Population ageing brings with it not just economic and social changes, but also policy changes and the emergence of new strategic and policy challenges. Further, it brings an increased force of older citizens with both the right and the expectation to be involved in policy decisions and planning that will affect them. Recent years have seen greater recognition of civil society, including seniors, as a community of political actors beyond voters and protesters, highlighting the links between public, private and third sector actors in policy and other government processes. This shift is occurring on all levels of government, and has seen the emergence of a new rhetoric around inclusive governance practices. Citizen participation is seen as important not simply because it contributes to good governance, to accountability, and to responsive and efficient government, but also because it constitutes a fundamental element, right and responsibility of citizenship itself. Thus, participation by seniors is a rising concern for policy makers and policy actors such as third sector organisations.

However, many forms of citizen participation, such as participation in consultations, while they may be seen as a responsibility for citizens in a healthy society, are also voluntary. Individual decisions and actions are thus vital not simply to individual citizen participation, but also to the capacity of third sector organisations to contribute to governance, particularly when these organisations are used as an intermediary between governments and the community. For example, community collaborations and partnerships, which are a strong force in community participation in governance, are strongly affected by factors such as member motivation, beliefs and commitment (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz et al. 2001). Further, community organisations themselves are maintained through individual energy and skills (Florin and Wandersman 1990). Given this reliance on individual choice and motivation, how can governments effectively engage with a broader range of older people in governance? Removal of impediments and active capacity building need to be accompanied by encouragement of participation. In order to do this, there is a need to “understand more fully the barriers and dynamics to participation in local governance, as well as the enabling factors and methods that can be used to overcome them” (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999, p. 6).

The research into citizen participation as it stands indicates that there is a range of factors impacting on participation and a number of models of factors affecting participation have been proposed. However, one of the major limitations within that literature is that studies of participation have largely focused on forms of participation such as voting behaviour or voting enrolment (e.g. Strate, Parrish et al. 1989; Binstock 2000; Gimpel, Morris et al. 2004), which are not valid across national contexts or across levels of government, or generalisable to other forms of participation. Given the importance of this body of research to both third sector organisations and governments for informing effective practice, it is clear that other methods of research need to be explored.

Because of this important difference between voting and other forms of political participation, it is useful to look at other forms of social participation for further information (Petriwskyj Forthcoming). Motivations and barriers to volunteering is one area in which there is a large body of literature. An understanding of volunteers, and
their motivations and characteristics, as well as the barriers they face, can give us a deeper knowledge base from which to develop a strategy to encourage other types of voluntary activity, including participation in governance activities. Further, the methodologies employed by volunteering researchers provide useful strategies for the citizen participation field (Petriwskyj Forthcoming). Indeed, it has been suggested that citizen participation may be viewed as a form of volunteering (e.g. United Nations General Assembly 2001; Petriwskyj and Warburton 2007; Petriwskyj Forthcoming).

This paper discusses the results of a recent research study on motivations and barriers to seniors’ participation in governance in the context of previous literature in the field, as well as the body of literature on seniors’ volunteering. Discussion focuses on the linkages, similarities and differences between findings and approaches. It then goes on to explore the implications for policy agencies, third sector organisations and researchers.