

Navigating Networks:
Local Government, Civil Society and Political
Integration in Ireland

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Abstract

Can government intervention mitigate both formal and informal barriers to immigrant political integration? Increasingly participation in electoral politics through voting and running for office is seen by academics and politicians as a means of furthering political, social and economic integration. However, new immigrants face formidable barriers to participation, including lack of information, lack of access to political networks and different histories of political socialization. This has led to calls for government intervention via voter mobilization and civic education campaigns that are executed in conjunction with immigrant civil society organizations in order to boost political integration. However, there is some disagreement in the literature over the extent to which government intervention can overcome both formal and informal barriers to political integration.

This paper addresses the dilemma of integration and state-immigrant civil society relations by focusing on a migrant voter registration campaign launched during the 2009 local elections in Ireland. Through interviews with both participants and non-participants on the campaign steering committee, I find that although local government is well placed to address some of the informational and social barriers to political integration, it is less well equipped to build networks between immigrant communities and critical political actors. In addition, because they are non-partisan and local, government registration drives may not focus on the kinds of salient political issues or generate the kinds of incentives that motivate people to vote.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, a new wave of migration has swept across Western Europe, reviving concerns about how to incorporate immigrants into the political and civic life of their new countries. One means of integration that has recently garnered a great deal of attention from both academics and policymakers is participation in electoral politics (Jeffrey 2000; Fanning et al. 2003; van Heelsum 2003; Calotti 2006; Garcia 2006; Dublin 2008; Earnest 2008). Integration into local politics through voting and running for office is seen by immigrant communities as a way of ensuring that their voices are a part of the political process: with political participation comes visibility, and hopefully greater awareness among politicians of the economic and social challenges facing the immigrant community. Participation also creates accountability, as it is much harder for politicians to ignore the problems and demands of immigrant communities when they constitute a significant voting bloc. Therefore, participation in electoral politics is not only a means of fostering political integration, but a way to address questions of economic and social integration as well.

However, immigrant integration through electoral participation faces several key challenges. Recent immigrants may know little to nothing about the political system in their new country, and may be disinclined to participate in politics based on their experiences in their countries of origin (Delgado 1993; Simpson Bueker 2005). In addition, although immigrants may actively participate in ethnic organizations and activities in their own communities, they may not be linked to organizations in their new countries that are “feeders” for political participation such as residents associations or athletic clubs.¹ Existing political and civil society organizations may have little incentive to reach out to new immigrant communities due to limited

¹ Weeks and Quinlivan note that within Irish local politics, membership in residents associations and the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is significantly higher among political candidates than the general population (2009). These groups provide candidates with a potential “pool” of support for both canvassing and voting activity.

information about this new pool of potential voters (Erie 1988; Jones-Correa 1998) and some groups, such as political parties, may actually benefit politically from actively mobilizing against immigrants.² At the same time, new immigrants may see little incentive to vote, given the relative salience of the political issues before them; for example, policies governing family reunification, asylum, and labor market access - which are highly salient to non-citizens - are made at a national level, but non-citizen voting is generally limited to local politics. Therefore, there are a number of both formal and informal barriers to immigrant political participation.

The recent emphasis on political participation has led to a renewed focus on civil society and the mediating role that organizations play in linking the immigrant community to politics (Fennema and Tillie 2004; Bloemraad 2007; Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008a; Albright 2008). From a civil society perspective, one solution to the question of political integration that has emerged both in theory and in practice is the development of immigrant voter registration and education campaigns. These can take on different forms: some are run by non-government organizations (NGOs), some can be run by government agencies at the state or local level, and some may be a mix of both, with the hope that it can lead to “bridging” between immigrant and indigenous organizations. Because these initiatives are non-partisan, the only goal is increasing participation in elections, rather than pushing a specific policy agenda.

However, there is some disagreement over the extent to which government can overcome both informational and social barriers to immigrant political participation. In addition, it is unclear if a non-partisan mobilization effort can compel people to participate in electoral politics. Therefore, the main question this paper addresses is, can government intervention mitigate both formal and informal obstacles to political integration, and if so, how?

² Vlaams Blok (now Vlaams Belang) in Belgium and the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria are two notable examples of parties that gained electoral support by taking a strong anti-immigration position (Van Der Brug et al. 2005).

In order to better understand some of the challenges and strategies involved in immigrant voter mobilization campaigns, this paper will focus on the interaction of local government and immigrant civil society groups under a specific voter program: the Dublin City Council (DCC) 2009 migrant voter registration campaign. The Republic of Ireland (hence ‘Ireland’) represents a critical case for understanding immigrant political integration, as it has one of the most open electoral systems in the world for non-citizens: anyone who has been a resident for at least six months prior to election day is eligible to both vote in and stand for local elections.³ Ireland is also an interesting case because it is a relatively new “receiving” state for immigration; until the 1990s, Ireland was a country of net emigration. Therefore, in some ways, Irish political institutions arguably represent a “best case” scenario for immigrant political integration: it is easy for non-citizens to vote and run for local office, and its political institutions do not carry the historical baggage of colonial dominance or other pre-existing norms of racial and ethnic relations that exist in countries with longer histories of migration.

However, despite Ireland’s relatively open formal political institutions, this paper finds that *informal* barriers to participation, in particular access to informal networks, present a key challenge to immigrant political participation and integration. Although government can directly address issues such as lack of information about the electoral process, and may even be able to affect the way that new immigrants view politics and the state, it is less well-positioned to link newcomers into the sports clubs, parishes and, most importantly, political parties that are critical channels for political participation. In addition, although Ireland’s electoral institutions are relatively open to newcomers, the structure of government institutions, specifically the centralization of social services and government programs, means that there are fewer opportunities for “entry points” into politics (such as local school boards), which in turn has a dampening effect on the perceived salience of local elections. Therefore, the extent to which

³ The ability to vote in local, national, or European Parliamentary elections depends on citizenship status and varies by country or region; see Table 3.

government can encourage new immigrant participation is limited both by the importance of informal political institutions and by the structure of the state itself.

This paper proceeds in four sections. Section one provides an overview of the current literature, and identifies some of the key points of tension that this paper tries to address. Section two provides a description of the evolution of the 2009 Dublin voter registration campaign within the current context of migration and political change. Section three uses interviews with key political and social actors to explore the extent to which the registration campaign addressed some of the key barriers to participation, and section four provides a discussion of the findings and lays out an agenda for future policy action and research.

1. Previous Research and Analysis

Although there is an immense literature on political participation, many of the conclusions drawn from past studies may not apply to new immigrant voters.⁴ An emerging literature on immigrant political participation identifies four key barriers to participation: information gaps, network gaps, political socialization and voter motivation. These barriers, some of which are contradictory, are explored using the 2009 Dublin City Council immigrant voter registration drive as a critical case.

⁴ Many of the most heavily cited works on political participation are the result of large-scale survey studies in the United States (Verba and Nie 1972; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). However, most of these studies relied on data that did not include the increase in diversity that resulted from the increase in immigration that took place in the US in the 1980s (Cho 1999). In addition, most democracies do not allow non-citizens to vote (Earnest 2006), so immigrants are generally not included in analyses of participation in electoral politics. Literature on immigrants and electoral participation tends to focus on immigrant participation in home country politics (Itzigsohn 2000; Guarnizo et al. 2003; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003; Itzigsohn and Villacrés 2008; DeSipio 2001), or naturalized immigrants (Cho 1999; Jacobs et al. 2003). Recent literature on non-citizen voting has tended to focus on why states allow non-citizens to vote (Earnest 2006, 2008) or on the theoretical question of *should* states allow non-citizens to vote (Bauböck 2005; Munro 2008).

1.1 – Political Participation and Immigration: Identifying key barriers in the literature

One of the key tensions in the immigrant civil society literature is over the extent to which government support of immigrant civil society can lead to increased civic participation and integration. A key challenge facing new immigrants is a lack of knowledge about their new political system; this *information gap* arises because immigrants are often unaware of the political processes within their new country - or even that they are eligible to vote. One key remedy offered to address the former is government intervention: immigrant voter campaigns, civic and language education or even direct government assistance to immigrant organizations can help fill the gap that keeps immigrants out of politics (Bloemraad 2007). However, recent research notes that immigrant organizations may help to build or solidify networks within immigrant communities but do little to tie these organizations to groups outside of immigrant communities (Strömblad and Adman forthcoming). In essence they have what might be dubbed a *network gap*; immigrant civil society groups create “bonding” but not “bridging” social capital (Granovetter 1973; Putnam 2007). Therefore, direct government assistance to immigrant organizations may not necessarily increase political participation, and instead there may need to be some kind of “bridge building” between immigrant ethnic organizations and non-immigrant civic or social organizations that channel their members into local and national politics, such as business or athletic associations – or even political parties.

Immigrant integration through electoral politics faces other challenges as well. Both the information and the network approaches focus on civil society and the mediating role that organizations play in linking the immigrant community to politics. However, “community” may be a misnomer: there can be significant differences between (and within) immigrant national groups, since attitudes towards politics, social trust, and civic life that people were exposed to in their countries of origin may vary. Differences in the *political socialization* process that immigrants

experience before they arrive in their new country, or what is commonly dubbed the “home country effect” is frequently used to explain immigrant political incorporation (Simpson Bueker 2005). However, there is a debate as to how “sticky” this effect is; other research suggests that the home country effect can diminish through “re-socialization” in the new country (White et al. 2008), and immigrants’ views on political participation and “civicness” can be affected by repeated interaction with their new government (Bloemraad 2006).

Finally, there is a question of *voter motivation*. People are more likely to vote when they feel strongly about a political issue at hand, or have a large stake in a given policy outcome (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Campbell 2003). Therefore, there would seem to be some inherent limitations to the non-partisan model of immigrant political mobilization: although immigrant voter registration campaigns led by government are non-partisan, people are generally motivated to participate in politics for explicitly political reasons.

1.2 – Exploring barriers to participation through the Dublin voter registration drive

In order to explore how government can or cannot attempt to address the four hurdles identified above, this paper focuses on a single case: the 2009 Dublin City Council (DCC) immigrant voter registration campaign. The DCC migrant voter project was directed by a steering committee that consisted of seventeen immigrant interest organizations including religious groups, youth organizations, business groups and ethnic associations.⁵ All thirteen committee participants with active contact information were approached, and nine agreed to be interviewed for this project.⁶ Interviews were also conducted with representatives of organizations that were involved with the elections, but did not sit on the committee. These interviews took place in

⁵ For a list of all the organizations that participated on the steering committee, please see Appendix A.

⁶ There was not available contact information for five of the participants: two of the organizations no longer exist, and two participants were no longer affiliated with their organizations, and forwarding information was not available. The last participant’s contact information was not publicly available and other participants were unable to locate him.

Dublin over a six-week period in the summer of 2009, and on average lasted between ninety minutes to two hours. With the exception of the Dublin City Council staffer who coordinated the campaign, participants were granted anonymity, as many of these organizations rely on public funding for their programming.⁷ Interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions about how they became involved with the committee, why they agreed to participate, their relationships with the Dublin City Council and other political and government organizations, the role of partisan mobilization, and the motivation for their particular communities to engage in Irish politics. Participants were also asked to describe their vision of political integration in Ireland, and what they thought it would take to achieve that goal.

2. Migration, Elections and the 2009 Dublin Voter Registration Drive

Starting in the 1990s, Ireland underwent a dramatic increase in immigration, and by 2006, the foreign-born population stood at over 10%. The increase in migration was especially dramatic in Irish cities; in some areas of Dublin over 50% of the population consisted of non-Irish nationals. Despite this increase in the immigrant population over the last decade, there was little to no subsequent increase of non-citizens in the electoral register for the 2004 local elections, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of Ireland's new immigrant population consisted of working-age adults who were eligible to vote. Surveys taken before and after the 2004 local elections indicated two serious barriers to political participation: first, there was a significant political knowledge gap among the immigrant population that was actually *higher* among some of the most educated immigrant populations (Feldman et al. 2008), and secondly, there were few to no links

⁷ Interviewees cited in the text are referred to as CM (committee members) or NCM (non-committee members), and numbered in order of appearance. Because the committee was relatively small, only information on gender, Irish or non-Irish place of birth, and industry is provided, so as to protect the anonymity of participants. Non-committee members by order of appearance include: male, non-Irish, community development; female non-Irish political operative. Committee members include (in order of appearance): male, non-Irish, business; male, non-Irish, community organization; female, non-Irish, community organization; female, non-Irish, community organization; male, non-Irish, community organization; male, non-Irish, community organization.

between immigrant organizations and Irish organizations, most notably parties (Fanning et al. 2004). In addition, although the Irish political system is open to foreign residents, the act of voting itself is extremely complicated, and relatively unique, making it difficult for even highly motivated newcomers to feel confident about how the process works or what they are doing in the voting booth. Finally, despite its open formal institutions, the informal institutions of Irish politics – especially the importance of informal social networks built through participation in indigenous Irish organizations like the Gaelic Athletic Association – present a key challenge to immigrant political integration. It is within this context that the Dublin City Council’s Office of Integration developed the 2009 immigrant voter registration initiative to encourage immigrant political participation and integration.

2.1 - Immigration to Ireland and the shifting voter pool

Historically, Ireland has been a country of emigration, not immigration (Table 1), and until the 1990s the vast majority of Ireland’s foreign-born residents were from the United Kingdom or the United States (Central Statistics Office Ireland, 1996 Census). As the Irish economy took off in the 1990s however, emigration decreased and return migration increased, and as this reserve labor pool dwindled, Ireland began to draw migrant workers from further afield. By 2006, immigrants born in countries other than Great Britain and the United States dominated the foreign-born population of Ireland (Figure 1).⁸

⁸ Traditionally, migration from Great Britain and the United States so dominated migratory flows into Ireland that Irish census reports up until 1996 lumped them all together under the heading “Other Countries”. However, from 2002 onwards, the census reports have included a detailed breakdown of the foreign-born population by nationality. Census data is available online from the Central Statistics Office at www.cso.ie/census.

**Table 1:
Estimated net migration in Ireland, 1911 - 2002**

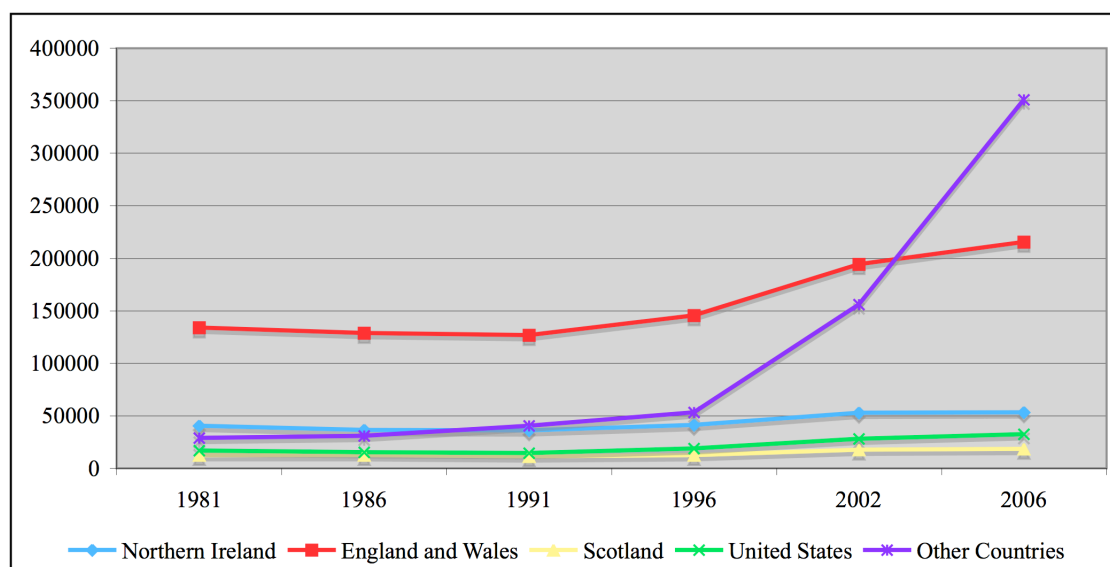
Period	Estimated Net Migration (inward less outward)
1911-1926	-405029
1926-1936	-166751
1936-1946	-187111
1946-1951	-122489
1951-1956	-196763
1956-1961	-212003
1961-1966	-80605
1966-1971	-53906
1971-1979	108934
1979-1981	-5045
1981-1986	-71883
1986-1991	-134170
1991-1996	8302
1996-2002	153881

Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2002 Census

Not only did the foreign-born population shift dramatically away from the United Kingdom and the United States in the last decade, but the distribution of this population was extraordinarily diverse. Sub-Saharan Africans, many of whom arrived claiming asylum, began to settle in Ireland in the late 1990s, and in 2004 Ireland was one of three members of the European Union that allowed new accession members access to the labor market.⁹ This policy decision led to an immediate and dramatic increase in the Eastern European population, most notably Poles (Table 2); a 2008 report from the Central Statistics Office Ireland noted that 44% of Irish residents born in the Eastern European accession states moved to Ireland in 2005 or later (Central Statistics Office 2008).

⁹ The other states being Great Britain and Sweden.

**Figure 1:
Foreign-Born Population of Ireland by country or region of birth, 1981 - 2006**



Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland, 1996 Census and 2006 Census

**Table 2:
Country or region of birth for the foreign-born population of Ireland in 2002 and 2006**

Country or Region of Birth	Country or Region as a percentage of the foreign-born population in 2002	Country or Region as a percentage of the foreign-born population in 2006
United Kingdom	62.1%	44.4%
Other Europe	14.8%	31.7%
<i>Poland</i>	0.5%	10.3%
<i>Lithuania</i>	0.5%	4.0%
Africa	6.6%	7.0%
Asia	7.0%	9.1%
United States	5.4%	4.1%
Other	4.1%	3.8%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2002 Census and 2006 Census¹⁰

¹⁰ Because of differences in how the foreign-born population was reported between the 2002 and 2006 census, all Western and Eastern European countries (including the Balkans and Russia) were collapsed into one group. The “Other” category includes Australia, New Zealand, and a group listed as “other” in the census data.

The increase in diversity of the foreign-born population presented several key challenges to political integration. First, the shift away from Anglophone countries as a source of migration introduced linguistic barriers to integration. Second, since Ireland’s political institutions are largely modeled after Great Britain’s at the national level, and British citizens have historically been able to vote in local and national-level Irish elections, there was never any great need to institute any kind of program to explain the system to “outsiders” – especially given Ireland and Great Britain’s long and tangled political history. Finally, the rise in non-EU migration created a “tiered” system of access to politics: non-EU citizens are only allowed to participate in local elections, whereas their European counterparts have more expansive voting rights (Table 3). Therefore as non-EU residents cannot offer electoral support for national or European elections, they may be viewed as a less politically important group for parties.¹¹

**Table 3:
Requirements for voting in Ireland by type of election**

Eligibility Criteria	Local Elections	European Parliamentary Elections	General Elections (Dail)	Referenda in the Republic of Ireland
18 years old	x	x	x	x
On Register of Elections	x	x	x	x
Citizen of Ireland	x	x	x	x
Citizen of UK	x	x	x	
Citizen of the European Union (not UK)	x	x		
Citizen of country outside of Ireland, the UK or the EU	x			

Source: Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government

¹¹ This is especially significant in the Irish case as local government is a direct stepping-stone to national government; in 2007, 75% of those elected to the Dáil Eirann as Teachta Dálas (TDs) came from local government (Quinlivan and Weeks 2009). Therefore, local officials with ambitions of higher office may have little incentive to build their constituencies among populations that would not be eligible to participate in national elections.

Although the demographic changes in the Irish immigrant population caught the attention of academics and local officials, political parties and the national government reacted much more slowly. A 2003 report noted that none of the major parties saw immigrants or minorities as potential members, and none of them had developed policies or practices to encourage immigrants to join parties; one party (The Progressive Democrats) did not allow non-nationals to be members at all (Fanning et al. 2003). In addition, a 2008 report noted that many immigrants were not even aware that they had a right to vote in Ireland (Feldman et al. 2008). However, local officials in Dublin were not only mindful of the rapid shift in the immigrant population, but also of the response (or lack thereof) in other European cities; there was serious concern that a failure to quickly absorb new immigrants into Irish civic life could over time lead to the kind of disillusionment and isolation that drove the riots in suburban Paris in 2005 (Cormac O'Donnell, personal interview, July 2009). Therefore, city officials moved to set up a migrant voter registration campaign for the 2009 local elections that would help fill the information gap for new arrivals, and link new migrant voters to existing Irish political institutions. However, this program would have to contend not only with the intricacies of the formal electoral institutions, but also the *informal* institutions and networks that shape Irish political participation.

2.2 - Formal and informal electoral institutions in Ireland

Although the voting system in Ireland is relatively complicated, local elections are almost universally accessible. According to the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, all legal residents of Ireland can run for office or vote in local elections as long as they are at least 18 years old, and have been resident in the state for at least six months; there are no citizenship requirements. Any legal resident of Ireland can submit a voter registration form with no restrictions up until six months before election day; after that point, voters must have their form stamped by the Garda (police) in order to verify six months of residency. Therefore, due to its relatively lax rules about who can run and vote, Ireland is seen as having

one of the most accessible local election regimes in the world; as two observers of local politics note, “It is difficult to imagine a much more open system than the Irish case” (Weeks and Quinlivan 2009).

That said, the Irish voting system can be very confusing to outsiders. Candidates are listed on the ballot in alphabetical order, and voters “rank” their preferences. As candidates are eliminated, their preference votes are transferred to other candidates until all seats within a constituency are filled (the “single transferable vote” or “STV” system). Many voters from other democratic countries are not used to picking multiple candidates, much less ranking them; this process is immeasurably more confusing for those immigrants from non-democracies who may not be familiar with the voting process at all. In addition, there was universal concern among the leadership of immigrant organizations about the role of the Garda in the late registration process; there was a sense that going to a police station in order to register to vote was intimidating for people. One community activist noted that even if you were not in trouble, “It is a very awkward thing to walk into a police station” (NCM1, personal interview, 2009)!

In addition to the confusion of the voting process, the openness of the electoral rules does not necessarily tell us about some of the more informal institutions or practices that shape Irish elections; these informal practices are at the root of what the literature identifies as some of the key barriers to immigrant political integration. Recent research on how candidates decide to run for office and how campaigns are conducted suggests that social networks and the ability to mobilize voters play a significant role in determining if and how people vote (Weeks and Quinlivan 2009). First, candidates in local elections generally have close ties to not only political organizations such as parties or interest groups (such as farmers associations), but also have much higher levels of associational membership than the average population, via sports leagues like the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), trade unions or residents associations. These are just the kinds of associations that immigrants do *not* generally have links to, and

this disconnect accounts for much of the “network gap”. Second, face-to-face canvassing and campaigning is the most important aspect of Irish local political campaigns. Local candidates generally do not have access to national television media, and Irish voters still expect candidates to come and ask for their vote personally; Weeks and Quinlivan note that in 2004 only four party-affiliated candidates did not canvass, and three of the four did not win a seat. However, canvassing activity is generally directed by the names and addresses that appear on the electoral register; if immigrants are not registered, they are unlikely to be approached during a canvass. Finally, family ties are historically significant for political involvement, especially within the Irish “civil war” parties Fianna Fail and Fine Gael; therefore Irish voters that are familiar with the system can rely on the recognizable “brand” of a candidate’s party and/or surname when they enter the voting booth. As one steering committee member noted, names and parties are “symbols”, and having a “good face and a good name” on the ballot is important (CM1, personal interview, 2009); however these are culturally specific symbols that immigrants may be far less familiar with.

2.3 – The DCC Response

In response to these issues, in 2008 the Dublin City Council (DCC) launched a voter registration drive based out of its Office for Integration. According to a city press release, “Facilitating participation in the political life of the city is a key element in promoting and supporting the integration of ethnic minorities in the life of the city” (Dublin 2008). The DCC effort was led by a steering committee whose main objectives were to 1) launch a multi-lingual voter education campaign and 2) conduct “train the trainer” programs that would draw grassroots community activists for group training sessions on voting and outreach who would then return to their communities and leverage their own personal and organizational networks in order to draw new voters onto the electoral register. Participants were recruited by Cormac O’Donnell, an official in the Dublin City Council Office of Integration, using both professional and informal networks. The group

met every 4-6 weeks from the summer of 2008 until the local elections in June 2009.

The steering committee produced educational materials in over 25 languages, and these were distributed via member organizations' mailing lists.¹² These included information on immigrants' right to vote, and in the days before the election information on how to vote using the complicated STV ballot. In addition, flyers and posters were hung and distributed in both government and non-profit immigrant service providers' offices and posted along public mass transit routes by Dublin Bus. A website, <http://ivote.ie> was established and posted information on how to vote in eleven different languages.

3.0 - DCC Program Assessment and Analysis

The literature notes that immigrants face four key challenges to political integration: information gaps, network gaps, political socialization and voter motivation. The DCC voter registration drive was able to visibly address the information gap via its public campaign; however, it is less clear how big an effect the campaign had on individual voters because there was no accompanying survey or other means of gauging voter knowledge. The DCC also had a clear network-building function among civil society groups within the diverse immigrant community. It was less successful, however, in "bridging" immigrant communities and native Irish political organizations. The DCC's effect on political socialization is mixed as well; although it developed culturally and socially appropriate materials and provided a positive venue for interaction with the Dublin city government, outside of the DCC office for integration, immigrant groups' interactions with the state were decidedly mixed. Finally, the DCC could do little to change voter motivation, both due to confusion over the role of local government, and the perception that the concerns of the immigrant community needed to be addressed at a national rather than local level.

¹² The Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government also produced election materials for migrants, but according to some committee members, did so without consulting with immigrant groups – a key point of frustration.

3.1 – Addressing the Information Gap

The DCC migrant voters campaign was meant to overcome what might be dubbed the “formal” information gap: it was designed to educate people about their right to vote, how to register and how to fill out a ballot. Unfortunately, because the program was non-partisan, it could not fully address the “informal” information gap: the symbolism of the names and parties on the ballots, or the informal face-to-face interaction with Irish political actors through organizational membership. However, by pushing to get immigrant voters on the Register of Elections, the program may have increased the odds that immigrant households were targeted by political canvassing (which is driven by the addresses listed on the register).

Despite its stated mission of voter education, and the high visibility of the campaign in the media and on public transportation, it is difficult to gauge the impact of the program because there was no corresponding survey to gauge how immigrant voters got their information about Irish politics. A survey by the Immigrant Council of Ireland noted that many immigrants living in Ireland did not know they were even eligible to vote in the 2004 local elections (Feldman et al. 2008); it would be interesting to conduct a similar survey in order to determine exactly how people got their political information in the 2009 election cycle.

3.2 – Addressing the Network gap

A major challenge facing immigrants is their “network gap”: the lack of links to Irish national organizations. Although the DCC program was able to both eliminate some of the network gaps within the immigrant community and build new links between immigrant organizations and local government, it was less successful at eliminating the gap between immigrant organizations and “feeder” political organizations, most notably parties.

The main way the DCC was able to address the immigrant community network gap was through the composition of the committee itself, which

included ethnic organizations, migrant umbrella groups, religious organizations, and even a representative from a youth group. Participants on the committee were uniformly positive about their interaction with other committee members; one noted that it was a “fantastic opportunity to come together with other organizations, and with people from such a diverse background” (CM2, personal interview, 2009). Participants also noted that through the committee they were able to develop new and positive relationships with local government; because many immigrant organizations focus on immigration policies made at a national level, some of them had little interaction with the Dublin City Council prior to the campaign.

Unfortunately, the ability of the DCC program to create links between Irish political organizations (most notably parties) and immigrant voters was limited. One committee member noted that an unnamed party official attended one of the trainings and participated in some events, but kept their participation non-partisan. However, an attempt to have a community forum hosted at the Dublin City Council with a panel of representatives from all of the major political parties fell apart, after everyone initially agreed to participate. None of the participants were exactly sure why this happened, but several speculated that parties did not want to invest in direct outreach to immigrants because politicians think that immigrants are all going to go home because of the current economic downturn. As one participant noted, when the economy was good and people were coming, the government’s rationale was “this is new, so we don’t know what to do and we can’t do anything”; now that the economy is bad, the story is “well, they’re all going to leave anyway, so we shouldn’t do anything” (CM3, personal interview, 2009). Another noted that for many politicians, immigration was just a “trendy” issue, the same way that the elderly, the handicapped and inner-city youth have been hot topics for discussion in recent years (CM4, personal interview, 2009).

That said, lack of party involvement was a surprise for many of the committee participants. One noted that “there was no involvement with the

parties – no communication, no contact, nothing” (CM5, personal interview, 2009). However, this was not a uniform sentiment; another participant noted that the two largest parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael did engage in immigrant outreach; however their outreach was limited to Poles, who represent the majority of the post-2004 influx of migrant workers.¹³ This committee member also speculated that the attention focused on Poles seemed to be driven by numbers but may in part have been motivated by a shared European origin and Catholic faith (CM3, personal interview, 2009). Party outreach programs were not directly tied to the DCC program, but some of the participants on the DCC steering committee knew the party immigrant outreach directors personally through both professional and informal networks. And given some of the comments of some committee members, there seemed to be a fair amount of back-channel communication between party officials and members of the committee; one mentioned that they had been approached to run for office, and another was quite adamant that the committee was not going to do the parties’ work for them in reaching out to immigrant communities: “[We were not going to be] handing the people to political parties...they would have to *sweat* to get to the people. We weren’t here to work for their election campaigns” (CM4, personal interview, 2009).

However, one political operative who did not participate on the steering committee noted that the political parties had little incentive to engage in mass voter drives because they did not know how people would actually vote (NCM2, personal interview, 2009).¹⁴ Instead, the onus was on individual

¹³ It should be noted that although Poles have dominated migratory flows to Ireland since 2004, their participation in Irish electoral politics is not proportionate to their numbers. This dynamic is visible both in terms of candidates and in political discussions: of the 36 confirmed immigrant candidates for local government in 2009, 19% were Poles, whereas 38.9% were Nigerian – this despite the fact that Nigerians are only 3.9% of the immigrant population of Ireland (Poles are 15%). Several non-African participants noted unprompted in interviews that the African community - and Nigerians in particular – were very active in Irish politics, more so than other immigrant groups.

¹⁴ These comments are consistent with the literature on party behavior and mobilization, which assumes that parties are rational and have limited resources, so they tend to target groups who they see as most likely to vote for them (Erie 1988; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Brady et al. 1999; Andersen 2008) or have the capability to mobilize themselves

candidates to leverage their personal networks in order to boost turnout and electoral support, particularly in local elections. Extensive personal networks were a key factor in how this particular party decided to put candidates on the ballot. Therefore, using this logic, it is unclear how if at all parties would support or engage with non-partisan voter drives; from their perspective, they may end up spending scarce resources for scarce rewards. This may in part explain the inactivity of Irish political organizations in relation to the immigrant community, and it is unclear that government policies would ever be able to affect this relationship.

3.3 – Addressing political socialization

As noted, there are contradictory views on the role of political socialization: on the one hand, scholars agree that immigrants may arrive having already experienced a process of political socialization (Simpson Bueker 2005). There is disagreement, however, as to how “sticky” this process is: it is argued that both awareness of immigrants’ past experiences and positive exposure to the political systems and government of their new country can “reset” existing notions of the state (Bloemraad 2006; White et al. 2008). In this regard, according to participants, the DCC program did an excellent job of recognizing different social processes and creating space for community interpretation of political processes. However, it was less able to control immigrant groups’ experiences with the state: interactions with the Garda, who present a very public face of the Irish state in immigrant neighborhoods, were often uneven.

3.31 – Political socialization and diversity

The DCC addressed issues of diversity by allowing participants to tailor the materials and strategies of the voter campaign to their communities, in a number of ways. First, because the train the trainer program focused on training community insiders rather than bringing in outside organizers, those who brought the voter registration drive to their communities could do

(Jones-Correa 1998). Therefore, as Brady, et. al. note, “political recruitment does not usually mobilize excluded constituencies to politics” (1999, pg. 154).

so in a way that was culturally appropriate. However, participants were also able to bring their communities' issues to the training itself, and in some instances pushed the trainers and participants to re-think their strategies. Second, the materials produced for the campaign were multi-lingual, and paired with ethnically and culturally specific images, a key example being the Arabic-language materials that included a woman wearing hijab. Again, these materials were the result of a constant dialogue between members of the steering committee and the DCC. Finally, participants on the committee had a great deal of latitude in how they chose to distribute the materials or generate interest in the election; one participant noted that they got the Garda to come to community events during Easter celebrations in order to stamp people's registration forms in an environment that felt more comfortable and less forbidding than a police station (CM1, personal interview, 2009). The participation of the police in a community event – not only did they stamp forms, but they set up children's games and even played the bagpipes – not only served to de-mystify the registration process, but also helped to put a friendly face on the Irish state. These kinds of programs linking ethnic communities to state institutions like the police in a friendly and informal way are critical to addressing the issue of “home country effects” and furthering the re-socialization process; in this case, it was largely possible because of the relative autonomy of the committee members.

3.32 – Interaction with the state

Interaction with the state has an impact on what Irene Bloemraad calls the “interpretive” dynamic of citizenship: both state policy and interaction with state actors can affect “understandings of citizenship, especially of immigrants' legitimate political standing” (2006, pg. 4).¹⁵ This process of

¹⁵ The context of reception can have long-term implications for immigrant integration. Irene Bloemraad notes, “the story of citizenship is not just about the immigrants we receive, but also fundamentally about the reception we give them” (2006, pg. 2). In her study of immigration in the United States and Canada, she found that while the Canadian government takes pains to make the immigration process welcoming, and emphasizes inclusion and multiculturalism, in the United States, immigration is largely a function of law enforcement. These differing contexts had long-term repercussions: naturalization

political re-socialization through positive interaction with the state can happen in multiple ways: interaction with immigration officials, public schools, and even the police force can all shape immigrant political participation and feelings of civic belonging. In Ireland, one area of state interaction that was significant for the voter drive was with the Garda (police). Potential voters that register less than six months before the election must have their registration papers stamped at a Garda station in order to verify their six months minimum residency. A 2004 study noted that there was some confusion with the Garda over what kind of identification was appropriate to establish residency and to allow immigrants to vote (Fanning et al. 2004). Unfortunately, several committee members noted that there was still some confusion over the registration procedure at the Garda stations in 2009; some immigrants who went to register after the November deadline were told (erroneously) that they were in the wrong place, or could not register. However, it was noted that this was not a systemic problem, but rather one where there was randomly inconsistent information. Participants were also careful to note (and did so unprompted) that the Garda were generally quite good about building and maintaining positive relationships with immigrant communities; they often attended immigrant community events, and hosted local forums (such as the Easter celebration mentioned above). However, the misinformation problems were still cause for concern at the DCC and among groups both on and off of the steering committee because it was already difficult enough to convince immigrant voters to go to a police station. Many immigrants have negative experiences with the police in their home countries, and were wary about giving them their personal information; once they were convinced to go to a police station in order to register – and subsequently rejected – their

rates (a key indicator of integration) were considerably higher in Canada than the U.S., even among the same immigrant groups. She traces this divergence to changes in Canadian immigration policy in the 1970s towards multiculturalism and inclusion; over the same period, immigration policy in the United States has increasingly become a function of law enforcement, creating a relatively hostile context of reception for immigrants.

experience only reinforced their negative perceptions of the police and state authority.¹⁶

3.4 – Addressing voter motivation

One of the main justifications for the political integration of immigrants is that by becoming active voters, politicians will have to respond to their policy interests. In Ireland, one of the main policy interests of the migrant community is immigration policy itself. Unfortunately, most immigration-related issues are decided at a *national* not a local level. Therefore, the political interests of immigrants are somewhat de-coupled from national politics because of the rules governing electoral participation. This in turn may act to dampen immigrant political participation: if people are more likely to vote when there are issues at stake that affect them directly, but those issues are not decided at a local level, it may be difficult to mobilize much of the immigrant community whose policy priorities are actually decided at a national level.

This issue of motivation and the function of local government came up in interviews with both committee and non-committee members. Cormac O'Donnell of the DCC noted that, unlike other European countries, local government in Ireland does not have control over education, health care, or even policing (personal interview, 2009). In other countries, participation on local school boards, community police forums and health care services have provided key entry points into local politics – even in countries like the U.S. where non-citizens cannot vote (de Graauw 2008). Committee participants also noted that there was some confusion as to what it was exactly that local government did; this was just one more reason why voting seemed to be both too confusing and relatively unimportant for immigrants. For many newcomers, their interest in politics or the state is driven by concerns about

¹⁶ Negative interactions with private citizens may also affect how immigrants in Ireland view the state (White 2007). In his overview of studies documenting immigrants' experiences with racism in Ireland, White notes that discrimination experienced in the streets and during everyday transactions "has convinced many among minority communities that the Irish government is failing in its duty to protect them and educate the general public (Amnesty 2001; Boucher 2006)" (2007, pg. 6).

their legal status and changes in the citizenship laws, rather than local zoning requirements; as one committee member noted, when people are worried about if they will be granted residency or not, “how do you expect them to be active in voting?” (CM5, personal interview, 2009).

4.0 - Discussion and Conclusion

The process of immigrant political integration faces four major hurdles: information gaps, network gaps, problems due to differences in national origin, and voter motivation. Increasingly, state partnerships with immigrant civil society groups are seen as a way to overcome some of these obstacles. However, the example of the 2009 DCC drive suggests that while the state can be a key actor in the process of political socialization, and can help patch some of the information gaps that are particularly problematic for new immigrant voters, the fact that these are explicitly non-partisan initiatives limits the state’s ability to provide a compelling motive to vote. Motivation is a particular problem in the Irish case, because the structure of local government does not address issues that are politically salient for the migrant population. In addition, the state is not in a position to compel the creation of networks between immigrant groups and Irish political organizations.

Moving forward, local government can continue to play a role in new voter education. However, it would be useful for both local government and political parties if there were a more expansive survey of immigrants that gauged their political behavior, including how they get their information. Not only would this help local government better target immigrant communities, but it would also perhaps fill some of the information gaps that parties have about immigrants: if part of the logic behind why parties fail to mobilize immigrants is that they do not have enough information about them, then better data collection would help fill that hole as well. It would also be useful to know what kinds of public voter campaigns are the best use of resources; although committee participants estimated that up to

10,000 new immigrant voters were registered, hard data was not available from the franchise office.

The question of political socialization is also one that could be tackled more thoroughly by both local and national-level government. A major complaint among several participants was that their interactions with government largely depended on who they knew in a given office that could help them cut through the bureaucracy – or who even knew what they were talking about. One participant on the committee described dealing with the government as “character driven” (CM6, personal interview, 2009) – a charge often levied against the culture of Irish politics in general (Marsh 2007). This certainly seemed to be the case with the DCC; although both committee and non-committee members noted that they had a friendly ear at the DCC Office of Integration, when asked about how institutionalized that openness was, there seemed to be some uncertainty; there was definitely concern that if current staffers left, things would not be the same. Cormac O’Donnell from the DCC downplayed these fears, noting that people’s expectations of what local government can and should do for them have shifted due to their interaction with the DCC, and these new norms would survive a change in personnel (personal interview, 2009). Nevertheless, personnel changes are a real concern – especially as the government has cut funding and services for migration-related programming and staff. ¹⁷

However, the area in which the government can make the biggest difference in political socialization is with its national-level ministries that regularly deal with immigration-related issues. Unfortunately, both committee and

¹⁷ For example, The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) was a government agency that for over a decade collected data on the changing population in Ireland and regularly issued reports on racism and social relations in the newly multicultural Republic. However, due to budget cuts, it was closed in January 2009. One non-committee participant noted that the timing was particularly unfortunate, because the kind of work the NCCRI did was more important in a recession than during an economic boom; there were reports of increasing hostility against immigrants who were seen as keeping natives out of the labor market during the downturn (NCM1, personal interview, 2009). Other agencies working in this area whose budgets were cut in January 2009 were the Equality Authority, the Irish Human Rights Commission and the office of the Minister for Integration.

non-committee participants aimed most of their frustration at national-level government ministries. One committee member noted that national ministries in particular could be “rigid and inflexible...and not in a good way...” (CM6, personal interview, 2009). Other concerns were raised about inconsistency; what somebody told you one day, someone else told you was incorrect the next visit. Another committee member felt like the government just did not know how to deal with immigration at all, and wasn’t very interested in trying to figure it out:

We’re in this meeting, and, it’s like, WE’RE the fucking experts...and they’re just sitting there [starts looking around in the air] like, ‘oh, yeah, diversity, that’s great’ (CM3, personal interview, 2009).

Taken together, in the view of those immigrant organizations that participated – formally or informally – in the 2009 migrant registration drive, the message from the national government is clear: they do not take the concerns of the immigrant communities seriously, nor are they particularly interested in dealing with immigration. This “signaling power” of the state is not insignificant; as Irene Bloemraad’s work on different state approaches to immigration in the United States and Canada demonstrates, the attitude of the national government towards immigrants, and the context within which immigrants are received and interact with the state in the short term have a profound effect on the process of integration in the long term (Bloemraad 2006). And as one participant noted, taking leadership on an issue doesn’t cost any money; it would be quite easy for the government to send out a pro-immigrant message through the leadership of key ministries, the office of the Taoiseach, or even through the way bureaucrats deal with immigrant-related issues. Perhaps then, the best thing the Irish government can do to help further the process of political integration is to simply acknowledge the new reality of their foreign-born population and respond in a uniform, coherent and positive way to their presence.

Appendix A: Dublin City Council Migrant Voter Campaign Steering
Committee

Integrating Ireland
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
Islamic Foundation Ireland
Parish Integration Project
Immigrant Council Ireland
Polish Federation of Organizations
Russian Enterprise Centre
New Communities Partnership
AkiDwa
North West Inner City Network
Arab Communities
Base Youth Project
Lithuania Association
NCCRI
Czech Association
Chinese Business Association
Ireland-India Council

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Biography

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