

Diversity seeks Council

Councillors with a migration background in German cities

From Karen Schönwälder, Cihan Sinanoglu and Daniel Volkert

On behalf of and edited by the Heinrich Böll Foundation in co-operation with the Mercator Foundation

Executive summary

Do the institutions of our democracy reflect the increasing diversity of our society? For the first time, a study conducted by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity – in co-operation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation and with the support of the Mercator Foundation – has investigated this question concerning the councils of major German cities. In a functioning democracy, the interaction of its institutions with all parts of society is crucial. The degree to which equality and integration have been achieved can be measured, in part, by the participation of immigrants in political decision-making and their access to political power. In the cities, where, in some cases, over a third of the population has an immigrant background, it is especially urgent to overcome the opposition between a diverse society and councils that are still mostly homogeneous.

Issues investigated and design of the study

To what degree are people with immigration backgrounds already represented on German city councils? Is there an observable trend towards a ‘more diverse democracy’? Who manages to become part of local political elites, and how do immigrants’ representatives view their own careers and the conditions under which they unfold? What are the obstacles? For the first time, these questions have been systematically researched regarding the major German cities, i.e. the 77 cities with at least 100.000 inhabitants. As Berlin, Bremen, and Hamburg are not only cities, but also regional states, they are not part of this study, yet we offer some commentary on the experiences in Berlin and the lessons they may hold for other cities. The study is based on three sources:

1. An evaluation of the lists of all candidates running for office, as well as of all council members elected for the period from 2001 until March 2011. For each city, we offer an analysis of two local elections.
2. A standardised questionnaire sent to all city councillors with immigration backgrounds; two-thirds of the addressees responded, i.e. 117 city council members.
3. About thirty interviews with city council members with immigration backgrounds were conducted in order to learn more about their motivations, career paths, and experiences.

The councillors considered are those who were either born outside Germany and came here as immigrants, or those with at least one parent born outside Germany. . If and how this “migration background” has an impact on a career in local politics is the subject of our study.

The overall picture: an upward trend on a low level

The number of immigrants on German city councils is on the rise. City councils elected between 2001 and March 2006 had 116 members with an immigrant background; between September 2006 and March 2011, this number rose to 198. The number of candidates has risen considerably, too – by about 50%.

The reasons for this positive trend are threefold: On the one hand, the number of cities with migrants on their councils has risen. Today only 15 out of 77 councils of major cities (eight of them in West Germany) consist entirely of non-immigrant Germans; before that the number was 24. Further, there now are a number of cities with more

than one councillor that has an immigration background. Finally, all parties have increased the number of councillors with immigration backgrounds.

Still, all city councils are a long way from representing the diversity of city populations. Only 4% of the 4670 city council members are migrants. As over a quarter of the population of major cities has an immigration background, this demographic group is still blatantly underrepresented in city politics. Not a single major city has a percentage of migrants on its council that corresponds to their numbers among the population.

Major differences between cities

There are major differences between cities. Frankfurt am Main is the leader among major German cities; here 15 council members have immigration backgrounds. Offenbach, Duisburg, Ludwigshafen, and Stuttgart do relatively well, too. There are twenty-one cities with four or more council members that have immigration backgrounds. However, it also has to be noted that some cities with a high percentage of immigrants, such as Mannheim, Heilbronn, Ingolstadt, Hagen and Pforzheim, have not a single council member with an immigration background.

Noticeable differential between parties

The openness towards immigrants differs considerably between political parties, as does the degree to which immigrants are drawn towards certain parties. In the big cities, all major political parties have councillors with immigration backgrounds, yet there are vast differences when it comes to numbers. While the Free Democrats (FDP) have eight such councillors, the Social Democrats (SPD) have 68. As measured by the total number of councillors, Die Linke and the Green Party have the highest percentage of immigrants (8%), followed by the SPD (5%), while only about 2% of the Christian Democrats' (CDU/CSU) and the FDP's city councillors have immigration backgrounds.

A number of immigrants with German citizenship, as well as EU citizens, have run for office as candidates for different independent voters' groups. Currently there are 15 such councillors, representing a growing

number of immigrants active outside of political parties; however, no trend has been observed for immigrants to run on purely immigrant lists.

Councillors with immigration backgrounds: many women, many Germans of Turkish origin

There is no such thing as the typical local politician with immigration background. Those active represent manifold biographies and a wealth of political experiences. It is remarkable that the percentage of women among councillors with immigration backgrounds is higher than among councillors without a migration background. Although, among immigrants, too, the percentage of women is below 50%, at 40% it still is higher than the average on German city councils, which is 33%. The commonplace idea that immigrant women are less well integrated than men is untrue. It is quite the opposite – female immigrants jump at the opportunity to take political responsibility.

Regarding the provenance of councillors, it is striking that 76 of them (38%) have a Turkish background. This runs counter to the prejudice that citizens of Turkish origin are especially unwilling to integrate. Another major group are people from EU countries. There are some councillors with an African or Middle Eastern background, yet not a single council member has a Vietnamese or any other Southeast Asian background.

The right of EU citizens to vote and run for office in local elections has had an effect on integration: In our sample, there were 17 councillors in major German cities who are not German citizens.

The majority of councillors with immigration backgrounds immigrated themselves, some as children: about one third were born in Germany. An especially high number came to Germany as family members or to go to university. Migrant workers, on the other hand, are less well represented in local politics, and those who came as refugees have rarely made it to the position of city councillor.

Those who succeed in local politics are often highly educated. In our sample, 66% of councillors had a university degree. Many of them are “educational climbers,” over half of the parents have little or no formal education.

Working on a city council is an honorary activity pursued by citizens who in their majority have a full-time job, still, about one third of them put more than 40 hours per month into their council commitments.

Political careers – manifold experiences

Some important developments in the 1990s created preconditions for the opening of local democracy to social diversity. The majority of councillors in our sample belong to those who naturalized during the 1990s, and by 2000, half of them had joined a German political party. Many of them have extensive experience in party political work, even in leading positions. Among the councillors in our sample, 62% had held an official position within their respective parties before becoming city councillor. However, over a third of those sampled were elected without having to earn their nomination for city councillor by years of party political groundwork.

Councillors with an immigration background bring numerous experiences to their job. Before being elected, many had been active on a foreigner's advisory council – in all 35% of those sampled. Others had been active in a range of political initiatives, within the trade unions, or on citizens' action groups. A small group has had political experience in their countries of origin. However, one out of six councillors sampled first entered politics by becoming a councillor.

Experiences and identifications as migrants

Almost two-thirds of councillors with immigration backgrounds are convinced of having achieved something for their fellow migrants, yet, overall, they do not perceive of themselves as being mainly spokespersons for this group. Many councillors say that their roots in a country other than Germany are important to them, two thirds, however, think of this as being of minor or no importance. About a quarter of those sampled do not perceive themselves as advocates for migrants' interests. Nevertheless, those councillors who regard their foreign roots as less important are also active in targeting their campaigns towards migrants.

Many councillors with an immigrant background have had negative experiences – be it animosity because of their ethnic background or

challenges as to their qualifications. Such negative experiences are widespread across party lines and independent of gender or ethnic background. They are not, however, perceived of as the dominant factor. Overwhelmingly those sampled think that other council members are respecting of them, and they regard their nomination as being a recognition of their expertise and popularity. Still, many notice that they are being pushed into the field of migration / integration politics – something imposed on them from the outside and regarded as questionable.

The need for change within parties and beyond

The majority of those sampled think their parties should do more to enable those with immigration backgrounds to equally participate in party politics. A majority reports that their respective parties have no activities aimed at winning members with immigration backgrounds. There is no panacea for how to improve the representation of those with immigration backgrounds. Possible approaches are to make stronger efforts to win this group, openness towards newcomers, the questioning of existing power structures, and targeted as well as verifiable measures to achieve a party leadership, parliamentary and council groups that represent social diversity.

There are also fundamental structural reasons why immigrants form a negligible part among political elites. The process of migration means that people will have to familiarise themselves with a new political system. Political rights are initially limited for immigrants, and this situation is often of long duration. Hostile attitudes towards certain groups of immigrants form an additional barrier. Socio-economic disadvantage, as experienced by many migrants, is important: time and funds certainly help to win a political office. Those who want to improve the political representation of immigrants are well advised to heed such structural factors.

Mixed results in Berlin

The example of Berlin shows that it is possible to have a sizeable representation of immigrants in politics, nevertheless, there is considerable divergence within the city. Among German states, Berlin is the

leader, 10% of its MPs having immigration backgrounds. The representation of immigrants on Berlin's district councils, though, only meets the German average. Here, some districts have a similar percentage as Germany's top third of cities, other districts, however, have hardly any councillors with immigration backgrounds. The breadth and vitality of social movements likely has a positive effect, as have networks between actors with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds and the acceptance of several parties to embrace leaders with an immigrant background.

The considerable difference between cities also points to the fact that the openness of political institutions is dependent on political culture, social dynamics and a city's politics. The parties do play a key role; councillors are overwhelmingly nominated by political parties. And yet, the increased participation and involvement of all of a city's inhabitants is an issue that goes beyond political parties – and one that does not solely depend on their activities. Diversity within political institutions is a project that concerns society as a whole.

The study was conducted in 2010/2011 at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in co-operation with the Heinrich Böll Foundation and with the support of the Mercator Foundation. The study (in German) is available for download and in print.

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Eine Studie des Max-Planck-Instituts zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften in Kooperation mit der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung und gefördert durch die Stiftung Mercator.

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Herausgegeben von der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

Berlin, November 2011, 80 Seiten

ISBN 978-3-86928-067-7

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