to offer both in terms of time and money at this stage in their lives. ‘I got to a position where you were generously giving me a nice retirement,’ one elder said. ‘So I decided that the way I would do this is that I would give back.’ Another framed the resources they had to offer in terms of health and opportunity, ‘If you can retire with good health it is just the best blessing in the world, because then you can do the things that you want to do.’

Still others are motivated by concrete changes they want to see in their community, whether that’s protecting a bike trail they hope to use with their newfound time or challenging legislation and government policies at the state level.

Recognizing this range of motivation is critical for communities as they seek to engage their elder communities. Presuming that all elders are driven by the same thing, or that civic engagement is only to benefit them as they age, risks alienating elders and losing their valuable contributions.

Putting Skills to Work

Communities also need to understand the variety of skills that elders bring to civic engagement. Many stereotypical elder civic engagement opportunities focus on skills we assume all people, especially elders to hold. Often this looks like extending traditional grandfather and grandmother roles to civic organizations – cooking, knitting reading to children, yard work and maintenance. Certainly many of the elders in this study engaged in this kind of civic engagement, but many also made use of the skills they had honed during their careers.

This was especially true of the educators we interviewed who saw a direct relationship between their teaching skills and their civic engagement. One former teacher focused their civic engagement by accessing their comfort with public speaking and ability to connect with children, ‘I can go to a big crowd and it doesn’t bother me, and I can get the children’s attention.’ Another brought writing and editing skills developed over a lifetime as an English teacher to her organization’s press and communications work. Others brought subject area expertise to understanding, communicating about, and advocating on particular local issues.

Several elder activists had worked in business and accounting were also able to bring those skills to the money-side of their organizational work. One retiree who had spent a career working with business and non-profit boards said he had become a ‘sort of fix-it guy’ moving from organization to organization in the community and helping them with their leadership and board development.

Other elders saw the skills they had to offer as more general, built over a lifetime in their community. One person emphasized that their work was possible for anyone who spoke Spanish, certainly a skill they had developed, but one not limited to a particular career. Another saw their ties to the community as a major asset they could offer, ‘I think because I am retired and I have quite a few skills, knowing where resources are in the community, being able to organize and that kind of thing.’

Identifying and deploying these skills is a critical part of how communities can build elder engagement. Building civic opportunities only around skills that all elders

are presumed to have will miss these very specific skills elders possess and risk alienating some potential elder activists. The particular skills described above can be harder to identify and cultivate, but our interviews suggest they may be the foundation for more durable, more rewarding engagement.

Recommendations for Promoting Elder Civic Engagement

Finally, our interview participants also offered some specific strategies communities might pursue to promote elder civic engagement. For many retirees the process of getting involved can feel somewhat random and haphazard: they happened to know someone involved in an organization who happened to invite them to a meeting or ask them to volunteer. Without those social connections, many people don't know how to get involved, and for that reason several of our subjects recommended concrete actions communities could take.

One common suggestion was that communities should host a volunteer fair targeting seniors and advertising opportunities for civic engagement. As one elder described, 'Maybe we need a retirement fair idea, just as we have employment fairs, maybe we need a retirement fair where people can come together and different groups can have a table or whatever and talk with potential volunteers.' Some imagined this could be focused explicitly on building multi-generational civic programs, bringing elders into schools and connecting them with much younger volunteers. One theme that arose in our interviews is that these fairs might target people quickly after they retired, before people lost touch with professional contacts or let skills get rusty.

Other ideas focused on specific things that communities could do to make the process of volunteering much easier for elders. Many elders stressed the need for transportation to volunteer activities and better public awareness of the transportation services available. Many communities already have elder transport programs, but they can make sure these are available to facilitate civic engagement.

Another idea focused on digital skills training. Communities could put together workshops and programs to help elders develop the technological skills they need to be most comfortable and successful in today's civic spaces. Such skills became especially important in the spring of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic put elders in particular at risk. Though many elders, based on our informal knowledge, continued their civic engagement, many others did not, or limited their involvement to activities with no social contact. Engagement using information and communication technologies expanded dramatically during this time, but the support for elders less familiar with such technology may not have kept pace.

Local civic infrastructure, from community foundations to University of Wisconsin – Extension programs have played a critical role in facilitating elder engagement. Several people pointed to the important work that these institutions do to provide organizational support to local groups, connect elders interested in getting involved, and share ideas across communities. Critically, as one elder said, these institutions tend to

‘work behind the scenes’ in a subtle way that doesn’t alienate or dictate to volunteers but rather lets elders take the lead.

The diversity among elder activists we observed might inform strategies that institutions and communities could pursue. Some elders we interviewed were primarily motivated by a particular issue or particular type of activity, but had little organizational experience; others had retired with deep knowledge of boards, operations and finance, and were willing to contribute those skills to a variety of causes. One thing local institutions might strive to do is connect these issue-based volunteers and organizational-focused volunteers in order to bring both of their unique skill sets to bear on an issue. Volunteer fairs, umbrella organizations for local elder engagement and targeted recruitment of elders as they retire from positions with relevant skills may all be strategies to bridge these two types of civic engagement. In addition, our elders noted that part of their motivation for civic engagement comes from the relationships their involvement nurtures. Chambré and Netting (2018) suggest rethinking community volunteering opportunities to maximize those social benefits.

Conclusion

As an intensive qualitative study, this paper has sought to detail how civic engagement works for a particular type of rural elder who we encountered frequently in our interviews—retired professionals. These elders were more often women than men, frequently retired from teaching and other public-facing jobs, with relatively secure pensions who can bring a set of resources to the community. Indeed, through their civic engagement they are earning their pension. Future research could examine the exact extent to which the types of elders discussed in our study are representative of all civically engaged elders—although there is good reason to believe that white professionals are overrepresented in civic engagement itself, not just our sample. An important question for both scholars and communities to consider is, how can we create a society where elders of colour, working class elders, and elder farmers can be provided with work that does not numb the mind, destroy the body, and sap the retirement account so that they too can be welcomed into the ranks of the civically engaged when they are shifting away from the daily work grind?

Rural communities (and indeed, urban ones also) may in fact depend on such societal changes that can increase the numbers and diversity of civically engaged elders. Our interviews show us that elders are the civic engagement backbone for many small towns and rural places. They may prove the difference between communities that thrive and die, and their engagement may usher in a new form of community—one that is not as multi-generational as some might hope for, but still includes all the amenities of such places.

Fostering opportunities for civic engagement among elders should be a core priority of community leaders in rural communities where elders are increasing as a proportion of the community population. Elders can play a significant role in making rural communities into thriving, dynamic places. Elder civic engagement can also help address some of the needs of elders (and, indeed, those of any age) with

disabilities that can lead to social isolation and its negative health consequences, and make it easier to identify and address problems among elders themselves. Finally, elder civic engagement can be a bridge to the future. The work elders do today to build dynamic civic institutions can play a critical role in helping to recruit younger people (or even just the next generation of retirees) to come and stay in the community, helping to secure the durability of rural and urban communities.

And here we also remember advice from our elders. First, we should not ask too much of any volunteer and we should make sure that however we systematize civic engagement, we need to make sure that it first serves one's soul. And that means, second, that we heed the ethic of bottom-up civic engagement. Communities are not built by governments, nonprofits, or businesses deciding what the civic needs of a community are. They are built by the people who live there, who need to feel the power of choosing their own civic engagement.

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Availability of Data and Material Per University of Wisconsin-Madison Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board protocol approval, our data may identify research participants, so only the research team has access to it. It is not available to others.

Code Availability Not relevant.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This research project was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board.

Consent to Participate Yes, informed consent to participate is required by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Social and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board.

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