



Local Immigrant Councils as a Form of Participation and Governance: How Institutional Design and Agency Matter

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Abstract

Over the past decades, Western European municipalities increasingly reacted to the presence of immigrants with efforts to include these new residents in local policymaking. As part of this, many cities installed local immigrant councils, allowing newcomers to participate in the political sphere and to bring their needs and interests into the political process. Even though immigrant councils became strongly institutionalized in countries like Germany, their role has been described as ambiguous and their relationship with local authorities as unequal. Existing research has examined immigrant councils as a form of political participation and urban governance and investigated their institutional design and agency of involved actors. Yet, to date, we have little research that systematically links institutional structures and agency of immigrant councils with these bodies' participation in local policymaking and their collaboration with municipal actors. Based on qualitative research on immigrant councils in two German cities, this article takes a fresh look at this form of immigrant political involvement in cities. It finetunes previous findings by showing that these bodies do not necessarily have to be tokenistic. Strengthening their political rights, countering forms of discrimination and side-lining of immigrant councils and bolstering the ownership of local officials and political leaders for these bodies are three strategies that can support these bodies' political participation and their role in urban governance.

Keywords Local immigrant councils · Political participation · Governance · Immigrant integration · Inclusion · Germany

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Introduction

In the wake of the settlement of guest workers in the 1970s and 1980s and the realization that these were here to stay, Western European cities sought ways to integrate and include immigrants in the local political sphere. Many cities put in place “immigrant councils” in order to create opportunities for (disenfranchised) immigrants to represent their interests in local policymaking and to make local policymaking more inclusive of immigrants’ needs. Local immigrant councils emerged, amongst others, in Norway (Nyseth & Ventura López, 2020; Takle, 2015), France (Martínez-Ariño, 2019), Germany (Bausch, 2011), Spain (Fauser, 2008), Italy (Zucchetti, 2001), Austria (Grasl, 2002), Belgium and the Netherlands (Van Puymbroeck, 2016). Immigrant councils are a means to invite disenfranchised immigrants have a say in local policymaking, but the mission of these bodies often remains ambiguous. They varyingly serve as fora of community engagement, as potential ‘schools of democracy’ for immigrants and as training grounds for future city leaders. They allow municipal authorities to gain access to immigrant populations, learn about immigrants’ needs, and ameliorate the democratic deficit that is based on their lack of voting rights (Bausch, 2011; Takle, 2015).

Whilst some countries like the Netherlands or Belgium meanwhile have introduced local voting rights for third country nationals without citizenship, others continue to exclude non-EU migrants without citizenship from local elections. Especially in the latter, local immigrant councils remain an important way in which non-citizens from outside the European Union can be involved and make their voices heard in local policy-making. This is the case in Germany, a country traditionally characterized by difficult access for immigrants to citizenship (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2011). Even though reforms of the 1999 citizenship law opened the door to more naturalisations (Schönwälder, 2013), about half of all people with an immigrant background resides as ‘non-nationals’ in the country (Destatis, 2022). Also, third country nationals in Germany until today do not enjoy active and passive voting rights and hence cannot participate in municipal elections.¹ Perhaps as a result, immigrant councils are nowadays established across German cities (Gesemann & Roth, 2015) and some regional states today even require by law that cities with a certain share of immigrant residents² create an immigrant council. Municipal actors in large German cities also heavily rely on immigrant councils as point of contact with local immigrant populations, as a recent study (Schiller et al., 2020) demonstrated.

There has been much debate about immigrant council’s democratic potential (Bausch, 2014, Linden, 2014, Kersting, 2020, Martiniello, 1999 and 2006, Nyseth & Ventura López, 2020, Però, 2007, Takle, 2015). A key concern is whether they can be considered as a form of political participation and whether they allow immigrants

¹ This exclusion of third country nationals from local voting rights is based on a decision of the German Federal Constitutional Court that defined the German people as constituted only by those who hold German citizenship (Blätte 2014:14).

² Hessen—Gemeindeordnung (HGO):§ 84: „In communes with more than 1.000 registered foreign residents a foreigners council has to be created.“ (Translation author).

only to have a say or whether they can influence the issues on the political agenda and the policies that are being decided and implemented. Pointing out their limitations, Güntner and Stanton (2013) emphasize the ambiguous character of immigrant councils. By creating these bodies, cities would signal the need of involving immigrants, but would rarely enable them to be part of important decisions. They would merely serve as a form of symbolic politics (Güntner & Stanton, 2013). In a similar vein, Martiniello (1999, 2006: 94) concluded that immigrant councils should be considered as tokenistic. As they are government-initiated, he characterized them as a form of state politics. Furthermore, authors pointed to the conformism of immigrant councils (Però, 2007) and to the disparities in the relationship between local officials, political representatives and immigrant representatives (Linden, 2014).

Conversely, others argued for considering permanently established advisory bodies, like immigrant councils, as a stronger form of participation than one-off instances of deliberative decision-making (Gundelach et al., 2017; Uster et al., 2019). Takle (2015) showed how immigrant councils allow immigrants to inform local policy-making and build networks with decision-makers and parties that they would otherwise have difficulties establishing. Even though the impact of such non-electoral participation on policy-making is contested (Meadowcroft, 2001; Michels & De Graaf, 2010), its relevance is at the same time undisputed in scholarly debates on participatory and deliberative democracy (Van de Bovenkamp & Vollaard, 2019). As Nyseth and Ventura López (2020) find, the existence of immigrant councils represents in itself already a democratic innovation and leads to a closer relationship with minorities at the political level. Güntner and Stanton (2013) conclude that such bodies have the potential for more profound and far-reaching change: these could be understood as means to move from an individualistic view on urban citizenship to a collective right to the city and hence as part of transforming the urban *demos*.

While the democratic potential of these bodies remains controversial, systematic research into the conditions under which such bodies participate in policymaking and cooperate with local authorities is scarce. This article combines analytical notions of political participation and urban governance and investigates how these bodies' institutional structure and agency informs immigrant councils' political participation and their cooperation with local authorities in the German cities of Mannheim and Frankfurt.

Theoretical Framework

Political Participation and Urban Governance

Political participation refers to the act of taking part in the political process, be it in agenda-setting, the design of new policies, the implementation or evaluation of existing policies. The literature on immigrant political participation in local policy-making is extensive. For example, we know a lot about immigrants' non-conventional political participation through local immigrant associations (De Graauw, 2016; Jacobs & Tillie, 2004; Pilati & Morales, 2016) and through immigrant rights movements (Swerts, 2017; Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014). Significant research exists

also on immigrants' participation in conventional politics, such as voting, party membership or taking political functions in parliaments (Bird et al., 2011; Bloemraad & Schönwälder, 2013 2013; Michon & Vermeulen, 2013; Mollenkopf & Hochschild, 2010; Sobolewska et al., 2018). Research has examined the role of individual characteristics of immigrants, immigrant networks, the political opportunity structures (Koopmans et al., 2005) and the institutional context (Abou-Chadi & Helbling, 2017; Volkert, 2017) for immigrants' participation in politics.

Similarly, most research on immigrant councils has started out from an analytical framework of political participation, which countered a dominant representation of immigrants as passive and politically quiescent in the 1990s (Martiniello, 2006: 85). These bodies have often been depicted as rather weak mechanisms for political participation, characterizing them as tokenistic (Martiniello, 1999) and as merely providing a symbol to recognize the need of involving immigrants in local policymaking (Güntner & Stanton, 2013). Given this weakness, some authors stipulated preconditions for immigrant councils to play a (stronger) role in policy-making. Bausch (2011) argued that municipal authorities would need to equip immigrant councils with political rights if they want to make the political agenda become more inclusive of immigrant interests. In a similar vein, Güntner and Stanton (2013) claimed that immigrant councils need to be grounded in a regime of rights to link them to mainstream decision-making. This need of political rights also reverberates in Takle's (2015) call for more reciprocity and a mutual benefit between immigrant councils and local authorities based on her research in Oslo.

While the analysis of immigrant councils as forms of political participation is well established, only few authors so far have discussed immigrant councils from a governance theoretical approach (but see Però, 2007). This is surprising, as research observed a general trend of urban governance since the 1990s (Bogumil & Holtkamp, 2004; Pierre, 1999). Governance has been defined as the interaction and interrelationship of state and non-state actors with the goal of collaborative policymaking (Rhodes, 1997, Pierre and Peters, 2000). Immigrant councils could represent an instance of urban governance, if they involve the collaboration of local policymakers, officials and immigrant residents with the shared aim of having immigrant interests represented in the local political sphere. Governance is often contrasted from government, which would entail a steep(er) hierarchy and little room for non-state actors to inform policies. To date, there are only few accounts of the interactions between state and immigrant actors and of immigrant councils' power position vis-à-vis the municipality (Van Puymbroeck, 2016). Pero's study is an exception in that regard. He suggests that the relationship of municipalities and immigrant councils should be rather characterized as a form of state domination than of governance (Però, 2007).

While existing research has been overall pessimistic about the potential of these bodies as regards political participation and urban governance, some also pointed to possibilities of strengthening these bodies. Yet, what remains unclear is under what precise structural conditions and agency these bodies are enabled or constrained. The study contributes novel empirical material and a systematic comparison between two cases characterized by different institutional design. This allows to examine the conditions for immigrant councils to participate in policymaking and collaborate in local governance. Furthermore, insights from the two cases allow to specify the challenges immigrant councils face when these conditions are not met and potential strategies to address them.

Structure and Agency from an Institutional Approach

Institutional literature refers to institutions as the cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative structures that provide stability and collective meaning to social actors (Scott 2005). Social structure can be defined as the distinctive, stable arrangement of rules and norms that govern the actions of human beings. Structures are important as they specify the leeway of actors (Scott, 2005) in an institutional or organizational field (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). The three institutionalisms were often criticized for its 'tendential structuralism' (Hay & Wincott, 1998): Historical institutionalism emphasized the path dependency of institutions without much attention for agency, rational choice institutionalism relied on a simplistic conception of human motivation based on rational calculations of interest, and sociological institutionalism often emphasized cultural scripts as guiding human action (Hall and Taylor 1996). However, as Hay and Winnicott have specified, institutionalism can be adapted so to recognize the dialectical relationship of structures with the conscious choices and intentional actions of agents that can either stabilize or transform the structures within which such bodies operate (Hay and Wincott, 1998). Agency is commonly defined as the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power and thereby (potentially) changing these very structures (Merriam Webster, 2023).

Drawing on this reconsideration of structure and agency in institutionalist analyses and applying it to participative bodies, we know that institutional structures matter for what such bodies can and cannot do. For instance, in research on the legitimacy of local advisory bodies, Gundelach et al (2017) showed that the more rights municipalities grant to such bodies, the more output legitimacy they have. Research has also demonstrated that local authorities and the way in which they define the relationship to other actors in local governance impact on these actors' (potential) performance (Uster et al., 2019). Pointing to the relevance of agency in local immigrant policymaking, research also showed that the leadership of mayors and municipal officials can result in the inclusion of immigrant interests (Bazurli et al. 2021, Schiller, 2017), but also that the agency of immigrant leaders themselves matters for whether and to what extent immigrant interests are heard in (local) policymaking (Bloemraad, 2005).

Drawing on these theoretical starting points of political participation, urban governance and the interplay of structure and agency, our analysis will examine the ways in which structure and agency matter for the degree of immigrant councils' political participation and for whether they can become a form of urban governance.

Methodology

Case Selection

The article is based on in-depth qualitative research, including interviews and participant observation in immigrant councils in Frankfurt and Mannheim. Those two cities have been selected for their similarity in that they are large West German cities (> 300.000 inhabitants), led by a social democratic mayor at the time, with a

share of about one quarter of the population being a foreigner.³ Both cities have local immigrant councils that have been institutionalized for more than a decade. Frankfurt had its immigrant council (which goes under the header “Kommunale Ausländervertretung”) since 1991. Mannheim since 1999 had a voluntary coordinating committee for foreign employees (“Koordinierungsausschuss für ausländische Arbeitnehmer”), which became the immigrant council (“Migrationsbeirat”) in 2000. At the same time, I selected these cities because of their difference as regards the institutional design of immigrant councils and the diverging ownership of local policymakers for these bodies.

The most significant difference between the immigrant councils was that they used different methods for selecting new immigrant council members, with Frankfurt using the more traditional model of city-wide elections and Mannheim using an appointment model. Elections take place in Frankfurt every 5 years, with all foreigners (non-citizens) living in the city⁴ being invited by letter to cast their vote.⁵ Elections are organized along lists, some of which are defined in ethnic terms, some in terms of being “international,” and some in terms of closeness to one or the other political party or conviction. Arguably, the election system with political lists emulates the mainstream political system, with immigrant councils serving as “schools of democracy” (Pateman, 1979) and as fostering political participation.

The immigrant council in Mannheim, after having elected its members for many years, switched in 2014 to a selection model. The multi-step selection procedure entails a public call for applications and ensuing the selection of the immigrant council members by an appointment committee.⁶ The latter is organized by way of inviting all candidates to an event, in which they have to debate migration-related matters in front of the committee, which then makes their selection based on candidates’ performance in those debates. From 91 applicants, 20 immigrant council members were selected in 2014. Arguably, the latter selection is based on whether

³ In Mannheim, 25,8% of the population did not have German nationality in 2020. In absolute numbers, that is 82.704 individuals (<https://www.mannheim.de/de/stadt-gestalten/daten-und-fakten/bevoelkerung/ewohner-mit-migrationshintergrund>). In Frankfurt, 28,98% of the population did not have the Germany nationality in 2019. In absolute numbers, that is 227.397 individuals. About half of this population is a citizen of an EU country, the other half consists of third country citizens. <https://frankfurt.de/de-de/service-und-rathaus/zahlen-daten-fakten/publikationen/fsa>

⁴ As long as they have already completed their 18th year of life and have lived in Frankfurt for at least 3 months.

⁵ The election procedure mirrors overall regulations for immigrant councils of the regional state of Hessen, requiring all cities with more than 1000 foreigners to install an immigrant council. The last election took place in January 2016 and resulted in an immigrant council of 37 members in total. Participation of urban immigrant populations in the elections of immigrant councils in Germany has declined since the 1990s, putting their democratic legitimacy into question (Bausch 2014). In Frankfurt, participation in immigrant council elections has been at a low of 6,2% in November 2015. This has again increased somewhat in March 2021, possibly to a highly visible chair of the immigrant council, with a participation rate of 13,5%. Arguably, the low participation in immigrant council elections in Frankfurt limits the body’s democratic legitimacy and thereby undermines its claim of representing the interests of all foreigners in the city.

⁶ The selection committee consisted of 5 members of the previous immigrant council, of 5 representatives of local immigrant associations and 5 members of the city council.

candidates are able to deliberate, thereby lending themselves more to collaborative policymaking or, in other words, urban governance.

A further important difference between immigrant councils in Frankfurt and Mannheim was the differing degree of responsibility and ownership of local policy-makers, with responsibilities allocated at a more strategic level in Mannheim than in Frankfurt. In Mannheim the mayor acted as a patron of the immigrant council and the coordination of the body was overlooked by the head of immigrant affairs. In Frankfurt political responsibility for the immigrant council was allocated to one of the alder(wo)men and the office for immigrant affairs had no role in supporting this body. Instead, a small separate support office was assigned with this task.

Another difference between the immigrant council was their definition of their “target group,” which was more broadly defined in Mannheim. Whilst the immigrant council in Frankfurt represented the interest of “foreign inhabitants,” focusing on non-naturalized inhabitants, the immigrant council in Mannheim addressed the concerns of “all immigrants” in the city:

“The KAV [immigrant council] represents the interests of the foreign inhabitants of the city. It advises the committees of the municipality on all matters concerning foreign inhabitants.” (Printed flyer, Kommunale Ausländer- und Ausländerinnenvertretung Frankfurt am Main 2015)

“The immigrant council is (...) the official representative body for immigrants in Mannheim vis-à-vis the municipal administration and city council. (...) Main goal is to promote the integration of inhabitants of foreign origin.” (Webpage, Migrationsbeirat Mannheim, 2015)

Focusing on two West-German cities with specific characteristics means that there may be limited generalizability to cities in other national/regional and political contexts. However, insights into the structural/agentive conditions for political participation and urban governance may still hold relevant insights beyond the specific cases studied here.

Operationalization of Key Concepts

Operationalizing the main concepts of political participation, (urban) governance, structure, and agency (see Table 1 below), my ensuing analysis will focus on immigrant councils’ political rights and their capacities to participate in policymaking as well as the extent to which there is a collaborative relation with municipal authorities. It will examine if and how this can be linked to their institutional structures and the agency of policymakers and residents involved with these bodies.

Data and Analysis

The qualitative data includes semi-structured interviews with 30 immigrant council members (17 in Mannheim and 13 in Frankfurt) and the two administrative support officers who are mainly responsible for the immigrant council (one in Mannheim

and one in Frankfurt), as well as fieldwork notes from observations in seven immigrant council meetings (2015–2016).⁷

The data was analyzed by carrying out open and axial coding (Babbie, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of transcripts of the full interviews, using Atlas.ti. This resulted in the first instance in 808 codes for the material in Mannheim and 655 codes for the interviews in Frankfurt. By way of axial coding, these codes were clustered into 90 code groups for the Mannheim interviews and 14 code groups for the Frankfurt interviews. The smaller number of codes and code groups in Frankfurt was because interviews from Mannheim were carried out and coded first. Therefore, code groups could immediately be defined in a more abstract manner for the Frankfurt data. While the amount of data for the two cities was different, the depth of data was comparable. As the fieldwork in Mannheim preceded the fieldwork in Frankfurt, my fieldwork in Mannheim had still a more explorative character, whereas the fieldwork in Frankfurt was more focused on political participation and urban governance relationships. I drew also on fieldwork notes for triangulating some statements in the interviews in the analysis part of this article.

Analysis of the Immigrant Councils in Mannheim and Frankfurt

Political Participation: Taking Part in and Being Able to Influence Policymaking

First, I analyzed the political participation of immigrant councils in Frankfurt and Mannheim, examining the role of political rights that were assigned to immigrant councils by municipal authorities as well as the support they received from local actors and their own agency.

Frankfurt

Starting with the case of Frankfurt, there was a well-oiled machinery in place for producing and voting on policy proposals. The Steering Committee (“Praesidium”) of the immigrant council (composed of 13 immigrant council members) collected proposals and drafted the agenda of the plenary meeting, where proposals to the city council or to the municipal administration were then discussed and voted on. More than half of all immigrant councillors needed to be present so a proposal could be voted on, incentivizing its members to make a show. Based on my observations, the immigrant council in Frankfurt made much use of these political rights and the immigrant council meetings in Frankfurt were very much focused on preparing proposals for different political committees. In one of the immigrant council meetings I attended, for example, 13 draft proposals were discussed and voted on

⁷ Two plenary meetings in Frankfurt: May 2015, August 2016; 5 plenary meetings in Mannheim: integration committee June 2016, Meeting MB Sept 2015, September 2016, December 2016; Podium discussion after the election 2 June 2016.

Table 1 Operationalization of key concepts and variables

Concepts	Variables	Operationalization
Political Participation	Taking part in and being able to influence policymaking	Proposals being discussed and picked up in political committees and city council
Urban Governance	Collaboration between municipal actors and immigrant council	Immigrant council serves as an independent partner of local authorities in urban governance
Institutionalized Structure	Selection mechanism of members Definition of target group Political rights and capacities to exercise these rights	Election or Appointment All immigrants or only non-nationals Right to speak and make suggestions/requests in city council and political committees and capacity to speak
Institutionalized Agency	Ownership of political leaders Ownership of officials Self-initiative of immigrant council and its member Exclusion/discrimination/side-lining of the immigrant council	Political leaders consider themselves as responsible for and actively support the immigrant council Officials consider themselves as responsible for and actively support the immigrant council Members proactively lobby for the rights of the immigrant council and participate in the policymaking process City council and political committees engage in tacit forms of sidelining/ignoring immigrant council members and their proposals

during one evening. Of course, this was an exceptional amount and not in all of their meetings as many proposals were being discussed (IP 1, 123).

Partly, this active role in formal policymaking taken by the immigrant council could be linked to its institutionalization of the immigrant council in Frankfurt as an elected body. Arguably, an election model may instil a (stronger) sense of being a legitimate voice of immigrants vis-à-vis the city council and needing to bring requests from immigrant populations to the policymaking table.

The extensive political rights given to the immigrant council appeared as another relevant structural aspect to understand the more active participation in formal policymaking in Frankfurt. The immigrant council was allowed to make proposals on all matters concerning foreigners living in the city and be heard on these matters. For example, in 2016 the immigrant council proposed to provide extra training for refugees to get their degrees and professional training recognized in Germany, to expand a public event series on “growing old in Frankfurt,” and to put up signposts in selected neighbourhoods stating that this was a “neighbourhood without racism”.⁸ In line with regional state law, the city council and the mayor can hear and the local committees had to hear the immigrant councils in their meetings (Hessische Gemeindeordnung, 2005). Therefore, the more extensive political rights in Frankfurt help making sense of the active political participation of the immigrant council in Frankfurt through the instrument of proposals.

However, the immigrant council in Frankfurt also faced some limitations in its institutionalized rights for political participation. Immigrant councillors explained to me the important difference between the right to file proposals and the right to file motions, with the latter being reserved to political factions in the city council and not at the disposition of the immigrant council. Also, the right to speak needs to be differentiated from the right to vote, the latter being again reserved to members of the city council. As one immigrant council member explained, proposals have less political weight, which means that the immigrant council only could raise certain issues or interests of immigrant residents, but depended on the will of the city council to do anything about them:

The immigrant council can speak, but it has not right to vote and no right to file motions in that sense. They can make a proposal, a bit like a plea if something could be done on this or that. But it is not a motion. (IP 2 51ff).

In the interview, this respondent illustrated the implications of those limited rights at hand of the example of the youth service committee, where the representative of the immigrant council would hear many discussions “about immigrants,” without being able to have a real influence on the decisions of this committee.

⁸ A full list of proposals of the immigrant council in 2016 can be found here: https://www.stvv.frankfurt.de/PARLISLINK/SDF?VORLAGEART=K&NUMMER=&JAHR=2016&GREMIUM=&FRAKTION=&DOKUMENTTYP=VORL&FORMFL_OB=SORTFELD&FORM_SO=Absteigend&FORM_C=und

Several immigrant council members in Frankfurt criticized this limitation of their political rights and actively lobbied to get their rights expanded. In a plenary discussion with the new alderman for social affairs and integration (plenary meeting on 29 August 2016) they requested an extension of their right to make proposals and speak to also bring in motions and vote. As one of them said: “also the youth welfare committee is an important body for the immigrant council. Yet, in such committees we are always just talked about. We need also the right to file motions and vote.” (IP1, plenary meeting on 29 August 2016).

Apart from the limitation of formal rights, some immigrant council members also referred to tacit ways in which they were excluded or sidelined by the city council. For example, immigrant council members mentioned that they lacked appropriate seating in the plenary meetings of the city council and hence could not properly participate through an unequal distribution of seating space in the hall of the city council. Another way in which the city council allegedly sidelined the immigrant council in the political process was by not giving proper credits to their ideas and proposals. As one interviewee (IP 2) claimed, their proposals were sometimes first turned down by the city council, but were later were implemented without giving the immigrant council any recognition for the idea. The example he gave was the installation of public water fountains in a neighbourhood of Frankfurt, which initially was proposed by the immigrant council. According to him these water fountains were installed two years after they made the proposal, but without giving any credit to the immigrant council:

This is a great thing to have, but I immediately realized that it is our idea. Someone has stolen the idea of the immigrant council. I immediately looked it up and in 2008 we had made a proposal, even with an image from similar fountains in Hamburg, asking why we do not have something like this in Frankfurt, because it would symbolize that the city is open to the world, it is friendly. And drinking water is something important and something that needs to be for free. Yet our proposal was rejected, with the argument that it was unclear who could do the cleaning, who would bear the costs etc. And this has happened already several times that we make a proposal, it is rejected and then after two years we learn from the newspaper that our idea was stolen. It also happened with an event, where our idea was stolen almost identically without involving the immigrant council at all. (IP2 53).

More figuratively, when explaining the immigrant council’s role of reminding the city council about the presence and needs of immigrants (IP 4, notes) one immigrant council member said: “we are like a scarecrow” and another opined that, “I have this impression that they do not want to see us” (IP 12 35). These quotes reflect the perception that the city council did not recognize and consider the immigrant council as much as it could, denying them the visibility that is necessary for proper participation. At the same time, the new chair of the immigrant council in Frankfurt has been quite successful in fostering ties with policymakers and gaining some more visibility for this body, especially through participation in and organization of public events. These examples point to the use of alternative venues for becoming visible and present, through individual networking and participation in public events.

To summarize these insights on the political participation on Frankfurt, the structural aspects of political rights and possibly to some extent also the election model can help understand the political participation of the immigrant council. Agency of immigrant council members also seemed to play a role, not least by way of lobbying for an expansion of their rights, for example when immigrant council members requested the alderwomen for getting the right to file motions and vote in the city council and its committees. Importantly, the active political participation of the immigrant council in Frankfurt was accompanied by strong accounts of the immigrant council and its members about being sidelined and lacking appropriate space or recognition in the decision-making process. This points to a form of ‘negative’ agency local authorities can take, limiting the capacities and undermining the trust of this body.

Mannheim

Turning to Mannheim, the meetings of the immigrant council were less focused on preparing policy proposals and more dedicated to the organization of public events and to communicating to the broader public. For example, every year the immigrant council was present with a stall at the municipal new year reception and organized quarterly public meetings, where they invited a policymaker or researchers for a talk and discussion. In 2016, the immigrant council furthermore organized a public campaign and a stall at the Saturday morning market in Mannheim as well as two podium discussions in order to promote immigrants’ political participation. This was motivated by the low participation of immigrants in the local elections in 2015 and had the aim to boost immigrants’ participation in the upcoming regional state elections of 2016.

Because of this focus on public events, there was a notoriously low participation rate of immigrant council members in the political committees. Despite membership, immigrant council members mostly failed to attend, as was recurrently problematized by municipal officials as well as by individual immigrant council members.⁹ As the head of immigrant affairs said:

The immigrant council likes to look for something that gives it visibility in the press, so it can show a positive impact for migrants. But it remains a big challenge for us to have the immigrant council see this more difficult task of political representation as its task. Also because of the limitations of their participation, as they cannot really have a say in the decisions that are being made. (IP18 45)

To strengthen the body’s participation in political committees the integration official in Mannheim initiated working groups, so immigrant council members would sign up for specific political committees and together prepare for the

⁹ The limited participation in the committees was a topic at the yearly conclave of the immigrant council in 2015 and was discussed as agenda point in the internal meeting of the immigrant council on 1 March 2016.

meetings. However, this seemingly was of little avail. When this issue came up,¹⁰ members of the immigrant council referred to being overcharged with attending the political committees both in terms of time resources but also in terms of their capacities of preparing for and speaking up in these fora.

Despite the ownership taken by the officials to foster and promote participation in the committees, I found limited self-initiative by the immigrant council members to gain a stronger political participation in Mannheim. An important structural reason for the more limited political participation in Mannheim could be the more limited political rights in Mannheim.

At the time of this research, the immigrant council had rights to speak and file proposals in the city council and the integration committee, but not in any of the other political committees. There, immigrant council members were invited, but had no formal right to speak or make proposals..¹¹ As an immigrant council member said:

The immigrant council is a political body, but it has no rights to participate in decision-making. And to be honest, if we had a right to decide, our work would look entirely different. More motivated. More topics. More proactive. And even though we know that we can sometimes achieve things also now, if we really try to, one remains a little bit demotivated. One sits in the committees, but has no right to vote. And if you have no right to vote, you are missing the most important thing. Achieving that right should be the immigrant council's goal, in order for it to persist on the long-run. (IP15 144)

To summarize these insights from Mannheim, we can see that the structural aspect of political rights as well as the agency taken by immigrant council members are important to understand their limited participation in the formal political process. Other structural aspects, like the selection and appointment model or the target group of the immigrant council were not mentioned in any way. As regards other agentic elements, the ownership taken by officials to strengthen political participation was mentioned, but apparently had limited influence on the participation of the immigrant council.

Comparing immigrant councils in the two cities, I found that the immigrant council in Frankfurt had more extensive rights, whereas the immigrant council in Mannheim had more limited political rights. These differences in the political rights of the immigrant councils appear a key ingredient for understanding the differences in the level of active participation in the formal policymaking process. Whilst the immigrant council in Frankfurt was very proactive and used much of its time and energy to file proposals to the city council, the immigrant council in Mannheim was much less active in formal policy development and instead focused more on organizing public events or preparing press releases. There, immigrant council

¹⁰ Internal meeting of the immigrant council on 1 March 2016.

¹¹ This changed in the meantime, as in December 2017 the immigrant council in Mannheim also received the right to speak in all municipal committees as well as to file proposals to the city council, based on the law on participation and integration of the regional state Baden Wuerttemberg (PartIntG).

members also more often referred to being overcharged and lacking the capacities to participate and speak up in the formal policymaking process. Overall, connecting formal political rights with actual political participation supports the thesis that institutional structural and agency matter—and that giving only weak political rights can be equated to a weakening of the immigrant council, whilst more political rights could be expected to strengthen these bodies.

Urban Governance: Collaboration Between Municipal Actors and Immigrant Council

Turning to the relations between municipality and immigrant council, I analyzed whether we can speak of a collaboration between these actors and hence urban governance, and how this could be linked to the structures of these bodies and the agency of officials, political leaders and immigrant council members.

Frankfurt

Observing the dynamics in the plenary meetings of the immigrant council in Frankfurt, I saw that the officials remained mostly in the background. They focused on taking minutes and answering procedural and regulatory questions when they arose.

Sharing this observation in an interview with one of the officials (the support office was run by three part time officials), the notion of “providing neutral support” was central in her depiction of officials’ role vis-à-vis the immigrant council. Whilst providing organizational support by helping with the organization of immigrant council meetings or forwarding proposals to the city council, the administrative support officers preferred to stay somewhat distant from the immigrant council. One of the three part-time officials that were responsible to support the immigrant council described this as follows:

We are an administration, we have rules that we need to follow. (...) We cannot just make friends with the immigrant council members, that is not possible. As immigrant council’s office we need to be as neutral as possible. (IP9)

In the interview, it became clear that this neutral role was deliberately chosen, because of the experience of previous cleavages within the immigrant council and the officials’ fear of becoming involved in these conflicts if they were to take sides. Their self-positioning points to a more classic conception of government, with officials providing support rather than being cooperation partners on eyes’ level. It reflects a more limited ownership on the part of the officials, leaving it to immigrant council members themselves whether the immigrant council was becoming a success or not.

Similarly, political leaders’ ownership for the immigrant council was limited to non-existent in Frankfurt. Potentially this would change with the arrival of the new alderwoman in 2016, when integration became for the first time an (explicit) part of the portefeuille of an alder(wo)man. This new alderwoman for “education and integration” emphasized in her short welcoming speech to the immigrant council

that she saw the immigrant council as mouthpiece of the immigrant communities in Frankfurt (fieldnotes from immigrant council plenary meeting, 29 August 2016). Thereby she recognized the role of the immigrant council to represent immigrant interests and participate in local policy-making. Yet it remained unclear if and how she was planning to coordinate or collaborate with this body. According to immigrant council members political leaders in Frankfurt for a long time have not taken a strong ownership for this political body and the relationship was rather distant. It was a novelty that an alder(wo)man would even attend their plenary meetings, hinting towards the thus far limited intensity of interactions with political leaders.

To summarize, the lacking agency of local officials and political leaders seemed crucial aspects to understand the lacking governance relationship and collaboration between local authorities and the immigrant council in Frankfurt. Structural aspects were not mentioned in Frankfurt as playing a role for defining the character of the relationship between municipal organization and immigrant council.

Mannheim

The situation in Mannheim was quite different, with strong ownership for the immigrant council taken by key officials and political leaders. Mannheim's mayor himself acted as chair of the integration committee, meaning that he met with the immigrant council every quarter of the year to discuss their proposals. The responsibility for supporting the immigrant council in the administration was allocated to the head of immigrant affairs, who was supported by several of his staff members. The transformation from an elected to an appointed body and the "new" appointment system was his brainchild. When observing the immigrant council meetings, he always played a very active role, providing advice on how to best achieve their goals in the integration committee, mediating conflicts among immigrant council members. He also acted as a broker to other departments in the municipality, whom he regularly invited to present their work in the immigrant council meetings. The role he took could probably be best described as that of coaching the immigrant council. This ensured a very intensive relationship and a very collaborative one too.

However, also in Mannheim the immigrant council was not as independent as one might expect from the strong ownership of the mayor and the head of immigrant affairs, pointing also to patterns of sidelining and undermining of the immigrant council. This became particularly clear in an incident in 2016, when the immigrant council had planned a public event together with different candidates for the regional state elections. Shortly before, the legal department of the municipality informed them that they had to cancel the event, because this would infringe against the rule of municipal neutrality. It became clear that they considered the immigrant council as a municipal body that was subject to the same rules as the municipal administration. What was at stake here was a decision over the very legal status of the immigrant council and whether it was indeed a part of the municipal organization or an independent body, with the immigrant council being in the impression that it should be the latter.

As one immigrant council member said: "we are not as independent as we thought. And I wonder: how political can we be?" (IP4 32). Another immigrant

council member indirectly responded to this question by saying that „as a body we are a bit like a toothless tiger and we cannot get as political as the individual members would like to be” (IP13 103). Pointing out that this hierarchy prevented them from having a more critical voice, someone said: The immigrant council is asked for its opinion, that is already important (...) But generally this is only done with positive things. When we put salt into wounds, then we are cast as the bad migration council (IP4 71).

Summarizing the findings on local governance in Mannheim, the strong ownership of local officials and political leaders and patterns of discrimination points to the relevance of agency in creating a collaborative relationship between municipality and immigrant councils. But also, it points to the fragility of such local governance relationships, because different departments in a municipal organization may interfere, as was the case in Mannheim, and undermine the independency of this body and hence the established trust in the local authorities.

Comparing the immigrant councils in the two cities, my findings showed a clear difference between a collaborative mode of governance in Mannheim and more conventional stance of the government in Frankfurt. These findings could be linked to the ownership of officials and political leaders. While ownership of political leaders matters, I also found that it can be undermined when the immigrant council is sidelined by other local actors. Agency mattered in different ways for the collaboration between immigrant councils and local authorities. Structural aspects seemed less relevant for the respective pattern of local governance relationship.

Discussion and Conclusion

Analyzing local immigrant councils’ potential for immigrant political participation and urban governance, research has uncovered the challenges of participation in local policymaking and collaboration with local authorities that immigrant councils. For instance, we know that immigrant councils sometimes have limited impact on actual policies being decided in the city council. We also know that immigrant councils are sometimes not taken seriously by elected policymakers, considering them as mere chat-shops. And we know that immigrant council members sometimes report the difficulties of fulfilling their role on a voluntary basis, whilst local authorities lament their limited investment. This article examined how structural conditions and agency of different actors enables or constrains these bodies’ political participation and governance relationships, drawing on in-depth qualitative research on immigrant councils in Frankfurt and Mannheim.

As my findings showed, different structural and agentic aspects play a role for the (lack of) political participation and local governance relationships of immigrant councils. For instance, the allocation of political rights (such as the right to file proposals) and the agency of immigrant council members (the frequent provision of proposals to the city council) were crucial to understand the more active participation

in formal policymaking in Frankfurt. Furthermore, the ownership of officials and political leaders (acting as coaches or patron of the immigrant council) were important to grasp a more collaborative relationship between immigrant council and municipality in Mannheim. Therefore, both structure and agency can be considered as interrelated factors that inform the role an immigrant council can play. We also saw that different aspects of institutional structure and agency were relevant for different things. While political rights and self-initiative were more important to ensure political participation, ownership by key local actors was critical to ensure the build-up of a collaborative governance relationship. The selection mechanism of members and the definition of these bodies' constituency appeared as less relevant for either their political participation or their governance relationship with the municipality.

An aspect that appeared as important for both political participation and local governance was the sidelining of the immigrant council by municipal actors, be it through departments of the municipal organisation or the city council. As we saw in Frankfurt, immigrant councillors experienced this as a form of invisibilization ("They do not want to see us", IP 12 35) and in Mannheim felt like being rendered a "toothless tiger" (IP13 103). These findings allow me to conclude that despite their strong institutionalization, immigrant councils are vulnerable to side-lining and discrimination, as this can undermine their capacities to participate and the trust that is needed for collaborating with the municipality.

Returning to the overall democratic potential of these bodies, this article showed that immigrant councils are limited in the extent to which they can participate in local policymaking. Their scope of political participation is mediated by the institutional structure and agency of urban actors involved with these bodies—more specifically by the political rights given to and the ownership of officials and political leaders for them. However, immigrant councils are not doomed to be mere lip service and instruments of the state. They can participate in policymaking if they receive more extensive formal rights for doing so, for instance by being allowed to vote on or veto proposals in local political committees. Furthermore, they provide an opportunity to develop collaborative interactions between immigrant council members and municipal actors, if municipal authorities also take ownership to invest into and build up trustful relationships, and if these collaborations are not thwarted by ambiguous standing and interference of other departments or actors within the municipality.

While immigrant councils have become established institutions and are important partners for municipalities in Germany as well as in other European countries, their limitations as regards political participation and urban governance are not unchangeable. They rather could be considered as a challenge for municipal authorities to strengthen the institutional structure of and ownership for these bodies. This can be done by countering patterns of side-lining and exclusion of immigrant councils through local actors and by strengthening these bodies' political rights as well as the ownership of officials and policymakers for these bodies. As long as local voting rights are not extended to foreign residents in Germany, immigrant councils remain an important way in which disenfranchised urban residents can be included in in local policymaking. Yet, immigrant councils

remain a vulnerable and experimental political sphere. Their position is ambiguous and ownership of policymakers for these bodies cannot always protect them from precarious situations with other urban actors. While this dilemma may be at the heart of deliberative democracy, this article has hinted towards the scope of action for local authorities.

This article has proposed a combined research framework that considers both political participation and local governance. Its results demonstrate that such a framework enables a fuller understanding of the scope of these bodies as well as the different aspects that may hinder or help them to develop their full potential. Future research could apply the developed analytical framework to a larger number of cases, providing an even stronger empirical basis to substantiate (or nuance) my finding that institutional design and agency matters for the role of these bodies can play.

Appendix

Gender and country of origin of immigrant council members in Frankfurt and Mannheim at the time of the research.

Table 2 Mannheim

	Gender	Country of Origin	Interview
1	Male	Turkey	interviewed
2	Male	Germany (Turkish parents)	interviewed
3	Female	Poland	interviewed
4	Male	Turkey	interviewed
5	Female	Turkey	interviewed
6	Male	Italy	interviewed
7	Female	Russiam-German	interviewed
8	Male	Benin	interviewed
9	Male	Iran	interviewed
10	Female	Turkey/Kurdistan	interviewed
11	Male	Kosovo/Albania	interviewed
12	Female	Bulgaria	interviewed
13	Female	Turkey	interviewed
14	Female	Bosnia	interviewed
15	Female	Pakistan	interviewed
16	Female	Turkey	interviewed
17	Male	Spain	interviewed
18	Male	Morocco	Not interviewed
19	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
20	Female	Turkey	Not interviewed

Table 3 Frankfurt

Interview No	Gender	Country of Origin	Interview
1	Male	Azerbaidshan	interviewed
2	Male	Turkey	interviewed
3	Male	Turkey	interviewed
4	Male	Turkey/Kurdistan	interviewed
5	Male	Turkey	interviewed
6	Female	Bulgaria	interviewed
7	Male	Turkey	interviewed
8	Male	France	interviewed
9	Male	Turkey/Kurdistan	interviewed
10	Male	United States of America	interviewed
11	Male	Turkey	interviewed
12	Female	Turkey	interviewed
13	Male	Turkey/Kurdistan	interviewed
14	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
15	Male	Russia	Not interviewed
16	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
17	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
18	Male	Turkey/Kurdistan	Not interviewed
19	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
20	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
21	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
22	Female	China	Not interviewed
23	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
24	Female	Turkey	Not interviewed
25	Female	Kenia	Not interviewed
26	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
27	Male	Italy	Not interviewed
28	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
29	Female	Turkey	Not interviewed
30	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
31	Female	Turkey	Not interviewed
32	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
33	Male	Greece	Not interviewed
34	Female	Italy	Not interviewed
35	Male	China	Not interviewed
36	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed
37	Male	Turkey	Not interviewed

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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