



Integrująca polityka wielokulturowej Republiki

Inclusive Politics for a Diverse Republic

Research undertaken on behalf of Forum Polonia
on responsiveness by Irish political parties to immigrant communities

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Introduction

More than seventeen per cent of the population of the Republic of Ireland were born outside the state. About twelve per cent of the population are non-Irish citizen immigrants. Politics in the Republic of Ireland needs to reflect this diversity. It does not do so adequately at this time. Citizenship and naturalisation rates have accelerated under the current government. Most of these new members of the Irish nation are from non-EU countries. Yet most migrants from EU countries who comprise the majority of immigrants seem unlikely to naturalise. In general those who move from one country to another within the EU do not change citizenship. This is because as citizens of member states they enjoy many reciprocal rights under EU treaties and agreements. But they do not enjoy the right to vote in parliamentary elections except where there are reciprocal arrangements between states such as exist between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. However, the franchise for local government elections depends on residency rather than citizenship. As such local government elections have the potential to reflect and represent the diverse nature of Irish society.

This research builds on previous studies that included responses from Irish political parties published prior to the 2004 and 2009 local elections¹. The right to vote in local government elections in the Republic of Ireland is not restricted to citizens. This report examines efforts by political parties to reach out to immigrants entitled to vote whether as voters, party members or candidates in the run up to the 2014 local government elections. Irish political parties have done little or nothing to reach out to immigrants during general elections because until recently the numbers of immigrants who had become Irish citizens and were entitled to vote was perceived to be insignificant². However, this is not the case in local government elections where the right to vote depends on residency rather than upon citizenship criteria.

In the 2009 local government elections more than 40 immigrant candidates stood for election. About half of these represented political parties. About half were African in origin and about half were from Eastern Europe with most of these being Polish³. In 2007 a Cabinet position of Minister of State for Integration was created. An Office for Integration funded voter registration campaign was targeted at immigrants. Some senior figures in political parties campaigned on behalf of immigrant candidates. Some

parties recruited officials with responsibility for recruiting immigrant members and candidates. Within a number of political parties there seemed to be a genuine enthusiasm for integrating migrants into the political system.

By comparison, five years later, some political parties seem to be making less effort. Very few immigrant candidates are likely to be selected by Irish political parties. In some respects efforts to engage with immigrant communities appears to have declined. Debate about integration has dropped off the political radar and from the programmes of political parties. There is no longer a Minister of State for Integration. The Republic of Ireland's large immigrant communities - who comprise one in eight of the population - are all but invisible within the political system. This especially holds for the Polish community that, a decade after EU Enlargement, has become Ireland's largest immigrant community and linguistic minority. According to the 2011 census Poles now make up more than two and a half per cent of the population of the Republic of Ireland. Whereas the 2011 census enumerated some 120,585 Poles, other estimates suggest that the Polish population might be as high as 150,000.

On 4 November 2013 Dublin City Council and the Minister for Justice and Equality jointly launched a Migrant Voters Registration Information Campaign. The context of this campaign and others run by immigrant organisations such as Forum Polonia is one of low immigrant political participation even though in the Republic of Ireland non-Irish citizen residents are entitled to vote in local government elections.

More than 17 per cent of Dublin's population is immigrants. But of the 323,000 people registered to vote in the Dublin City Council area just 16,000 (under 5 per cent) are immigrants. Of these, 10,000 are immigrants from outside the EU and 6,000 are EU nationals. The perception that immigrants who are entitled to vote in local elections will not do so seems to have undermined commitments to integration within political parties. However, if immigrant voter registration could be increased to average levels for Dublin this would mean an immigrant electorate of more than 54,000 in the city.

In this context Forum Polonia's election campaign **Vote! You are at home** has sought, through a combination of workshops aimed at encouraging voter registration, political participation, mentoring and debate within the Polish community, to promote integration.

Forum Polonia is a cooperative platform that brings together representatives of Polish community organisations, media and individuals involved in projects relating to the Polish minority and its links to Irish society as a whole. Forum Polonia promotes and develops the interests of the Polish community in the Republic of Ireland. Since its establishment in 2008 it has initiated many nationwide cultural, social, educational and active citizenship campaigns and activities. Forum Polonia also commissioned this research on the nature and extent of responsiveness by political parties to immigrants.

Focus of the Research

In advance of the 2014 local government elections political parties in the Republic were asked to provide details of initiatives they are undertaking to reach out to immigrants entitled to vote in local government elections; to encourage immigrants to become party members and to select immigrant candidates. The parties were informed that a report would be published prior to the 2014 elections addressing the following themes:

- Nature and extent of efforts by each political party to reach out to immigrant voters (with a focus on tracking whether there has been improvement since the 2009 election or not)
- Nature and extent of efforts to encourage immigrants to become members of political parties (comparing data provided by political parties to responses in 2009)
- Selection of candidates from immigrant communities
- Commitments to promoting the inclusion of immigrants within Irish politics and society

The purpose of this report is to stimulate positive public debate in the run up to the election. It is based on formal responses from and interviews with officials from Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, the Labour Party and the Green Party, some off-the-record interviews with members of some political parties and literature and documents published by political parties. Sinn Fein declined to participate in the research. Whilst this report refers to the perspectives of the Polish community it also draws on the perspectives of other immigrants involved in encouraging political participation and voter registration. Several immigrant candidates who stood for election in 2009 were also interviewed as part of the research.

Findings

This report compares the efforts of political parties to engage with the Republic of Ireland's immigrant communities in the run up to the 2014 local elections to what happened in the run up to the 2004 and 2009 elections. In each case political parties were asked the same questions by a research team.

[Nature and extent of efforts by each political party to reach out to immigrant voters \(with a focus on tracking whether there has been improvement since the 2009 election or not\).](#)

In the run up to the 2009 election some political parties targeted public campaigns at immigrants aimed at recruiting immigrant members and seeking the votes of immigrants entitled to vote in local government elections. These are not doing so in the run up to the 2014 election. Members of some political parties who participated in the research questioned whether such outreach was a pragmatic use of resources given their belief that immigrants entitled to vote in the local election were unlikely to do so in large numbers. In a number of political parties there appears to be a sense of disillusionment arising from low levels of immigrant voter turnout during the 2009 local government elections. It also seems that perceptions that immigrant candidates performed poorly in the 2009 elections have contributed to a sense of disillusionment within some political parties.

Comments by two members of the same political party illustrate this point. One senior official stated that immigrant candidates just did not perform in 2009 and that there was no sense in putting the same effort into supporting such candidates in 2014. Another member of the same party stated that in his experience immigrants did not want to vote and were disinterested in political participation. When pressed to explain what he meant he described how he had worked in 2009 to get about 150 East European voters onto the electoral register in the town where he was a councillor. He believed that the overwhelming majority of these did not vote in the election. In his view immigrants had made a real and positive contribution to his community but were disinterested in engaging in politics even though many worked in jobs where they were well known within the local community.

Nature and extent of efforts to encourage immigrants to become members of political parties (comparing data provided by political parties to responses in 2009)

Fine Gael and **Fianna Fáil** employed integration officers (both Polish) in the run up to the 2009 election. **Fine Gael** no longer has such a post in its organisation.

Fianna Fáil has recently recruited an Equality Officer responsible for outreach to women, young people and immigrants who, in effect, holds a similar role that the party's integration officer held in 2009. **Fianna Fáil** states that the party has attracted immigrant members in recent years but that 'under-representation is a real concern.' Much of the effort by **Fianna Fáil** to reach out to immigrants has occurred through **Ógra (Young) Fianna Fáil** which has attracted some immigrant members. **Fianna Fáil** identified a party cumainn (branch) in **Dublin** that has a high proportion of immigrant members.

The **Labour Party** has a long-standing equality officer post with responsibility for engaging with immigrants. **Labour's** efforts to engage with immigrants are mostly organised through an Intercultural Subcommittee co-ordinated by the party's equality officer. This committee includes some immigrant members. It has organised some public events aimed at immigrant led organisations and immigrant community leaders. For example, Minister Joan Burton addressed one such event held in early 2013 at University College Dublin. In 2011 Labour Intercultural adopted principles and objectives aimed at fostering immigrant participation within the party.

The **Green Party** response stated that from its foundation it always had non-Irish members. In advance of the 2009 local election it attracted members from new immigrant communities. However, in its response the Green Party frankly identified the challenges the Party has faced in reaching out to immigrant communities:

During our period in government we haemorrhaged a lot of members and I'd say a lot of those were newer members and for whatever reason – be they unhappy with things done in government or just when things turned negative for the party people who were new and maybe not very committed just didn't renew again. So I would see that the diversity that was there maybe in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, began to lessen, particularly after the local elections when groups around the various candidates who were active in the party became less involved. So at the moment we've fallen back, but more because the general membership of the party has gotten smaller.

Selection of candidates from immigrant communities.

The number of immigrant candidates expected to stand on behalf of political parties in 2014 is considerably fewer than 2009 though, as in 2009, a number of immigrant candidates are likely to stand as independents in 2014. Some immigrant candidates who stood for election as town councillors received significant numbers of votes. However, the removal of town councils in advance of the 2014 elections may in part explain why some of the candidates selected to stand by political parties in 2009 are not standing again in 2014.

Fine Gael stood seven immigrant candidates in the County, City Town & Borough Council Elections of 2009. None were elected. At the time this report was published it had selected just one immigrant candidate to stand in the 2014 elections. Naidine Meisonnave from Estonia is contesting in the Pembroke-South Dock ward in Dublin.

Fianna Fáil stood nine immigrant candidates in 2009 of which one, Russian-born Anne Rooney was elected as a town councillor in Clones. With the exception of Councillor Rooney none of the party's 2009 candidates had been selected to stand in the 2014 election.

Labour stood four immigrant candidates in 2009. Just one of these, Elena Selacas, who narrowly missed being elected to Limerick County Council, is standing again for election in 2014.

The **Green Party** stood six immigrant candidates in 2009. One of these, Kristina Jankaitiene was elected to Carrickmacross Town Council County Monaghan in 2009. None of the other five candidates are standing for election in 2014. The party has sought to select immigrant candidates in advance of the 2014 but has been unable to do so. In one case, what was described as a promising Polish candidate has pulled out for personal reasons. In other cases decisions were made on pragmatic grounds. The party has limited resources and decided not to stand immigrant candidates in areas where it was considered that these were unlikely to be elected.

Sinn Fein stood no immigrant candidates in 2009. According to media reports the party has selected Congolese-born Edmond Lukusa as one of its two candidates to stand in Mulhuddart, Dublin 15 in 2014. Mr Lukusa has been a member of Sinn Fein since 2007. He also became an Irish citizen in 2007.

More than twenty **Independent Candidates** stood for election in 2009. So far eight independent immigrant candidates have declared that they are standing for election in 2014.

[Commitments to an Inclusive Republic.](#)

The **Fine Gael** party highlighted its commitment, made prior to going into Government in 2011, to streamlining the process of citizenship and naturalisation. **Fine Gael** pointed to its track record in promoting citizenship and naturalisation as the basis of its appeal to immigrant voters. As put by **Fine Gael**:

When Minister Shatter took Office in March 2011, the processing time for citizenship applications, in all cases, was over two years and often much longer, with a backlog of about 22,000 cases on hand. The Minister undertook to address this issue, and, despite a very large increase in the number of new applications received each year – rising from approximately 9,500 in 2008 to over 16,500 already this year to date – that intolerable situation has now been remedied.

New forms and streamlined processes, that the Minister introduced, are working well and over 70 per cent of citizenship applications are now being processed within the six-month target. Due to complications, some applications take longer but the delays experienced prior to 2011 are no longer a feature of our citizenship process. Since taking office the Minister has granted citizenship to almost 60,000 persons. In the previous 10 years less than 25,000 citizenship applications were granted.

Shortly after taking office the Minister established a ceremony to properly recognise and to mark, in a formal and meaningful way, the granting of citizenship. The first Citizenship Ceremony ever held in the State took place in June, 2011 in the Dublin Castle Convention Centre. Since then, 81 Citizenship Ceremonies have been held. The ceremonies, introduced at no extra cost to applicants, have been universally well received by participants and provide a sense of dignity and occasion that serves to underscore the importance to both the State and the applicant of the granting of Irish citizenship. The **Fine Gael** response noted that Minister Shatter was named Africa World Newspaper 'Man of the Year' in 2013.

Fianna Fáil stated that the party would hold a workshop on integration during its 2014 Ard Fheis (Annual Conference) aimed at raising the visibility of immigrant members within the party and at which representatives of immigrant-led organisations would be invited to attend. It stated that **Ogra (Young) Fianna Fáil** has planned a campaign aimed at encouraging third-level students including immigrants to join the party. **Fianna Fáil** stated that the party will be proposing a Seanad reform bill that will support changes in the Taoiseach's Panel that would allow representatives of the Irish Diaspora, Travellers or immigrant communities to be appointed to the Seanad.

Labour pointed to the role of the 'Labour Intercultural' subcommittee within its organisational structure. This group was set up with the sole purpose of including new Irish communities within the party. Its remit, as stated in its 2011 constitution, is 'to promote the concept and realisation of an intercultural society and ethnic diversity in Irish society' and to 'encourage people from our immigrant communities to join and become active in the Labour Party, and to encourage such members to play a full and active part in the party's activities, and to ensure that new members from such communities are welcomed'.

The Green Party has an Equality Committee that advises the party on a range of issues including gender and race, however it does not at present have any initiatives in place to widen party membership. A party member said that the Green party has historically had non-Irish members and has performed well on issues of asylum and justice but that the party may have failed to recognise the distinctive needs of different immigrant groups and to recruit such persons: "So I suppose we would have been doing the policy work but not, on a coordinated basis, focusing on the outreach work."

Analysis

An optimistic pro-integration narrative preceded the 2009 elections notwithstanding the economic crisis. The Fianna Fáil/Green Party coalition government included a Minister of State for Integration in its cabinet. Minister Conor Lenihan published an Intergration Strategy that included support for immigrant electoral registration and, importantly, provided a focal point for debates about integration. This cabinet post no longer exists. Two African candidates who stood as independents in the 2004 local elections - Rotimi Adabari in Portlaoise and Theo Matthews in Ennis - were elected as town councillors. This clearly inspired other immigrants to become involved in politics. It suggested that political parties might benefit from selecting immigrant candidates and that political parties would have to become responsive to a multi-ethnic electorate in the future. But it also suggested that the indigenous Irish in towns like Ennis and Portlaoise were willing to vote for immigrant candidates.

Neither Adabari nor Matthews could have been elected solely by immigrant voters. Adabari, who served as Mayor of Portlaoise and who was re-elected in 2009, has described himself as a representative of the entire community. There are few wards in the entire country where the immigrant vote might play a decisive role in securing the election of an immigrant candidate. In one such area, Mulhuddart in Dublin 15, three African candidates (representing Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and one independent) competed against one another in 2009. In the midst of the economic crisis political leaders campaigned for their party's immigrant candidates in Dublin 15, exemplifying a positive politics that contrasted with anti-immigrant populism expressed by mainstream political leaders as a response to economic problems in some other European countries. In 2009 a number of immigrant candidates polled strongly in areas where immigrants comprised just a small part of the local electorate.

The immigrant candidates who fared best in 2009 had built up strong local connections and were members of local organisations as well as immigrant-led groups. It is of concern that most of these have decided not to stand in 2014. It generally takes candidates more than one attempt to get elected in Irish local government. Candidates generally need to become well-known in their localities as public representatives in order to be elected.

An Irish-born interviewee reflected that he was on his third attempt to be elected in 2014. He referred to well-known figures in Irish politics who stood several times before getting elected. The backlash within some political parties, based on perceptions that efforts to get immigrant candidates elected in 2009 had ended in failure, seems to ignore some of the basic facts of life of Irish local politics. It can take time for candidates to build up strong support in their local communities. Local politics is a long-distance race and not a sprint. But it is also the case that resources available to political parties are limited and that in order to maximise their success these may adopt a short term approach to winning elections.

The likely outcome of the 2014 elections is that only a small number of immigrants will be elected as councillors. Immigrant political representation in the Dail seems a long way off. In a context where a large percentage of the population has no place in the political system there is a need for a proactive approach to immigrant political incorporation. Simply put, a diverse republic needs inclusive politics and institutions that reflect the composition of a diverse society.

As part of the debate on the future of the Seanad, Fianna Fáil proposed that a reformed upper house could utilise the Taoiseach's nominee provision to ensure that groups on the margins of Irish political life are enabled to have their voices heard in the National Parliament:

A renewed Seanad should re-focus on the objective of encompassing a broader sense of representation including groups who would otherwise not have a voice in the Oireachtas. This would avoid what De Tocqueville famously called the 'Tyranny of the Majority'. This vision would reflect broader groups that have come into Irish life such as the New Irish and other minority or marginal groups such as the Traveller community and the Irish Diaspora.⁴

The somewhat negative narrative that has emerged in advance of the 2014 elections needs to be challenged. A lack of focus in securing immigrant political incorporation is grounded in short term pragmatism rather than anti-immigrant populism. There is obviously a need for better voter registration campaigns and more proactive approaches to engaging with immigrant communities. It is not just a question of funding future publicity campaigns aimed at encouraging voter registration.

Comprehensive reform of how people can register to vote is overdue. For example, in the United States voters can register online as they might for car insurance. A combination of social services card, passport and driving licence identification numbers and existing online administrative data could get around current cumbersome procedures. Short of such reform there is a need for ongoing high profile voter registration events, for example in conjunction with citizenship ceremonies.

Political parties could clearly do far more to engage with immigrants. All of the political parties in the Republic of Ireland now have a bank of experience to draw on. All have immigrant members. However, there seems to be little or no top-down commitment to fostering political integration. This is simply poor leadership. The challenge is not just to mentor some electoral candidates but to work to make local and national government more responsive to a diverse Irish society. In other countries efforts to politically incorporate diverse communities have included ethnic minority consultative committees within the decision-making structure of local authorities. For example, in London during the 1980s, when the city's diverse population was underrepresented in local government, various local authorities put in place Ethnic Minority Consultative Committees. Such committees were given the opportunity to advise on policy and members were co-opted as non-voting members of local authority decision-making committees. Members of Ethnic Minority Consultative Committees were community representatives and over time some of these were elected as councillors. At a time when local government reform is pending there is an opportunity to put in place a system to support immigrant participation in making local authorities more representative of the diverse communities which these serve.

Perspectives of Immigrant Candidates who stood in 2009

One immigrant candidate, who stood in 2009, expressed the belief that political parties are not committed to the inclusion of immigrants. He stated that there is “no willpower in the mainstream political parties” when it comes to migrants. Even though some immigrant candidates did well in 2009, “after the election they just dumped them.” This candidate, who had been approached by a number of political parties to stand in 2009, contested the election as an independent.

Several of the immigrant candidates who performed well in 2009, as both members of political parties and as independents, are not standing in 2014. One who was interviewed for this study had returned to her country of origin. Illness was a factor in the decision of another candidate not to contest the 2014 election, although she did not rule out contesting future elections.

One candidate stated that the abolition of town councils would make it more difficult for immigrants to get elected because the number of votes needed would be considerably higher.

One 2009 candidate who was approached to stand again in 2014 stated that his party and all of the other political parties should do more to promote the positive contribution of immigrants to Irish society so as to make them acceptable candidates in future elections.

Three candidates who had been selected by political parties in 2009 stated that they had not been approached by their party to stand for election in 2014 or otherwise remain involved in politics. One described being surprised at not being approached to contest the 2014 elections, given her relatively good performance in 2009.

One candidate described becoming disillusioned with the political party for which he had stood in 2009. He did not think that it was viable to stand as an independent candidate without support of a political party. Several of the candidates who stood for election in 2009 expressed disappointment at the low numbers of immigrants that turned out to vote.

Perspectives of Polish Candidates Standing in 2014

As part of the research, interviews were undertaken with independent candidates of Polish origin who are standing for election to Dublin City Council in 2014. Here two such candidates explain how and why they came to participate in politics:

Agnieszka Wieczorkowska

In September 2013 Agnieszka Wieczorkowska took part in a Local Government Training Course organised by Forum Polonia and the Polish Leaders Association. Currently she is involved in the **Vote! You are at home** project aimed at encouraging Poles and other minorities to register and vote in the local election in May 2014. Participation in this campaign motivated her to stand for election. She holds a master's degree in psychology and currently is pursuing her Ph.D. at the Academy of Management in Poland. Her research focuses on problems of exclusion of disabled people and minorities as well as people from disadvantaged backgrounds. She lives in Ballymun with her husband and five-year-old daughter Dalia. Agnieszka has been involved in many activities and organisations. She is a member of the Ballymun Intercultural Group, an organisation which works to raise awareness of multiculturalism and promotes integration within Ballymun. She also works with the Polish Community Centre "Biblarz" where she organises art and music workshops for children and workshops for parents about raising children. She is also an active member of the Polish Scouting Association. Agnieszka has co-organised a number of community-based events, such as a celebration of the Intercultural Day in Ballymun in 2012 and 2013, the Career Day in Dublin (in partnership with the Polish Embassy) and free English conversation classes for migrants as well as Irish language courses for parents. She described her motivations for participating in politics in the following terms:

I believe that my own experience as a migrant, as a woman and as a mother and my multicultural background will contribute to the integration of immigrants in Dublin. I think that Dublin City Council needs more diversity. In my opinion, diversity is a value and it is absolutely necessary to build an open and modern community. I would like to see more women and migrants involved in Irish political life. It is our civic duty to participate in the electoral process and people should be aware of their voting rights. We should and we

need to participate in the decision making process that affects our local community. I want to represent everybody in my local community regardless of one's ethnicity or nationality. Briefly speaking, my actions will be aimed at making our local community a better and a safer place to live. I would like to make it more family –friendly place, where children are given the best opportunities to develop their interests and talents and fulfil their aspirations. I would like to also help to improve life of people with disabilities. My work experience and familiarity of the issues facing people with disability will be very helpful here. I have been a social activist for many years. I support and would like to promote civic activism. However, I don't identify myself with any political party ideology. Therefore, I have decided to stand as an independent candidate.

Rafal Kornatka

Rafal Kornatka arrived in Ireland in 2005. In 2008 he graduated from the National University of Ireland in Maynooth obtaining a Higher Diploma in Economic Science. Between 2009 and 2011 he was a trade union representative. In 2013 he became an Irish citizen. At the moment he works for an insurance company in Dublin. He described his reasons for standing for election in the following terms:

I have been an activist my whole life. Whatever I did, I have always tried to help people and really enjoyed it. As a teenager I was involved in many activities at school and as a school president I was organizing school events and I was representing the school at workshops and conferences. I have always wanted to make a difference in people's lives.

When Rafal obtained Irish citizenship he became even more eager to get involved in local community work. He has participated in the organisation of events such as an Intercultural Family Day held in August 2013. He became an Executive Board Member of the Dublin City Community Forum, which is a platform for community and voluntary organisations seeking to exchange information and work collectively on issues relating to the economic, social and cultural development of Dublin City:

I want to work to create a better life for my local community. My aim is also to build a positive image of the Polish community in Ireland. I believe that as a councillor I will have a real impact on the life of my community and the city as well. I want to utilize my skills and experience to provide help and assistance on individual and community issues.

Rafal is standing as an independent candidate because he believes that it will allow him to perform his duties objectively as a councillor. Nevertheless, he is not ruling out the possibility of cooperation with some political parties to achieve common goals in the future. Currently, there are over 30 people in his campaign team. At first, only Poles living in Dublin were involved in his campaign but later people from other countries joined, creating a truly multicultural group.

Issues Identified by Forum Polonia

Polish immigrants make up the largest immigrant community in the Republic of Ireland, numbering more than 2.5 per cent of the population according to the 2011 census. Except for their right to participate in local government elections they are excluded from the electoral process. Forum Polonia has been engaged for a number of years in seeking to encourage the integration of Poles into Irish society by supporting electoral registration and civic and political participation.

In 2008-2009 Forum Polonia ran an information and mobilization campaign 'Give a voice' aimed at increasing numbers of Poles registered and voting in the local elections and at projecting a positive image of Poles to the host community. Active citizenship volunteers received training and these organised a number of registration events. The Polish language media also supported this campaign. 'Give a voice' worked with other immigrant organisations and with local authorities and political parties. The main activities were undertaken in the Dublin area. One of the campaign highlights was a round-table discussion in April 2009 and that was attended by Polish candidates standing for political parties and as independents. Several political parties participated in the event. www.forumpolonia.org/szanse-i-wyzwania-polacy-w-wyborach-lokalnych-irlandia-2009

The most recent voter registration campaign organised by Forum Polonia in cooperation with the School for Leaders Association (Poland) takes account of indications that some members of the Polish community are reluctant to register to vote believing perhaps that such participation would not be welcome by Irish society. In response to this apparent reticence Forum Polonia has been running a campaign **Vote! You are at home**. The campaign is based on a programme developed by the School for Leaders' Association and their campaign 'Your Voice, Your Choice', to support community leaders

and strengthen relationships between communities and local authorities in Poland. This was adapted to suit the social, political and cultural situation in Ireland. By the end of 2013 more than 70 community leaders and activists from around the country along with all 30 Polish weekend schools, 16 Polish parishes and some 20 Polish media outlets had become involved in **Vote! You are at home** campaign.

There are considerable challenges in engaging the Polish community in the political process and the likely long term marginalisation of Ireland's largest immigrant community from the political system is a matter of grave concern. Beyond encouraging immigrants to vote it is crucial that mechanisms are put in place to ensure that local government is responsive to Ireland's diverse communities.

Recommendations

- Political parties in Ireland clearly need to do much more than at present to engage with immigrant communities. Unless they do so they are hardly fit to represent Ireland's diverse communities. All political parties need to have strong outreach programmes aimed at promoting political integration.
- The premise of the **Vote! You are at home** campaign is that many immigrants may not feel welcome to participate in the political system. Political parties need to be more open and welcoming as institutions and need to actively promote the message that they want immigrants to become members and to vote.
- There is a need for ongoing dialogue between political parties and NGOs to promote civic and political participation and to address institutional barriers or perceptions that impede this. There are good examples to build on, such as the Crosscare initiative that enabled some members of immigrant communities to shadow some TDs.
- While several parties appear to have designated persons or groups (Equality Officers, Intercultural Committees etc.) whose remit includes immigrants, the extent to which party leadership supports such work is unclear. The research finds low levels of communication and information sharing in this area within political parties. Without adequate monitoring, reporting and feedback mechanisms, as well as genuine commitment from party leadership, efforts to make parties more inclusive and representative will be ineffective. This point was acknowledged by interviewees in a number of political parties.

- Because the political system effectively excludes immigrants there is an urgent need for proactive and creative ways of fostering immigrant representation in decision-making. For example, political parties might support the appointment of immigrants to boards of state-funded bodies. Local authorities should create consultative committees including immigrants and other stakeholders and involve these directly in decision-making. For example, City and County Councils might set up Diverse City/County Advisory Committees whose members are entitled to contribute to Council meetings.
- A number of existing initiatives promoted by groups such as The New Communities Partnership and Cairde could be built upon. These include the Dublin City Integration Forum, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Ethnic Minority Integration Forum, South Dublin Migrant Integration Forum and the Fingal Ethnic Network. Such Forums disseminate information to migrant communities in council areas, provide a link between their communities and the local people, promote migrants' perspectives in policy matters within the County, provide a space where County officials can present topics of interest and inform migrant communities on developments in the County, among others.
- One suggestion made by a Labour Party official was that electoral registration be promoted at citizenship ceremonies, that new citizens be registered as voters at the same time as they naturalised and at the same event. This would emphasise their duty as citizens to participate in the democratic process.
- Voter registration campaigns are crucial but these need to be evidence-based and better focused. These need to have access to information on levels of voter registration for different immigrant communities.
- Many immigrants seem to be discouraged from registering to vote due to a complicated registration process that includes having to visit a Garda station to get a registration form stamped. The introduction of an online voter registration system is overdue.

Appendix

¹ Fanning B. O'Boyle N. and Shaw J. (2009) *New Irish Politics: Political Parties and Immigrants in 2009* (Dublin: Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative) www.ucd.ie/mcri

Fanning B. Mutwarasibo F. and Chadamoyo N. (2003) *Positive Politics: Participation of Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities in the Electoral Process* (Dublin: Africa Centre) www.africacentre.ie

² Fanning B. Shaw F, O'Connell J. and Williams M. (2007) *Irish Political Parties, Immigration and Integration in 2007* (Dublin: Migration and Citizenship Research Initiative, 2007) www.ucd.ie/mcri

³ Fanning B, Howard K and O'Boyle N. (2011) 'Immigrants in Irish Politics: African and East European Candidates in the 2009 Local Government Elections', *Irish Political Studies*, 25.3, pp. 417-20

⁴ Fianna Fáil (2013), *A Seanad for the People*, www.fiannafail.ie

