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# The new immigrant elite in German local politics

Karen Schönwälder, Cihan Sinanoglu and Daniel Volkert

**Abstract:** The article investigates some consequences of immigration on urban politics. On the basis of original data, it first discusses to what extent the councils of big German cities reflect the new immigration-related diversity of the population. Second, it asks to what extent the elected immigrant officials mirror the immigrant population. The article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the selectivity of political careers in diverse societies by addressing immigration-related factors.

**Keywords:** local politics; immigrant representation; Germany; councillors

Cities are often 'global' and multi-ethnic places. The consequences of decades of immigration are more visible in cities as immigrant populations tend to be more numerous in cities than in villages and often develop 'ethnic' infrastructures. To what extent does this transformation of urban populations also lead to a transformation of city politics and local political elites? This article focuses on Germany and its bigger cities. In contrast to Britain and the Netherlands where an, albeit limited, body of research on local immigrant incorporation exists (e.g. Michon, 2011; Garbaye, 2005; Solomos and Back, 1995), we have no wide-ranging systematic knowledge on electoral participation and representation within 'conventional' local politics in Germany (but see selected details in Wüst and Heinz, 2009: 206–207; Alba and Foner, 2009: 286).<sup>1</sup> The major reason for this lack of interest was the perception that there was nothing to study:

Since restrictive citizenship law kept naturalisation figures low, and – until EU-voting rights were introduced – no political jurisdiction allowed non-citizen electoral participation, most immigrants could not vote or stand as candidates for councils and parliaments.

However, this situation began changing in the 1990s, a change accelerated with the 2000 reforms to German citizenship law. Since then, the group of German citizens with an immigrant background has been growing fast. Ethnic German immigration from Eastern Europe has contributed to this trend. In 2009, the share of potential immigrant voters was estimated at 9 per cent of the electorate in national elections (Federal Election Commissioner, 2009). Due to residential concentration and voting rights for EU- foreigners, their share is often much higher at the local level. Thus in Munich the share of the immigrant electorate in local elections has been estimated at 23 per cent and in Stuttgart at 26 per cent (Stadt München, 2011: 83; Haußmann, 2009). Of the population of all cities with more than a hundred thousand inhabitants 27 per cent have a migration back- ground,<sup>2</sup> and the share of the German nationals among them is growing.

To what extent do the councils of German cities reflect this new diversity of the population? This question is discussed in a first part of this article on the basis of data for the seventy-seven German cities with at least a 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> We will show that, in terms of the shares of councillors with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds, the councils are far from mirroring the population of their cities.

But to what extent do the elected immigrant officials mirror the immigrant population? This question is investigated in a second part of this article. It is widely recognised that ‘high-intensity forms of participation’, that is ‘activities such as campaigning, organizing, fund-raising, and attending meetings as well as seeking and achieving elected office’ (White- ley and Seyd, 2002: 1), engage only a minority of the population. Does the composition of the group of immigrant councillors merely confirm general assumptions about the social selectivity of political careers and the gender imbalance? What is the impact of additional factors related to the immigration experience?

While there is a body of research on immigrant political participation, a more general understanding of the formation and characteristics of immigrant political elites still needs to be developed.

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This claim implies that we assume the more demanding forms of immigrant activism, that is in conventional politics, to follow different logics than electoral participation more generally, as the necessary resources, motivations and contextual conditions are not identical.

Our data come from the first systematic and comprehensive investigation of immigrant representation at the local level for Germany. In order to capture developments over time, we analyse the results of the two most recent local elections. Local elections are held every 5 years, but the dates differ between the regional states. The study thus covers the period from 2001 to March 2011. We identified all councillors who were either foreign born, that is first generation immigrants, or the children of at least one immigrant, based on names, places of birth and additional information (from websites or the persons themselves).<sup>4</sup> We also conducted a postal (and electronic) survey among all current immigrant councillors. With a response rate of 67 per cent, the results provide a sound source of information about career paths and political experiences. These two data sources were further supplemented with in-depth interviews with twenty-nine immigrant councillors (for more details see Schönwälder *et al*, 2011).

### **Levels of immigrant representation**

The analysis of the local elections in Germany's big cities in the past decade shows a clear trend towards increasing immigrant representation. While city councils elected between 2001 and March 2006 had 116 members with an immigrant background, those elected between September 2006 and March 2011 have 198 such councillors, an increase of 71 per cent.

The number of immigrant candidates also increased significantly, although at a lower rate than that of elected councillors.

Apparently, we can observe both a growth of the pool of aspirants and an improvement of the chances of immigrant politicians to be elected.

This increase of immigrant representation is not just an isolated development in a few cities: in over half of the selected cities, the number of immigrant councillors is now larger than it was after the previous election. Sixty-two of the seventy-seven cities presently have such councillors, while in councils elected between 2001 and March 2006, only fifty-two cities had immigrant representatives. All major political parties increased the number of immigrant councillors in their ranks.

Altogether, the 198 immigrant councillors equal 4 per cent of the total 4,670 councillors. Compared with the size of the immigrant population (27 per cent as mentioned above) a huge representation gap is obvious; city councils are hardly reflective of a diverse population.

How does Germany compare to other European countries? Such international comparisons are complicated, but at first blush Germany might still lag behind other European countries of longstanding migration. An analysis that, akin to our study, defined 'migrant councillors' as first and second-generation immigrants, found that in the Netherlands 3 per cent of local councillors were of foreign origin in 2006. However, in the Dutch cities of similar size, the share was 11 per cent, higher than in the German cities analysed by us (IPP Nieuwsbrief, 2006, with figures for the thirty-one biggest cities).

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A study of the French Haut Conseil à l'Intégration (2009: 154), which identified immigrant councillors based on names, found that nearly 9 per cent of elected officials in the municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants were of non-European origin (and around 20 per cent if immigrants of European origin were included). Again, this is higher than in the German cities.

While a number of factors contribute to such variances, including differences in the electoral and party systems (see Garbaye, 2005) and in the composition of the immigrant population, it is highly plausible that representation levels in Germany are negatively affected by the consequences of a restrictive citizenship tradition.

In contrast to some cities in the Netherlands, Great Britain (and Norway) that have achieved statistical representation of immigrant or ethnic minority populations<sup>5</sup> on their local councils, none of the seventy-seven large German cities has achieved that. In Frankfurt on Main, fifteen of the ninety-three councillors have a migration background, which is a share of 16 per cent – the highest of all cities. Here, 42 per cent of the population have a migration background. In Stuttgart eight of the sixty councillors have a migration background (13 per cent), a major improvement from the previous two, but compared with the 37 per cent share of immigrants in the population and the estimated 26 per cent share of immigrants in the electorate, still a small number. Munich and Düsseldorf have 9 per cent immigrant councillors, Köln has 7 per cent – all cities with more than 30 per cent immigrants in their populations. Fifteen of the seventy-seven cities are still without any immigrant representative on their councils, including West German cities with significant immigrant populations<sup>6</sup> (Table 1).

A lack of historical data makes the analysis of temporal trends difficult. A number of councillors with immigrant backgrounds were elected to German city councils in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, of the current immigrant-origin councillors surveyed in our study, about one-fifth has been in office for 10 or more years. Still, it seems safe to say that never before in the Federal Republic of Germany have so many representatives of the immigrant population sat on city councils. This is partly the result of an opening up of the larger political parties to the new diversity of the resident population. Thus the Social Democrats (SPD) have recently expressed the need to make their party more 'colourful' and 'diverse' (SPD, 2010) and in 2011 introduced targets for immigrant shares on their leadership bodies. Likewise the Christian Democrats (CDU), Germany's leading conservative party, have declared their wish to win more members with immigrant backgrounds (CDU, 2010).

But the growth of immigrant representation is also a result of the aspirations and efforts of members of the immigrant population. Given that the resources and motivations necessary for a political career are not evenly distributed across this population, the next section investigates what features characterise those immigrants who are now members of city councils.

### **The immigrant councilors and their career paths**

To what extent do the immigrant councillors of the early twenty-first century reflect the socio-demographic structure of the immigrant population? Does their composition confirm general assumptions about the social selectivity of political careers and the gender imbalance? And what do their characteristics and experiences reveal about furthering and hindering factors of immigrant political careers in Germany?

It is not surprising that time, that is, the period of residence in Germany, is a major factor – be it as time to become familiar with a new context, to become naturalised, learn a new language or work your way up in a political party. On average, 29 years lie between immigration to Germany and election to a city council, 10 years is the shortest period and 50 years the longest among our respondents. However, contrary to findings for the United States and for voting behaviour, immigrant generation is not a major factor (Ramakrishnan, 2005: 80–82). Two-thirds of the immigrant councillors are first-generation immigrants, a share that mirrors the composition of the immigrant population.<sup>7</sup>

It usually also takes time for immigrants to advance from party member to elected representative. More than 10 per cent of today's immigrant councillors joined a German political party before 1990, and 54 per cent were party members already prior to 2001. Nevertheless, long-term party membership is not an indispensable precondition for becoming a councillor: one-sixth of those surveyed began their more intense political engagement with the council mandate.

Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Green Party all have such political novices among their immigrant councillors,

Table 1: Population and immigrant representation in selected German cities (all cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants)

City	Population	Share of those with migration background	2001-2006			2006-2011		
			Council seats	Immigrant councillors, No	In %	Council seats	Immigrant councillors, No	In %
Nürnberg	503,638	38	70	3	4.3	70	6	8.6
Dresden	512,234	n.a.	61	0	0	70	0	0
Leipzig	515,469	9	70	0	0	70	0	0
Hannover	519,619	29	64	1	1.6	64	3	4.7
Essen	579,759	21	82	3	3.7	82	3	3.7
Düsseldorf	584,217	33	82	3	3.7	92	8	8.7
Dortmund	584,412	28	88	1	1.1	96	5	5.2
Stuttgart	600,068	37	60	2	3.3	60	8	13.3
Frankfurt a. M.	664,838	42	93	9	9.7	93	15	16.1
Köln	995,420	32	90	6	6.7	90	6	6.7
München	1,326,807	35	80	5	6.3	80	7	8.8

*Source:* Authors' data base for representation. General population figures are based on data of the Federal Statistical Office for 31 December 2008. Data on the share of those with a migration background are estimates based on microcensus data for 2008 (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2010: 36–38; IT NRW, 2009). A table for all 77 cities can be found in Schönwälder *et al* (2011).



while within The Left (a relatively new socialist party), previous extra-parliamentary activism is common. Contrary to assumptions in the literature (e.g. Holtkamp, 2008: 132–133; Korte, 2009: 39), access to a council seat is not always conditional on long-term service to the party. This is true mainly for the Social Democrats, 79 per cent of their immigrant councillors held a party office before they were elected. In contrast, among the Conservative immigrant councillors, 71 per cent gained the council seat without prior party office. Given the small number of immigrant councillors in the Christian Conservative CDU and CSU (see below), this should not be interpreted as indication of relatively open party structures. We find it more plausible to interpret this career pattern as the result of a new interest of the conservative leadership in having selected immigrant representatives.

Among previous other political activities, membership in a foreigners' advisory council is most often mentioned; these councils appear to provide a context in and through which party representatives and immigrant activists met (see Martiniello, 1998: 112, for parallel observations in Belgium). German political parties do not seem to shy away from recruiting immigrants with a background in migrant activism and associations in spite of a common public portrayal of such associations as a barrier to integration. This practice contrasts with the situation in France where immigrant councillors are rarely affiliated to immigrant organisations (Geisser and Soum, 2008: 18).<sup>8</sup>

Political activism in the home country is not typically associated with a career as city councillor. While half of the first-generation immigrant councillors came to Germany as adults, only a small group were politically active in those countries (12 per cent of all immigrant councillors). This is somewhat surprising as we might expect that previous political experience is a resource for different kinds of political activities in another country. Possibly immigrants with such backgrounds are more inclined to remain active in home-land-oriented contexts.

As regards migration paths, refugee backgrounds are hardly represented among the councillors although Germany was, for a considerable time, the major refugee receiving country in Europe (see Bloemraad, 2006, with different results for the United States). Labour migrants are also little represented (9 per cent).

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Longer-term insecure legal status may partly explain the small number of refugees, low educational levels in combination with the social selectivity of political careers of labour migrants. The overwhelming majority entered Germany as students (25 per cent) or family members (51 per cent). To an extent this situation may reflect German migration history.

After the recruitment stop in 1973, labour immigration was largely restricted to citizens of European Community, later European Union, states. Since 1974, family formation or reunion was, and still is, a major avenue for immigration. But further research is needed to explain the interaction of migration biography, legal status and political careers.

A much clearer link exists between education and a political career, even at the local level. For immigrants, like non-immigrants, political careers are socially highly selective. Two-thirds of the councillors have a university degree, while in the population with a migration background this is the case for only 10 per cent of people. There are no comprehensive data on the social and educational characteristics of local councillors in Germany. Selected studies suggest that the immigrant councillors' educational level does not deviate significantly from average levels (Reiser, 2006: 146– 147; Witt *et al*, 2009).<sup>9</sup> But, given the lower average educational qualifications among immigrants, the social selectivity of political careers presents a barrier to equal representation.

However, in another way patterns for immigrant councillors differ from the more general patterns. Women are better represented among immigrant councillors than among all big city councillors. The respective shares are 40 and 33 per cent. The share of female immigrant councillors has increased by 4 per cent between the two periods investigated here. Thus we do not see a combined effect of dual disadvantage, as intersectional approaches might suggest.

This may be a result of preferences within the political parties that are interested in having both more female and more minority representation (Bergh and Bjorklund, 2011: 135, for Norway), but it may also reflect motivations and career aspirations

among women. Female immigrant councillors are a bit younger than their male counterparts; they also entered German party politics later. Their ethnic community ties are weaker: they are in smaller numbers active in migrant organisations (26 per cent compared to 55 per cent among male councillors) and to a lesser extent motivated by migration policy issues. On the basis of his research on Latinos in New York, Michael Jones-Correa (1998) has suggested how gender-specific immigration experiences might lead to different political strategies. As he believes, the common loss of status motivates men to seek compensation in the sphere of homeland-oriented politics while women, who may even gain status through employment, have more reason to engage in issues pertaining to the country of residence. It would be desirable to explore the occurrence and explanation of gender differences further in a comparative framework. More attention has already been devoted to explaining different levels of representation across ethnic or national- origin groups. Theoretically such differences could be caused by several factors relating to the characteristics of the group and to the context of reception (such as levels of education, political experience and social capital as represented by ethnic organisations, immigration history, legal status, discrimination). As the 'Amsterdam school' (Tillie, 2004; Fennema and Tillie, 2001; Michon and Vermeulen, 2013) argues, ethnic social capital, represented by ethnic organisations and the links between them, increases political trust and furthers participation in the main- stream. With regard to the formation of immigrant elites, it is plausible that diverse and multiple organisational structures produce a pool of activists who can then be recruited by the political parties or who themselves decide to move from one field of activism to another (see also Bloemraad, 2006). In addition, Rahsaan Maxwell (in this issue) has emphasised that for discriminated groups, ethnic loyalties provide a basis for representation as they can thus counterbalance the effects of exclusion.

Indeed, both lines of argument may well help explain the situation in German cities. In Germany's big cities, 38 per cent of the immigrant councillors have a Turkish background, while among the immigrant population, those of Turkish origin account for only 16–20 per cent (and even less in the immigrant electorate).<sup>10</sup> Social selectivity should work against them since the average educational level among those of Turkish background is lower than in other major immigrant groups. However, it seems that other factors counter-balance that. Those of Turkish origin have well-developed ethnic structures in Germany. In addition, the disadvantaged position of the Turkish population and the experience of discrimination may provide a stronger motivation to become active than among better-placed immigrant groups. An increase of the share of Turkish-German councillors from 28 per cent in the councils elected between 2001 and 2006, to 38 per cent at present, also points to possible party selection effects, but may also reflect the influence of role models on co-ethnics.

Ethnic social capital does not explain the whole picture. Legal status and political socialisation also matter. Several councillors without German, but with EU, citizenship have been elected; without the extended voting rights given to those from EU countries, the proportion of EU-origin officials would certainly be lower. Those of EU background make up 36 per cent of immigrant councillors, a figure that roughly corresponds to the share of this group in the immigrant population.

In contrast, the often privileged status of East Europeans as German or European Union citizens is not associated with a strong presence among local politicians. Councillors from the former Soviet Union (seven) and Poland (eight) are less strongly represented than their population shares would suggest.<sup>11</sup> Immigrants from those two contexts are not only numerous but also often ethnic Germans, who enjoy citizenship rights and thus full voting rights from their arrival. Partly, immigration from these regions is relatively recent, that is a phenomenon of the 1990s. Immigrants of the 1990s may need more time to find their way into German political structures.

In addition, socialisation in a former socialist country seems to go along with a low motivation to aspire to political office<sup>12</sup> – an assumption that is supported by the weak representation of those from former Yugoslavia (only five councillors).

How does racist discrimination affect entry into local political elites? If we equate African and Asian background with membership in a 'visible' minority, twenty-three city councillors or 12 per cent belong to this group. This is close to their combined share in the immigrant population.<sup>13</sup> Africans are better represented than Asians. We might assume that racist discrimination and the weak legal status of people who often entered Germany as refugees would depress levels of activism – although for the Turks we argued that discrimination can also be a motive for engagement. In the case of councillors with an Asian or African background, the high share of those with bi-national parents (39 per cent) and of people who immigrated as students (about half of the first generation) points at conditions that can counterbalance disadvantages and discrimination, but as numbers are small, we should be cautious to draw general conclusions. Finally, to what extent are party affiliations of immigrant councillors different from those of other councillors? It comes as no surprise that in German cities, as in other countries, the political parties are not equally attractive to immigrants and not equally open to them. As in other countries (see e.g. Brouard and Tiberj, 2006), immigrants tend to support left-wing parties. Three quarters of the immigrant officials were elected for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), for the Green Party and The Left, a relatively new socialist party. The Social Democrats have the largest number of immigrant councillors but taken together, the number elected for the Green Party and The Left is larger, in spite of the smaller number of seats won by those two parties (Table 2). Smaller numbers of immigrant councillors were elected for the Christian Conservative parties (Chancellor Merkel's CDU and its regional partner CSU) and for the Liberals (Free Democratic Party, FDP). Both a shortage of candidates with immigrant backgrounds interested in running for these parties, and barriers within the parties toward would-be immigrant candidates, contribute to this situation.

**Table 2: Big city councils: Immigrant councillors and seats overall according to political party**

Years of election	SPD	Green Party	The Left (PDS)	CDU and CSU	FDP	Others	77 cities
2006–2011	68/1369	50/634	27/338	27/1477	8/350	18/502	198/4670
2001–2006	49/1425	27/490	10/229	21/1714	4/259	5/445	116/4562

Source: Authors' database.

But neither Conservatives nor Liberals as yet fully exploit their existing pool of aspirants for office. Their immigrant candidate pools (127 and 138, respectively) are much larger than the number of elected councillors,<sup>14</sup> which suggests that the parties are currently the major inhibiting factor (see also Schönwälder, 2012).

## Conclusions

The immigration-related diversity of German cities is still only beginning to become visible in their political bodies. A small share of city councillors are immigrants or the children of immigrants. Over the past decade the representation of the immigrant population in city councils has increased steeply but, in terms of immigrant political incorporation, Germany is lagging behind other European countries.

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The social selectivity of political careers presents a major barrier to equal representation of immigrant and non-immigrant populations. As our analysis of the backgrounds and experiences of the immigrant councillors further showed, other factors, such as political experience, legal status and migration history, gender, experiences of discrimination and ethnic structures – as well as contextual factors – have an impact on the motivation and ability of immigrants to aspire to a local political career, but the exact mechanisms and their interaction need to be explored further.

Apart from immigrant participation in general, immigrant activism in its more demanding forms – in conventional politics but also in other contexts – is a topic worth more extensive empirical research and theoretical generalisation.

## Notes

- 1 A couple of studies have now provided analyses of developments on the national and regional level (Geiger and Spohn, 2001; Fonseca, 2011; Wüst and Heinz, 2009; Schönwälder, 2010).
- 2 Own calculations based on microcensus estimates for 2009, without city states, based on Statistisches Bundesamt (2010). 'Migration background' is the official terminology in Germany and refers to residents with foreign citizenship, the naturalized, ethnic German immigrants and the children of these groups. In this article, 'immigrant', 'immigrant councilor' etc. refers to the first and second generation.
- 3 The city states Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin were excluded as their status as regional states implies different political frameworks with potential consequences on immigrant incorporation (e.g. more competition for seats, no EU voting rights).
- 4 We do not restrict the scope of the study to particular groups (like non-Europeans) but include all immigrants.
- 5 Amsterdam already in 1998 came close to statistical representation, while in Den Haag and Utrecht the parliamentary presence exceeded the immigrant share in the population (van Helsum, 2001: 5). In England, ethnic minorities in Birmingham were, in 1993, represented roughly according to their numbers (Garbaye, 2005: 108). In Oslo's city council elected in 2007, 'non-Western' minorities were represented according to their population share (Bergh and Bjorklund, 2011: 134).
- 6 For details on all cities, see Schönwälder *et al* (2011).
- 7 The share of the second generation has grown in the past decade, a development that possibly reflects the ageing of that generation. The average age of immigrant councillors is forty-four. All data reported in this section are based on our own analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the councillors and the results

of our survey.

8 The doctoral dissertation by Daniel Volkert will further explore differences between German and French parties, an issue that has as yet not been investigated.

9 In Frankfurt on Main, 80 per cent of the immigrant councillors have university degrees, while among non-immigrant councillors the share is 65 per cent. As many other cities do not provide detailed biographies of councillors on their websites we cannot tell how representative this picture is.

10 All figures are based on microcensus estimates. Breakdowns are only available for some cities. The microcensus comprises 1 per cent of all households.

11 Those from Russia and Kazakhstan alone have been estimated to number about one-fifth of the immigrant electorate (Federal Election Commissioner, 2009). There are no exact figures for ethnic German immigrants. Those from former Yugoslavia number about 1.5 million, that is around 10 per cent of the whole immigrant population.

12 On long-term effects of home country socialization see Wong *et al* (2008: 88).

13 There are about 1.5 million residents of Asian and 0.5 million of African background in Germany (here without ethnic Germans from Kazakhstan). Asians in Germany are mostly from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and the Middle East. Available figures are estimates based on the microcensus.

14 Membership figures are not available.



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