

# How Do Migrants Participate Politically within Restrictive Contexts?

*Citizenship, belonging, and participation in Italy*

How do people with different migrant backgrounds interpret and enact political participation in restrictive institutional contexts? To address this question, this policy brief looks to Italy, where the acquisition of citizenship is a highly demanding process. Further, the right to vote in any election is restricted to Italian citizens. This brief explores how citizenship (or lack thereof), belonging, and political participation interact, revealing how migrants actively participate in the community. It finds that migrants both adapt to and rework institutional structures in order to enact political and social change.

## Brief Points

- Citizenship status determines an individual's access to formal politics.
- In restrictive contexts, migrants nevertheless find ways to engage in political participation. This is often driven by a sense of duty to multiple communities.
- Participation is enacted in formal and informal contexts, inside and beyond the nation-state boundaries.
- Personal and contextual factors can determine both migrants' sense of belonging and their political participation.
- Sense of belonging and political participation influence each other, but not in a causal or unidirectional manner.

**Davide Bertelli** *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

## Introduction

What does it mean to participate politically as a migrant in a country where electoral politics is limited to national citizens? To address this question, this brief explores the links connecting a sense of belonging, political participation, and citizenship in the current context of migration to Western Europe.

Italy became a country of net immigration in the early 1970s. Today, the political and legal structures in the country mostly exclude non-citizens from formally participating in the political system. Only Italian citizens can vote. Furthermore, access to certain positions in the public sector are also restricted, meaning that migrants are effectively closed off from electoral politics both as candidates and as voters. In addition, the process of naturalisation in Italy is highly demanding and time-consuming: the country hosts more than five million long-term, permanent, non-Italian residents who are unable to access the formal channels of participation.

Bridging academic literature on political participation and sense of belonging, I explore the connections between the two. I move beyond the artificially drawn binary between formal and informal participation to argue that, in fact, both modes of participation are complementary and intertwined. Together, they represent an opportunity for activism that migrants can use to implement social and political change. The aim of the research presented in this brief is to study how migrants develop their sense of belonging, and how this is interrelated with participation in the public life of the community of residence. While belonging and participation are interrelated, this does not necessarily imply any causality or dependency between the two: participating politically can strengthen sense of belonging, while a strong sense of belonging can be a vehicle for political participation.

## Data

In the summer of 2018, I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with 26 residents in the Italian province of Brescia. All the participants in the research had a migrant background. Most of them arrived in Italy as documented adult migrants between 1973 and 2006: three arrived in Italy as children born in their countries of origin; two were born in Brescia by migrant parents; and one arrived in Italy as a refugee.

The sample of informants is well balanced in terms of age, gender, geographical origin, citizenship status, level of education, and trade union membership. The diversity of my sample provided an opportunity to explore interpretations, meanings, reflections, and experiences of participation, citizenship, and belonging, from different angles, in a context where both integration processes and transnational ties were varyingly salient.

## Political Participation and Belonging

### Political participation

Political participation is directly influenced by two elements: *context* and *personal background and experiences*. First, context dictates what forms of political participation are available to whom, based on the state's institutional and legal frameworks.

Second, personal background and experiences play a significant role in shaping the forms and extent of an individual's participation. How people interpret and enact political participation depends on a complex web of personal, social, cultural, geographical, and temporal factors.

Considering these two elements, participation is then understood and practiced in a variety of forms, including electoral politics and informal politics (e.g. trade union activism; community organising; and volunteering in cultural, ethnic, and religious associations). Ultimately, migrants have the potential to exert their agency, shaping forms of mobilisation and involvement at the social level which can result in the transformation of existing structures.

### Belonging

It is impossible to isolate sense of belonging from the geographical, temporal, social and discursive elements it is so dependent on. Academic literature argues that belonging is geographically situated and bound to change over time. It is centred on the idea of *feeling at home* and mainly rests on a two-directional process: on the one hand, the individual's self-realisation and self-acceptance of the self as a member of a wider community, and, on the other hand, the wider community's recognition, validation and inclusion of that individual's identity. Personal and political dimensions of belonging are

inextricably linked to each other. The abstract and emotive elements of belonging that individuals experience are strongly joined to the discursive and normative constructions that govern political practice.

### Belonging and political participation

Considering the complex web of political and personal elements that shape belonging, the multi-faceted nature of identity, and each person's varying attachment to and recognition within a community, we see that multiple belonging(s) emerge. These multiple belongings coexist, due to the interrelationship between social, cultural and political influences playing at different geographical scales, from the local to the transnational level.

Migrants' sense of belonging does not necessarily adhere to the geographical, legal, and normative limits imposed by the nation-state. Further, because sense of belonging coexists at different scales, it can be conducive to various forms of political participation. At the same time, political participation can be enacted in the absence of a developed sense of belonging (as, for example, in the case of a felt necessity to become involved in the community). The act of participating may lead to the implementation of political and social change which, in turn, can directly influence the individual's sense of belonging to the community/-ies to which the efforts of their participation are directed.

## Migrants' Political Participation

In the course of this study, many of the migrants that I interviewed talked about their multiple experiences of political participation in Brescia, both in the formal sphere of electoral politics, and in the informal sphere of non-party political activism. These two spheres are often in communication with each other, as they represent channels through which migrants can tackle day-to-day difficulties and challenges. To find a way to participate politically often comes as a result of a deeply felt sense of duty.

For these migrants, getting involved politically is a matter of finding a way through and beyond formal politics. In this way, political and social change can be implemented *around* the barriers posed by institutional structures. To achieve this, migrants in this study expressed the importance of officially organising: the



'Nessuna Risposta, la Lotta Continua!' Photo: la\_sara / Flickr / CC BY-NC-ND

formalisation of existing, informal social groups into organisations and associations can direct the attention of policy makers and society at large onto pressing issues. When asked about what drove them to become an active member of the community, the migrants I interviewed – regardless of citizenship – often described it as happening by chance. My interviewees mentioned certain situations that sparked a desire to become active. These ranged from discrimination in the workplace, political developments at the national level, and the hardening of anti-immigrant rhetoric in Italy, to the transport of dead friends and relatives back to their country of origin.

### Sense of duty

The study found that a sense of duty is commonly associated with a desire to become politically active. Sense of duty among migrants is experienced in three directions: towards newcomers to the country; towards their country of origin; and towards the receiving community in country of residence. First, many migrants consider it their duty to help the new migrants arriving in the city, especially those with a shared cultural and geographical background, making available their personal expertise, experience, knowledge, and networks. This is in order to allow the newcomers a smoother transition to the new country, without having to suffer the same difficulties and hardship as the first migrants.

*We created the associations so that those who came before could help the others. (Anna, 65, from Ukraine, naturalised Italian)*

Second, a sense of duty is also felt towards the communities left behind in the countries of origin: migrants often interpret it as their personal and direct responsibility to offer concrete help to communities living thousands of kilometres away, in the form of remittances, donations of materials and medical equipment, and even educating people to avoid embarking on the dangerous journeys of undocumented migration.

Third, among the migrants I interviewed, a sense of duty is most often interpreted as a sign of thankfulness towards the Italian community that has hosted and welcomed them as migrants. The recurring theme of 'giving back to the Italian community' is mostly associated with the act of voting, which is restricted to Italian citizens. As such, these migrants see their participation in electoral contests (either as candidates, or as voters, or both) as a final stepping stone to complete their journey of inclusion in the wider community, and to officially have a chance to change the system from within. In this sense, voting as a sense of duty is also interpreted as a demonstration of good character and of deservingness of the rights and duties obtained through the acquisition of Italian citizenship.

*We must, we must participate! Because if you don't participate in the social life, in the political life, we will always remain at the margins of society. (Veronyka, 53, from Moldova, naturalised Italian)*

### Participation in associations

The relevance and importance of informal

political participation becomes strikingly clear when we consider the experiences of permanent residents who have not yet been naturalised, and are hence excluded from electoral politics. Informal participation becomes the only channel through which to become active and to implement social change.

Cultural, ethnic, and social organisations and associations represent a key platform for migrants' active engagement in the community of Brescia, alongside religious organisations and trade unions, both of which are strongly rooted in the city. These associations have often been founded out of a necessity to help one another and to overcome common daily issues: practical help and fellowship among members of a community are the enabling elements.

Over time, informal gatherings have transformed into more structured, formal associations and organisations, which today offer a variety of services to their members: not only moral support and social activities, but practical help with monetary donations, document processing, help with citizenship and permit applications, contracts, translations, and issues in the workplace. The remit of these associations and the variety of activities offered strengthens the migrants' multiple belongings, reducing the distances between migrants, their community of residence, and their community of origin.

The ongoing activities of these associations have led to four key consequences in Brescia:

- 14 associations have coalesced into a federation of migrant associations whose main purpose is to promote cooperation and intercultural dialogue in the city;
- The coordination of these associations has also led to the electoral mobilisation of migrant communities;
- The local institutions (political, religious, and lay alike) have come to recognise these migrant associations as social interlocutors in the city; and
- Some of these associations have been acknowledged and supported by the Consulates of the countries of origin of their members, helping to cement the transnational nature of migrant activism.

## (In)formal political participation and belonging

*Those who are active have been so always and regardless. To become a citizen brings you from a smaller box to a bigger box. Sure, I feel safer, more protected, I have more rights. But political participation exists regardless. (Noura, 51, from Syria, naturalised Italian)*

How and to what extent migrants participate politically is directly influenced by not only citizenship status, but also the way in which a sense of belonging develops.

At the same time, sense of belonging can be said to be directly affected by the extent to which migrants are involved in the host community. Migrants' relation to the city of Brescia is in continuous transformation, as it is impacted by political, social, discursive, and cultural dynamics outside of any single migrant's control, as well as by the migrant's self-understanding and role in the community.

The (re)production of daily acts can reinforce attachment and belonging to the city. This then triggers a process of realisation that to enact political and social change, it is necessary to directly and actively participate. In the restrictive Italian context, the link between the right to vote and belonging is articulated differently by those migrants who have naturalised and those who have not: naturalised migrants attach a symbolic meaning to voting, as a concretisation of having become an Italian citizen and a manifestation of belonging.

*[With the right to vote] you make him feel like belonging to the community. (Klajdi, 41, from Albania, naturalised Italian)*

Migrants who have not naturalised express very strong emotions about their inability to vote: the borders and boundaries of citizenship become suddenly visible on election days, when many interviewees describe how they are reminded that they cannot fully belong.

To be excluded from participation on the grounds of what is often perceived as an arbitrary and unfair legal framework generates a mix of frustration and sadness among migrants who see themselves as fully contributing members of the Brescian community. Frustration results from the inability to have a say in electoral politics, despite a strong sense of attachment to Brescia. Sadness is generated by a perception of exclusion from the political system. However, this disempowerment is not accepted passively by migrants: on the contrary, it is often reworked and processed into other forms of political organising.

### Conclusion

Voting emerges from this study as a fundamental form of political participation. Participation in electoral politics is, however, tightly linked to the citizenship status of each migrant. In the case of exclusion from formal politics, there exist other forms of participation where migrants can fulfil their desire and willingness to be active and to contribute to both the community of residence and the community of origin: activism in trade unions, religious organisations, and ethnic and cultural associations is complementary to electoral politics and equally crucial in the migrants' development of sense of belonging.

All these forms of activism constitute an enactment of the migrants' perceived sense of duty. Migrants' sense of duty is articulated in three ways: towards the new immigrants arriving from the same community they originate from; towards the communities the migrants left

behind; and towards the receiving community. The transnational nature of many of the cultural and ethnic associations and organisations migrants are involved in necessarily reinforces the development and coexistence of multiple belongings. These multiple belongings are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are conducive to a recognition of the self as an active and contributing member of geographically distant communities.

The enactment of change at the political and social level happens both through formal and informal political participation. Further, the act of participating reinforces and, at the same time, is reinforced by a sense of belonging. Political participation, whether formal or informal, has the potential to strengthen one's sense of belonging; at the same time, participation can be driven by a well-developed sense of belonging. The relationship between participation and belonging is non-causal and non-dependent: instead, the interaction between the two continuously reshapes the material, geographical, and emotive factors from which they develop. ■

### Further Reading

Horst, Cindy; Marta Bivand Erdal & Noor Jdid (2019) 'The "good citizen": asserting and contesting norms of participation and belonging in Oslo'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2019.1671599.

Horst, Cindy & Odin Lysaker (2019) 'Miracles in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt and Refugees as "Vanguard"'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. DOI: 10.1093/jrs/fez057.

Strømsø, Mette (2019) 'Investigating everyday acts of contributing as "admission tickets" to belong to the nation in Norway'. *Nations and Nationalism*. DOI: 10.1111/nana.12536

Tellander, Ebba & Cindy Horst (2019) 'A foreign policy actor of importance? The role of the Somali diaspora in shaping Norwegian foreign policy'. *Foreign Policy Analysis* 1(1): 136–154.

### THE AUTHOR

Davide Bertelli is a Research Assistant at PRIO. Davide completed his master's degree in Human Geography at the University of Oslo in 2019, with a thesis on sense of belonging and political participation among migrants in Brescia, Italy.

E-mail: [davber@prio.org](mailto:davber@prio.org)

### THE PROJECT

The 'Governing and Experiencing Citizenship in Multicultural Scandinavia' (GOVCIT) project was funded by the Research Council of Norway (2016–2019). It has explored relationships between citizenship policies and experiences of belonging in individuals' everyday lives.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.