

The research results make it clear that the old age period length is increasing. The projections showing that the percentage of people aged 65 and over in the population will be growing systematically are compatible with this (Hrynkiewicz, Witkowski, and Potrykowska 2018). In 2035, it is expected to reach 23.2, with a slightly higher level (24.3) in urban areas and 21.7 in rural areas, and up to 32.7% in 2050 (respectively 34.1 in urban and 31.9 in rural areas). The changes in the percentage of the population aged 80 and over will be even more spectacular: in the years 2010–2035, it will more than double, increasing from 3.5 to 7.2. Research in the field of health diagnosis of elderly people clearly shows that as the length of the old age period grows, senior citizens also remain fit and active for a longer time (Waligórska et al. 2014).

One of the areas where the increased significance of the older people's segment is noticeable is electoral activity. Until recently, classic research into electoral participation used to assume that as voters entered the period of late maturity, the percentage of people taking part in the elections would drop dramatically. This was determined by social aspects (less mobility and activity) as well as and medical reasons, related to the deterioration of health with age (Wojtasik 2012). Nowadays, however, these tendencies, although they still occur, have started to appear later with the increase in average life expectancy. This is also influenced by the relatively longer period of good health of senior citizens and by their improved living conditions.

The main aim of the project is to diagnose the electoral motivations of grey voters (voters in the period of late maturity, usually aged over 65). Research and analyses carried out after the elections in the last cycle (2018–2020) show the growing importance of voters in late maturity for the election result, especially for ensuring the victory of PiS [Law and Justice] in the elections to the Polish Sejm and of Andrzej Duda in the presidential election. Without significant support among the oldest voters, the Law and Justice party's victory would not have been so impressive, and the re-election of Andrzej Duda would have been impossible. Seeking the sources of the oldest voters' attitudes, one can indicate two directions of inference, which also constitute the operationalization of the research problem. In the first one, the dominant behavior among them results from co-occurring sociodemographic characteristics – compared to the rest of the population, they are less educated, less well-off, and more religious (Błądowski et al. 2012; Informacja o sytuacji osób starszych na podstawie badań Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego 2018; Mossakowska, Błądowski, and Więcek 2012). Consequently, the process of voters from increasingly young generations (better educated, less religious and better off) joining this group will result in changes in the electoral image of grey voters. The second direction of inference assumes the dominant influence of aging as a universal process on the way of perceiving the social environment, and thus also on electoral attitudes. It is due to the social, psychological and economic consequences of old age that these voters have such a relatively constant political formation.

The solution to the problem will be based on longitudinal structured interviews. The possibility of implementing the proposed research project for 48 months allows the research to cover the entire 2023–2025 election cycle, including local (2023), parliamentary (2023), European Parliament (2024) and presidential (2025) elections. Additionally - in order to deepen the study - introductory interviews will be conducted, aimed at the diagnosis of grey voters' basic and political values, socio-political attitudes, motivations and goals, etc., gray voters (2022). The research will focus on a group widely referred to in the literature as people in their late maturity, most often classified like this when aged over 65 years (Strelau 2003), taking into account the internal diversification of this group (see the section on the research methodology). Such research fits within the current trend of global electoral studies, which have been shifting their interest in aspects related to the legitimizing functions of general elections (Levitsky and Way 2002; Schedler 2002) to the investigation of the emergence of fair political representation (Simpser 2013; Ham 2015). This has its sources in the increasingly strong influence of demographic aspects on the nature and on the results of electoral competition, as well as in the instrumentalization of the significance of individual groups of the general public. In the case of general elections, the problem of grey voters may influence the move away from the classic determinants of electoral competition (e.g. programmatic, ideological or economic ones) towards voting of a strictly demographic nature. As a result, voters lose some of their agency as well as of the sense of having an influence on politics, and reduce the legitimization given to the representatives and authorities elected in this manner. This is part of a more extensive process of contemporary de-legitimization of democratic political systems, observed in most democracies consolidated in the second half of the 20th century (Morlino 2009).