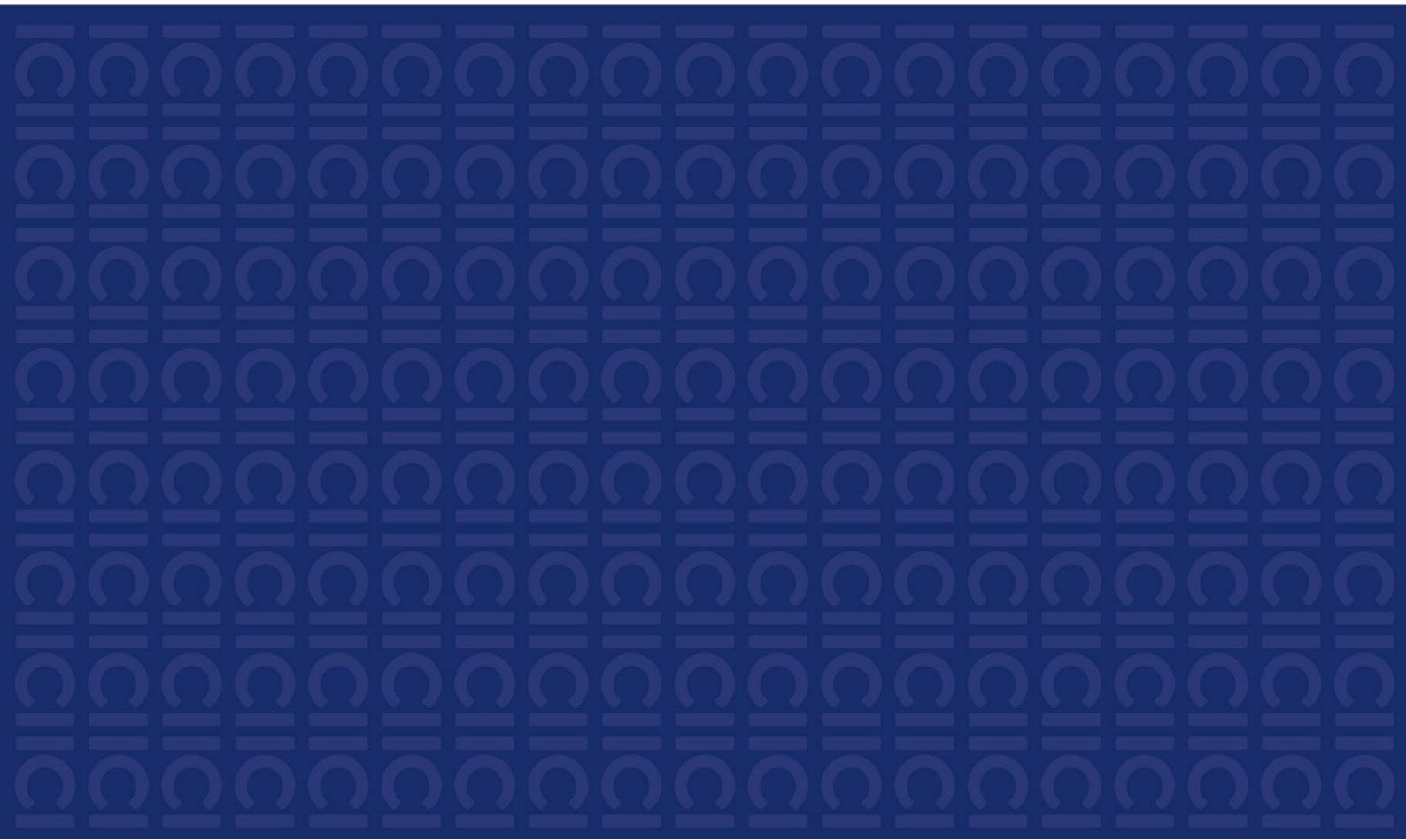


The Experience of Migrant Candidates in the 2019 Local Elections

Migrant Electoral Empowerment Report

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Working for **equality**



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1. Introduction

With only 9 out of 949 local councillors from migrant backgrounds elected in 2019, there is significant work to be done to increase diversity in local government in Ireland. While the 2016 census showed that non-Irish nationals currently account for nearly 12% of the Irish population, migrants are not represented at the political level. In other words, migration has had an increasing impact on economy and society, but arguably less on politics. Although immigration has been the subject of controversial debates in Ireland and beyond, migrants themselves have little direct impact on parties and policies that affect the migrant community directly because politicians from a migrant background continue to be a minority in the Irish political system, where key policy decisions are made.

Recent research has demonstrated that low levels of migrant representation in the political system is linked to poor outcomes for migrants' interests in policymaking, especially in terms of policies for integration, job creation, and housing. Increasing the political participation and civic engagement of migrants should be a key concern for interested policy-makers, as migrants often consider active citizenship as an expression of successful integration. While Ireland is relatively inexperienced in promoting diversity, increasing the representation of migrants in local government can provide favorable opportunities for migrant participation in local elections. Increased opportunities for participation can, in turn, redress underrepresentation by also expanding the role of Local Authorities nationally to include developing local migrant integration strategies. Therefore, it is essential to examine and understand the electoral participation experiences of migrants in order to advance active migrant citizenship in Ireland.

The present report is based on the experience of migrant candidates who ran in the local government election in Ireland in May 2019. This research presents a range of data and insights regarding migrants' participation in electoral campaign, in political parties, and in the wider community. This valuable information was collected to shed light on the barriers to participation that migrants experience in the political sphere, and to offer guidance for boosting migrants' representation in local government. As well as promoting the civic and political participation of migrants, I expect this report to serve as an inspiration to future candidates. I also hope it can encourage political parties to work intentionally to attract migrants into politics.

2. Electoral context – migrant participation in the 2019 local elections

In the 2019 local elections, 9 (0.94%) of elected councillors were from migrant backgrounds. In total 56 candidates from a migrant background were identified in this study. This group accounts for 5% of the total number of local election candidates, out of nearly 2000 candidates. Among migrant contestants, 20 female candidates (32.7%) and 33 male candidates (62.3%) ran. By contrast, in the 2014 elections, 31 candidates from migrant backgrounds contested the local elections, and 2 were elected – in addition to a third candidate who was later co-opted, giving an indicator of 0.32% of the total number of local councillors. The number of migrant candidates in local elections increased from 21 candidates in 2009 to 31 in 2014 and 56 in 2019. Had this

increase represented an increase in the number of successfully elected migrant candidates, this might be considered a positive improvement; however, migrants are still underrepresented in the political process. A key concern for policy-makers interested in citizen engagement is ensuring that settled migrants participate in civic life, which is often considered as evidence of successful incorporation of migrants in their society of residence.

2.1 The right to vote and migrants’ participation in local elections

Every regular resident in Ireland, regardless their nationality, has the right to vote and run in local elections.

The Irish political system provides reasonable access for migrant political participation in local elections. All legal residents over 18 years-old are eligible to vote and participate as candidates in local government elections, including asylum seekers in the direct provision system who are waiting for the results of their asylum application. At a national level however, Irish or UK citizenship is prerequisite to run or vote in general). In the 2016 general election, only two candidates from a migrant background were elected.

Despite these possibilities for migrants’ involvement in local Irish politics, a mere 5.1% of the eligible migrant population were registered to vote in 2016/2017, according to the 2016 census. Previous research has established that migrants are less likely to register to vote than the majority population and less likely to run for elections. Irish NGOs have been actively seeking to increase the proportion of non-Irish nationals registered to vote and become more informed about Irish politics, often via government-funded programmes. Table 1 below shows the percentage of non-Irish nationals who are listed on the electoral register aged +18, the number of candidates from migrant backgrounds running in the 2019 local elections, the % non-Irish on voting register, the number of seat all per county, and the number of migrant council elected.

12% of Irish society are people of a migrant background, but only 5% of candidates contesting 2019 local council seats were of a migrant background.

Table 1 – Migrant candidates’ representation in Irish Local Authority 2019 elections

Local Authority	No of Seats (949)	No of Migrant Candidates (56)	No of Migrant	% Non-Irish on voting register	% Non-Irish resident

			Councillors elected (9)		population aged 18+
Carlow	18	0	0	3.9	11.7
Cavan	18	0	0	4.1	12.9
Clare	28	<u>2</u>	0	5.3	11
Cork	55	<u>8</u>	0	5.8	15.5
Donegal	37	<u>1</u>	0	3	8.4
Dublin	63	<u>11</u>	<u>4</u>	5.7	19.2
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	40	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	4.4	12.6
Fingal	40	<u>11</u>	<u>1</u>	8.7	18.8
Galway	39	<u>2</u>	0	9	19.7
Kerry	33	0	0	6.2	12.1
Kildare	39	0	0	3.3	12
Kilkenny	24	0	0	3.4	9.5
Laois	19	<u>2</u>	0	5.5	11.3
Limerick	40	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>	4	10.6
Leitrim	18	<u>2</u>	0	7.3	12.6
Longford	18	<u>1</u>	0	8	16.4
Louth	29	<u>2</u>	0	5.5	11.4
Mayo	30	<u>2</u>	0	5.1	11.1
Meath	39	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	4.1	11.7
Monaghan	17	0	0	6.3	12.2
Offaly	19	<u>1</u>	0	4.4	9.5
Roscommon	18	<u>1</u>	0	5.8	11.5
Sligo	18	<u>1</u>	0	4.5	10.3
Tipperary	39	0	0	5	10

Waterford	32	0	0	4	11
Wexford	34	<u>2</u>	0	4	10.1
Wicklow	32	0	0	4.3	10.8

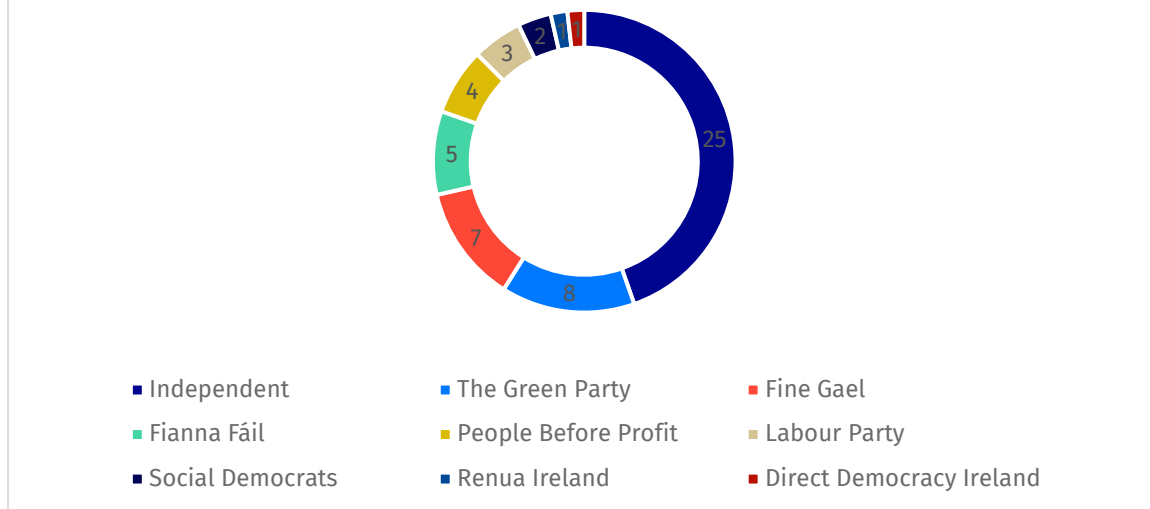
Source: Electoral register data from Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government 2019; CSO Population data, Census 2016; Immigrant Council of Ireland 2019; and Monitoring Report on Integration 2018.

The highest numbers of migrant candidates tend to be in the largest urban areas, such as Dublin, Cork, Fingal and Limerick, highlighting an important urban-rural divide. Migrants accounted for 5% of candidates contesting local council seats in this election, with 40% of all migrant candidates hailing from Dublin and its commuter-belt region of Fingal. Dublin City council elected the highest proportion of migrants (45%) in the 2019 local election. However, it's important to note that higher proportions of migrants in the population do not translate proportionally to higher numbers of migrant candidates. Galway, Fingal and Dublin have approximately similar migrant populations aged 18+, but while Dublin elected four councillors from a migrant background, Fingal elected just one council member, and none was elected in Galway. The number of non-Irish people on the voting register seems not be directly related to electoral success. For example, Monaghan and Leitrim have higher numbers of non-Irish people on the voting register (higher than Dublin), but these counties put forward zero and two migrant candidates, respectively, and no candidate was elected in either of the two counties.

35% of candidates of a migrant background were women but 66.6% (6 out of 9) of elected councillors of a migrant background were women.

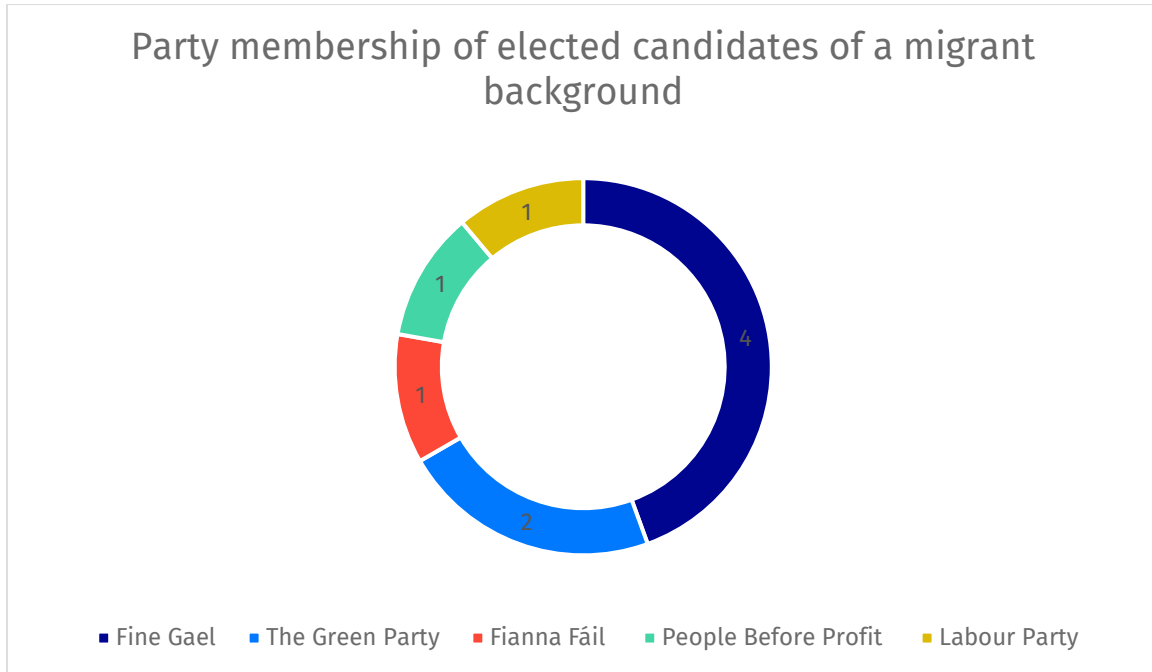
In terms of gender representation, electoral politics in Ireland follow global trends as highly male dominated. In the 2019 local elections, women made up 28% of all of the candidates (562 women contested the elections). Within the migrant group, 35% of candidates were women, only slightly better than the Irish level. However, out of the 9 elected councillors of a migrant background 6 were women. Achieving even this may well be credited to nationwide women's organisations, which have engaged with female candidates to prepare them to run for political office, as well as to advance ethnic minority women's voices at the local level.

Party membership of 2019 local election candidates of a migrant background



Party membership remains a significant precondition for electoral success among migrants. Nearly half of the migrant candidates (25 candidates) contested the 2019 local elections as independent candidates, meaning they had no membership to a political party. This pattern also existed in previous local elections (2009 and 2014), in which most migrant candidates ran as independent candidates. Eight candidates ran for the Green Party (GP), seven ran for Fine Gael (FG), five for Fianna Fáil (FF), three for the Labour Party (LAB), four for People Before Profit (PBP), two for the Social Democrats (SD), and one Renua Ireland and one Direct Democracy Ireland (DDI) candidate. Fine Gael elected four candidates from a migrant background, Green Party elected two, while People Before Profit, Fianna Fáil and Labour elected one candidate each. In the 2019 local election, no candidate from a migrant background who ran as an independent was elected. Low voting register numbers and low party membership rates among migrants contribute, amongst other factors, to the lack of diversity in parties' selection processes. While in the past some Irish political parties have taken proactive steps to encourage migrant candidates (such as implementing efforts to recruit migrant candidates and recruiting integration officers), Irish political parties wound down their integration infrastructures in the last two local elections. Across the political spectrum there appeared to be less interest in reaching out to migrant communities due to low levels of migrant voter turnout. While strong candidates with serious chances of successful campaigns are clearly assets worth pursuing, political parties do not seem to grasp the clear pattern of relationship evidenced between migrant party membership and successful electoral bids in the 2019 local elections. Political parties should take more proactive steps to select migrant candidates by looking outside the usual networks, recruiting integration officers, and actively canvassing for migrant votes.

Party membership of elected candidates of a migrant background



As previously stated, the share of migrants among elected representatives is the chief indicator of integration. The historical low of elected migrants in Ireland suggests a lack of political engagement among migrants, which is concerning. While Ireland’s Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020 proposes efforts to encourage migrant political participation, under-representation of migrant candidates in politics remains a challenge.

3. Methodology

This report is designed to help people from migrant backgrounds get politically active in Ireland. It is also a resource intended to encourage political parties to engage with the migrant community. This report employs qualitative and quantitative methods, combining desk research, analysis of existing data, surveys and structured interviews, such as questionnaires and interviews with local council candidates from migrant backgrounds who ran in the 2019 election. The sample frame ensured that all candidates known to the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) were invited to respond to a voluntary and anonymous online survey. The ICI received survey responses from 46% of all candidates contacted (nearly half of the sample), which gave us a very good research coverage. While this study does not aim to represent all migrant candidates, the results in this report offer a considerable and timely view of the current situation. For the interviews, the ICI developed a sampling frame to assure a representative cross-section of candidates: those elected, those not elected, those running independently, those on a party ticket, those who were EU members, EU non-members, male, female. Six candidates were selected for interviews, which took place in various locations around Ireland. For the purpose of this study, the definition of people “from a migrant background” includes: people who were born outside Ireland and migrated to Ireland; and people who were born in Ireland from family that migrated to Ireland. It is important to highlight that this group could also include naturalised Irish citizens who have made Ireland their home.

3.1 Surveys and Interviews design

The online survey collected experiences and campaign strategies of local election candidates during the pre-candidacy period. The aim was to learn about migrant candidates' experiences of the election and to identify resources and strategies for migrant running for local government elections. The data was collected during October and November 2019 through an online survey instrument structured to collect data on:

- Motivations to contest elections
- Previous political experience
- Campaign strategies
- Party activism and engagement with voters
- Campaigning and canvassing
- Electoral goals and messages
- Recommendations for potential new candidates

The majority of the survey questions were closed-ended, while a small number of the questions elicited specific details, such as respondents' experiences of racism during the electoral process, and the potential strengths and weaknesses of the candidates' campaigns. This study included a pilot phase in order to test response rate and survey design (particularly with regard to the newly-added questions); this pilot phase informed the final version of the survey. The one-to-one interview was structured to elicit more in-depth information about candidates' experiences. These interviews proved useful for learning about the subjective perspectives of, and backstories to participants' electoral campaign experiences. In other words, they offered rich material for building a significant analysis.

3.2 Ethics and research limitations

A data protection and confidentiality policy was maintained at all times. All surveys and interviews sought and secured informed consent, and the aims and objectives of the study were reiterated during the one-to-one interviews. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the survey at any stage without consequences.

This study is not representative of all migrant candidates in the 2019 local election for two reasons: firstly, reaching candidates to respond to the survey proved a challenge because contact details for candidates are not easily accessible in a central source, resulting in the need to conduct a manual search through all Irish local authorities' pages, social media accounts and blogs in order identify candidates' emails (and phone numbers where available). Secondly, despite efforts to reach all candidates, not all of them had functioning email addresses, which means it's possible that some candidates never received the survey link.

4. The experience of migrant candidates in the 2019 local government election in Ireland

4.1 What motivated candidates to contest the election?

I run because I decided to highlight the lack of diversity, lack of [diverse] voices in politics
(Participant 2, party candidate).

From the results of this research, one can surmise that migrant candidates are motivated to get involved in Irish politics for a few different reasons. Many of these reasons are universal to all candidates; however, there are also reasons specific to migrants. Some candidates wished to promote their local area or to advocate for integration, some had previous experience in politics, some acted out of the need to increase the political representation of migrants or to give back to their community. Migrant candidates' primary motivations for participation in formal politics was to promote and improve their local area, which suggests that integration is essentially a local issue, and that migrants act from a strong sense of belonging to their local areas. The desire that led them to political engagement was primarily to advance positive changes for the whole local community. The second and third most common reasons for running were the need to represent the interests of migrant groups, and to promote their integration in Ireland. Most migrants are aware of the marginal influence that the migrant community currently has over political decisions in Ireland; the candidates addressed insufficient migrant representation in Irish politics, affirming that running for civic office can increase migrant participation in political and civic life. This includes migrants' participating in groups, networks and forums to promote integration. A fourth important motivation for migrants was the desire to give back to the community. "Give back" means collaborating in the development of the areas where they live, including their own communities. The commitment to giving back indicates a strong sense of community and network and indicates untapped reservoirs of strength and capacity for civic engagement. During the interviews, candidates highlighted that migrants want true integration, and that having access to electoral platforms is not just a sign of participation in political and social life, but also a way to give voice to migrants, through political representation.

I want to do something better for my community (Participant 3, independent candidate).

The encouragement and support of members of their local community, family, friends and also political parties, is important for candidates (as 93% of surveyed candidates reported),

especially when they lack political networks and resources. In the interviews, three candidates stated that their decisions to stand for election were directly influenced and encouraged by members of political parties. One interviewee credited “political shadowing” through ICI’s internship scheme with influencing their decision to run. The scheme promotes practical educational experience and insight into local politics by placing migrants in politicians offices for a period of time. These supports are important sources of encouragement for migrants. Some candidates report previous political experience in their countries of origin (23%), but, for the vast majority of candidates, it was a completely new experience.

“The more I impact my community the more people, especially the Irish residents, they will think, Ok, this migrant is helping us. Then they will understand us more and embrace us more. Those are the benefits of getting involved in community activities” (Participant 1, party candidate).

4.2 Running as party member or as an independent candidate?

I wanted to bring real change, I want to be free to apply my own policies and my own views, my own opinion (Participant 4, independent candidate).

The 2019 election saw unprecedented numbers of independent candidates. Out of 56 migrant candidates, 25 ran as independents, and 55% of those contesting the election as independent candidates declared they did not identify closely to any political party. A few candidates reported that they ran as independents due to their lack of interest in political parties. In the interviews, candidates indicated the difficulties of finding a party aligned with their own political views and the policies they care about. Being independent candidates offered freedom to elaborate their own policies. All the successful candidates, however, were affiliated with political parties, meaning they had access to support and resources; migrant candidates’ limited use of door-to-door canvassing, as well as general political inexperience and unfamiliarity with the highly personalised nature of Irish local politics, very likely contributed to poor performance in the 2019 elections (trends already observed in previous local elections). Among those running as party candidates, 70% of respondents admitted doing so due to their affinity for their parties’ platforms. Others cited access to campaign resources (experience,

finance, campaign strategy) and the extensive networks of party members. Opportunities to network are particularly useful to migrants, who tend to have smaller networks in Ireland (if they do have networks, they are often in their countries of origin).

People say it is very hard to run as an independent and it is probably true. Even though you don't get that much support from your party, you still get some. It is extremely difficult to run as an independent but it is also difficult to make your point in a party as well (Participant 6, party candidate).

Most candidates recognised that party contestants had higher chances of being elected, and, indeed, having access to talent and experience, professional campaign managers, and networks of party members, contribute greatly to successful electoral campaigns. Among the interviewed, all 6 candidates intended to run again in the 2024 local elections.

People have supported political parties for a long time now and sometimes they are not open to receive someone without a political party especially someone from a migrant background (Participant 3, independent candidate).

4.3 Election campaign – positive and negative experiences

For most candidates, running in the local elections was a very positive experience. In the interviews, candidates mentioned skills gained, as well as knowledge about their sought political role. They considered that serving as role models to the younger generation was another positive outcome of their campaigns, for example the candidate who stated, "A lot of the younger generation now are inspired to do that. One student actually said to me that a lot of African students want to do it, especially because it shows that absolutely anyone can aspire to do it themselves one day" (Participant 1, party candidate). For other young people, just discovering that migrants are entitled to both run and vote in local elections was a very positive outcome, as many were not previously aware of this. This motivated candidates to join efforts with community members to recruit more migrants to register to vote. Increasing migrant voters

in the electoral register was for this candidate a call to increase migrant participation in politics: “I got the call that, I got more people to register” (Participant 5, party candidate).

The negative experiences respondents noted were primarily about losing respective elections, or about racism. They pointed to the disappointment of losing an election after weeks of time and energy invested, for example this candidate, who reported, “I really saw the disappointment of not getting elected. You’re getting to such a high, you engaged, meeting people... you get such a boost” (Participant 1, party candidate). While more than half of the candidates reported that they did not experience racism during the campaign, the candidates who reported otherwise narrated some alarming experiences during canvassing and on social media. These experiences did not prevent them from keeping in touch with voters because, in general, their campaigns were well-received, as this Dublin candidate said, “Some people just saw my colour, (...) but there are some people who welcome you and want to see some change in the system that would actually support you like that as well” (Participant 4, party candidate). Migrants’ experiences in the 2019 election and their willingness to participate in public life reinforce calls for the state to promote more equal political participation for migrant groups. This would include the adoption of public awareness-raising and education measures to address discrimination and prejudice.

4.4 The electoral campaign

4.4.1 Media campaign

“I wasn't aware that this thing about posters was so important for voters. I was the only one who did not put up any posters” (Participant 3, independent candidate).

All survey participants reported that their electoral messages targeted the entire Irish electorate, regardless of nationality. To spread their messages, candidates employed both traditional electoral platforms and social media, as well as canvassing and direct contact with voters, with 85% of the candidates leafleting, 80% canvassing, and 73% using posters. Many candidates ran active digital and social media campaigns, with 57% of the candidates using their own campaign websites and blogs; meanwhile Facebook was the most popular social media platform, used by 85% of candidates, followed by Twitter and WhatsApp (53% each). Interviewees explained that social media was useful to reach potential voters who were not informed of their electoral message by other media outlets. A well-curated social media platform facilitates contact between candidates and potential voters, who can learn about candidates’ proposals and policy directions. An additional benefit is that journalists can also use social media to reach out to candidates for talks and interviews, and appearing in the local news helped candidates’ campaigns have wider reach. Mainstream media outlets such as TV,

local and national newspapers, and radio, are especially effective at reaching small communities.

4.4.2 Campaign budget and campaign team

We don't have the same amount of networking that Irish people have when they are running for election. When an Irish person is running, they have their moms, aunts, they have been living in the same area, they attended the same school. So other candidates had a network I don't have (Participant 6, party candidate).

Most of the candidates used leaflets and posters in their campaigns (84% and 81% respectively). Candidates indicated the importance of using leaflets and posters, while also expressing that posters are a prohibitive expense for often-small campaign budgets. One candidate said people frequently mentioned they had not seen her poster; she was the only candidate in her area who did not put up posters. Candidates advised potential future election contestants to prepare financially for printing costs. Campaign budgets varied: 31% of the candidates reported budgets between €1000 and €3000; 27% reported funding of less than €500; another 27% had funding between €500 and €1000; 11% a had budgets between €6000 and €10,000; and only one candidate reported a budget of more than €10,000. Candidates running on party tickets reported receiving financial support from their parties (61%). Half of the candidates reported campaign teams of up to 3 people, while 37% had between 4 and 6 people, 11% had between 7 and 10 people, and the remaining 10% had teams comprised of more than 11 people. In most cases, the teams were the candidates' friends and family, while 46% of the candidates appointed professional campaign managers. Other supporting campaign roles included communication support, canvass organising, and finance management. Fundraising was also a particular challenge for migrants, as their potential donors would often be outside of Ireland.

It is very important to have a team. The fact I started my campaign two months before, and I was very new, my campaign team was basically my partner, some friends that came to help minding my children. I didn't have that many people (Participant 6, party candidate).

4.4.3 Canvassing

I was working on my own, knocking on doors, which was fine in some ways, but on the other side you don't get to reach that many people. That was very difficult as well (Participant 4, independent candidate).

Door-to-door canvassing is a major component of electoral politics in Ireland. Despite the widespread use of social media and websites and mainstream media, Irish politics are still highly personalized. Consequently, holding face-to-face conversations, both to urge people to vote and to learn about voters' concerns, is one of the most effective ways to build a successful campaign in Ireland. This method is a very tangible way to gauge attitudes, and assess candidates' own support. While demanding and time-consuming, this practice allows candidates to have conversations with neighbours, friends, and acquaintances. Candidates described their willingness to participate in door-to-door canvassing, highlighting the value of getting their messages to voters in face-to-face meetings; the most effective approach was leafleting followed by visits from either the candidates themselves, or their canvassing team. However, candidates recounted the limitations of canvassing alone, such as lack of childcare, or the inability to cover large areas without a sizeable campaign team. But overall, the majority of the candidates reported good reception from Irish voters, who often engaged and wanted to hear about the candidates' proposals.

I canvassed not the full constituency but 75% of it, probably, of the housing in the areas. Obviously with my team and not on my own. That was really important as well (Participant 2, party candidate).

4.5 Party support

My party offered us training. The main thing was that during training we got to chat to the people who were already TDs or ministers (Participant 5, party candidate).

While political parties can be facilitators of migrant political activities and could potentially increase migrant political participation, Irish political parties have tended to give insufficient attention to potential migrant candidates and the migrant electorate. They have made little effort to attract migrant candidates, especially women from migrant backgrounds. There have been exceptions. In the 2009 local elections, political parties took proactive steps to recruit and select migrant candidates, but these efforts saw a marked decline in 2014; political parties divested from such efforts, apparently, due to the low migrant voter turnout in the 2009 local elections. In short, political parties did not see their initial efforts produce the results they were looking for. This start-stop pattern of political incorporation has been identified in the responses of political parties to mobilise migrants via political parties. 70% of the respondents were affiliated to a political party. For some migrants, party membership offered a way of learning and understanding party politics. This membership provided candidates with contacts to established politicians, as it was possible the new candidates to hear and talk to experienced representatives. One respondent affirmed that having party leaders to look up to, “played an important role for me, and I got good pieces of advice” (Participant 5, party candidate).

I didn't have that much support, someone to tell me where to go, how to do it. (Participant 6, party candidate).

While all migrant candidates elected in the 2019 local election were members of political parties, some candidates felt they could have received more support from their respective parties during their campaigns, both financially and in terms of guidance. The largest political parties organized training sessions and networking meetings for candidates' members; although, it is hard to measure the effectiveness of such training sessions. 54% of survey respondents said they took part in political parties and other organisations' events. This indicates that candidates identify that they need to gain some electoral/political skills. Of candidates affiliated with political parties 30% reported that they did not receive relevant support from their parties. Some candidates felt their parties were initially supportive, but did not follow through, particularly with financial backing, the lack of which was a common denominator among many candidates; for these candidates, personal funding was the only solution. While several parties currently have Integrations Officers, Equality Officers and Intercultural Committees, political parties in Ireland need to do more to engage with migrant communities; otherwise, they will hardly be fit to represent Ireland's current diverse communities. Migrant voters are still 'invisible' in politics. Campaigns by migrant organisations to spread awareness of voting rights have met limited success to date; Irish political parties should go beyond short-term solutions and anti-immigration discourse and, ultimately, take a stronger proactive role in promoting migrant political participation.

I have never done any training, never did training in public speaking, for example. I just

learned from doing it, which might suit some people, but others might need some training on that (Participant 5, party candidate).

4.6 Racism on the campaign trail

I stayed focused and I didn't let those things come my way (Participant 5, party candidate).

Anti-migrant sentiment and racism exist in Ireland. Its form and impact, from institutional to everyday racism, have been well-documented by organisations such as the European Network Against Racism (ENAR), Immigrants Council of Ireland (ICI), and in several reports by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), among others. Studies have found that attitudes to immigration in Ireland became more negative during the recession and are now worse than the average in Western Europe. Irish civil society organisations lobby the government to combat racism, but adequate legislation and other measures by local government and the Gardaí have been inadequate. Of all the migrant candidates surveyed, 33% reported experiences of racism and discrimination along the campaign trail. Candidates from migrant backgrounds described receiving racist and anti-migrant abuse on social media and during door-to-door canvassing, while news media have also report migrant candidates had posters taken down. A candidate reported that while she was canvassing, one person told her: "I don't need your flyer" (Participant 4, independent candidate). As the candidate explained, people commonly saw only the colour of her skin and disregarded the electoral message the candidate wanted to bring forward. Another candidate was told to "go back home," while another had difficulties hiring a venue for a campaign launch event. As this candidate reported, "I couldn't secure a venue in a hotel or restaurant or any public place. Until I asked someone to help me with this problem. The same people who refused to give me the venue accepted a booking from this person" (Participant 4, independent candidate). The candidate was victim of an act of discrimination prohibited by the law (Equal Status Acts 2000-2015).

When people react that way, they need more awareness and I think it's time to work with public organizations and public services (Participant 2, party candidate).

Negative reactions and stereotypes about migration have negative consequences on migrants' participation in the political processes; naturally, fear of racist attitudes can prevent migrants from taking part in the elections. Although Irish people and the Irish media are generally

concerned not to appear racist, racist content does arise in mainstream media. While Ireland has only developed an incipient political or media backlash against immigration, there is no doubt racism has entered Irish politics. Anti-immigration sentiment in political discourse aims to create segregation and tension; the proliferation of these views must be constrained, but it is not easy to do so on an institutional level. Much of the institutional infrastructure for responding to racism in Ireland (i.e. the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism) was dismantled during the recession and has not been replaced. This means that effective, large scale strategies to stem and prevent systemic racism in Ireland are largely inexistent, and that the presence of strong anti-migrant political forces can prevent migrant candidates from running for civic office, even if they are legally entitled to do so.

Social media can be difficult for anyone who is involved in politics because you will always get abuse of some kind, regardless of where you are from, you will get abuse from social media because it is the nature of it (Participant 2, party candidate).

Most candidates reported that the abuse came mostly from social media and emails. Asked how they coped with racist abuse, some felt that abuse is part of any candidacy. However, candidates also associated the abuse with their being migrant and/or women in politics. Migrant candidates initially feared racist attitudes, for example, this candidate, who admitted feeling, “a fear of what people were going to say, what kind of reception I would get, that would be a hindrance” (Participant 1, party candidate). But others said that, despite their fears, they “got a good response on the doors [sic]” (Participant 5, party candidate). Some candidates opted not to engage with racist abusers because, as one respondent said, “it is not practical to engage with keyboard warriors online” (Participant 2, party candidate). By not reading comments, or assigning someone to manage their social media accounts where possible, candidates took measures to preserve themselves and keep on with their campaign. One candidate said she “confronts that (racism) by being productive, trying my best to make a positive impact in my community” (Participant 1, party candidate). It is important for candidates to find individual ways to cope with racist abuse, but a Migrant Integration Strategy action plan to prevent racist abuse, in electoral campaigns as well as daily life, it not only not necessary, it is urgent.

They consider how you look and they think they can say whatever they want (Participant 6, party candidate).

4.7 Migrant women in elections

The gap between elected men and women indicates the need for a gender-conscious analysis of migrant women's political participation. Migrant women face numerous barriers to full participation in society, including (but not limited to) politics: low employment, particular for African and muslim women, discrimination in the private rental sector and sexual harassment. Other gendered factors undermine female candidacy, such as disproportionate responsibility for childcare. Overall migrant networks are smaller, and female migrant and ethnic minority candidates lack the support systems, such as extended family networks, that might facilitate canvassing by providing childcare. Research has shown that lack of childcare is a significant barrier for women. As a result, they must canvass during the daytime when children are at school, rather than in the evening, the prime time slot for canvassing. Alternatively, they may lack the financial resources to travel to cities for trainings, leaving many migrant women frequently feel isolated and excluded from local community committees and structures. While migrant women aspirants were identified, trained, and supported by migrant advocacy groups, these strategies are more complicated to apply in rural areas, where migrant women have less access to resources and transportation, and are consequently more difficult to reach.

I was attending an event about women in politics, and I felt nobody was raising my voice. Even though we were women, no one in the audience or even in the panel was speaking my language - not literally - but they were not speaking about how exactly it feels to be a woman migrant in Ireland (Participant 6, party candidate).

Female migrants commented on the importance of joining women migrant groups and organisations that motivate and prepare women to run for political office. Organisations such as Women for Election, ICI and Akidwa have been working to raise awareness about the need for more women in politics. These organisations also support voter registration drive and make efforts helping to build capacity and support for migrant candidates.

I got quite a lot (harassment) during the campaign, things like, you don't look like a foreigner, or will give you call later. Men wouldn't get these comments as much as women (Participant 2, party candidate).

In addition to racism and discrimination, migrant women share with Irish women experiences of sexual harassment. Migrant female candidates reported both face-to-face and online harassment, such as comments on their looks and men promising to give them a call.

In spite of all this, migrant women affirmed their commitment and interest in promoting positive changes through politics. However, the integration of specifically female migrants is largely absent from political parties' programmes; anecdotal evidence shows that female migrant candidates are added to tickets as tokens. Consequently, political parties must increase women's representation in local government with integration policies that provide solid understanding of the Irish political system, realistic encouragement for electoral success, and strategies to retain candidates that do well in the polls, to encourage them to run in the future.

4.8 Biggest challenges for migrant candidates

Where candidates were asked to reflect on the strengths and challenges of their campaigns, the majority responded that their knowledge of and engagement with local issues prior to the campaign made them stronger candidates. The candidates underscored their visibility in the community as an important factor in their campaigns.

Responses about their challenges, in turn, were very diverse. They considered their migrant backgrounds and small campaign budgets as disadvantages, by comparison to Irish candidates who have more connections, access to funding, and who do not experience the same level of discrimination. Other challenges cited were lack of political experience, low visibility in the community, poor English language skills, and small campaign teams. At least some of those issues might be addressed by political party policies designed to support, fund and train experienced as well as first time candidates.

The political system here in Ireland is quite complicated and difficult to understand. It can take a while to understand how it works (Participant 2, party candidate).

Candidates were also asked about the greatest challenges of the Irish electoral system to prevent people from migrant backgrounds from running for office. The majority of candidates believed that most migrants are unaware of their political rights. The lack of information about migrant voting rights signpost a weak dialogue between migrant communities, political parties, and the government. Although campaigns have tried to inform migrants of their political rights in Ireland – mostly via campaigns by civil society organisations - persistent misinformation among migrant groups points to a democratic deficit that places migrants at the margins of the political system. Therefore, informing migrants about possibilities for participation in political life is key to increasing the number of migrants engaged in politics in Ireland.

When I decided to run for election, my level of knowledge about Irish Politics was very limited, close to nothing, I didn't know how to run a campaign, I knew nothing. I had to speed up (Participant 6, party candidate).

A second reason that might prevent migrants from engaging in electoral politics is insufficient knowledge of the political system and the cultural nuances of engaging with voters of different nationalities. Political knowledge refers to how much factual information someone possesses, based on varying measures of knowledge about institutions, history and current affairs, and this knowledge is very important for migrant candidates' campaign strategies. Candidates pointed out that the Irish political system can be complicated; it was nevertheless necessary for them to learn how it works before they started campaigning. Other candidates mentioned the need to "understand the system" and the "underground culture" of politics in Ireland. Therefore, learning about the political system in Ireland can help migrant candidates feel more confident in their skills and come across as more knowledgeable to their potential voters. However, lack of knowledge about the Irish political system is also due to lack of interest in politics demonstrated by some migrants, and this is certainly also a powerful barrier. Resistance to learning more about Irish politics might be understandable; the complexity of the system, and the sheer volume of information, can easily discourage anyone from engaging in politics. A uniform and central site for information would help migrants situate themselves within the political system in Ireland.

Finally, other barriers mentioned were lack of financial resources and prejudice against migrants in Ireland – please see section 4.4 and 4.6.

5. Lessons learned

Candidates emphasized that they learned a great deal from the electoral process and enjoyed many aspects of the process of running for office, even when they were unsuccessful. The majority indicated that they learned the importance of the ground work involved in campaigning, as a way of educating themselves about community issues (i.e. in canvassing, meeting people one-to-one, public speaking, etc), as explained by this candidate: "I was talking to people as much as possible, which I think really helped. And people are able to talk to you, asking questions or just even having a conversation with you" (Participant 1, party candidate). Other candidates said they learned about local authority legislation and local issues, and that the election was a great incentive to learn about Irish history and politics. Others mentioned how much they learned from the people they met on the campaign trail: "I have learned much more about the people here, the culture, and their language" (Participant 4, independent candidate). This new knowledge provided candidates with more confidence to discuss social problems and gave them the self-assurance to speak at public events about their campaign proposals. Others recounted the strange feeling of seeing their faces on posters and TV, a new

experience for first-time candidates. One candidate described it as “really terrifying at first, it is very strange to have your own face on posters and on the leaflets you put in doors” (Participant 2, party candidate). But later the candidate appreciated the benefits of being known by face and name, even by strangers. Some candidates also recounted relationships developed during the campaign with people who took part in campaign events. Overall, all candidates expressed a sense of accomplishment in their candidacy, and some hinted at the possibility of running again in the next local election.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to examine the electoral experience of candidates from migrant backgrounds in the 2019 local election in Ireland. The report has shown that migrant participation in election remains very low, and that government and political parties are failing to engage fully with and to integrate migrants into the Irish political landscape. Even though Ireland has become an increasingly diverse country, migrants continue to have a negligible role in political decisions. While Irish political parties do condemn racism and discrimination towards migrants, more proactive strategies to boost migrant voter registration, combat racism, and encourage migrants’ electability are necessary to improve migrant political participation.

The research also examined local candidates’ experiences of candidacy. Many candidates overcame the many challenges of running within an electoral context of insufficient inclusivity and proper support for migrant candidates. Researched participants showed their commitment to improving their local areas and were highly motivated to promote the integration of migrants. The report furthermore presented migrants’ individual experiences, their electoral strategies, and their recommendations to future migrant candidates. Their recommendations are needed, indeed; despite strong campaigns, structural barriers prevent too many migrant candidates from running in elections. If true representation is genuinely sought, political parties must expand their recruitment networks and offer adequate supports for migrant candidates. Otherwise they must acknowledge a democratic deficit that places migrants at the margins of the political system, depriving them of access to decision-making that pertains to all those who live in Ireland.

Appendix - Recommendations from migrant candidates

The list below is a compilation of the key recommendation directly from migrant candidates who ran in the 2019 local election to those planning to run to the election in 2024

- “Get involved in a political party or/and in community activism. It does not necessarily mean joining a political party, it can be a movement or a campaign”
- “Network, network, network! Reach out early to community groups as well as local businesses way before the election season”
- “Be ready for all the attention – and sometimes criticism - that you will get”
- “Attend party meetings and contribute to them”
- “Take in part in community activities and get to know people that live closed to you”
- “Find out what is going on in your area, what communities are there, which groups are there to get involved”
- “Commit to learn more about politics in Ireland”
- “Organise meetings for all migrants in the area to inform them about their voting rights”
- “Reach people in direct provision centres in your area. They are often isolated and politically excluded. Also consider providing transportation to the events you organise that involve asylum seekers”
- “Support other migrant candidates. If you know other migrants running reach out to them to share experiences and political support”
- “Start your campaign early to gain visibility, relevance and acceptability”
- “Attend council meetings to get informed about local issues and learn the ropes of the councillor’s job”
- “Take the time to study your own policies, so you will be able to explain and discuss your policy plans to your area”
- “Do not necessarily focus on the migrants only. Consider that if elected, you will represent the entire community”
- “Stick to your values and do not be afraid that because you are a migrant or a woman people will not listen to you. The vast majority of people want to hear what you have to say”
- “Prepare financially to invest in campaign materials and transportation costs

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