Language in public participation:

Understanding and overcoming language and culture barriers in the political participation of people of migrant origin

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A report by Iker Erdocia

2023

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

As is the case in any other social domain, political life is constituted in and by language. In the political sphere, language crucially serves as a medium of communication, encompassing the dissemination of political messages, the presentation of agendas, the discussion of ideas and the negotiation of policies. However, language is not only a neutral tool for communication. Research in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics has shown the multifaceted nature of language, which is inherently entangled with culture and identity and it is indexed to the social, cultural and economic status of speakers. Language, along with other factors such as nationality, ethnicity and race, influences how individuals are perceived by the public and how they perceive themselves in social contexts.

Understanding the intricate relationship between language, culture and identity in the symbolic field of politics, a neglected area of inquiry, is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant candidates standing for election to local council. This task is even more important in the Irish context where migrant people are vastly underrepresented in politics.

Drawing on interviews with 13 people of migrant origin, this project documents in their own words their perceptions and experiences about the language and culture challenges they encounter in the course of their political activity at the local level in Ireland. More precisely, this study delves into the nature of linguistic and cultural barriers and their influence on the political pursuits of migrant candidates, while also exploring potential strategies that will allow greater access to public participation.

The main findings of the study are:

— Most of the migrant participants in this study do not consider language as a barrier to their particular political involvement. A few participants with English as an additional language (EAL) encounter minor communication issues, but believe that these have minimal political impact. However, the pressure to meet high English proficiency standards may deter other migrant individuals from entering mainstream politics.

— Listener expectations regarding migrant candidates' language, combined with factors like cultural background and ethnicity, can lead to prejudice and micro-aggressions during initial encounters, affecting perceptions of trustworthiness. These negative experiences occur primarily in informal interactions with the public, not within institutional settings like city councils or political parties.

— The response of candidates to instances of language-related discrimination highlights the significance of strategies such as building the resilience and self-confidence of candidates, promoting diversity awareness among constituencies and fostering inclusive spaces for civic engagement within communities. Participants consider language-related biases and other prejudices as potential obstacles to both the electoral success of migrant candidates and the active engagement of migrant individuals in politics.

Overall, the report highlights that political bias often arises from perceptions of foreignness, and that these are triggered by language and culture-related factors such as non-Irish accents and other identity markers not typically associated with Ireland. In short, migrant candidates may face prejudice irrespective of their language skills. Therefore, the report strongly recommends that legal protections and integration initiatives, such as strategies and action plans by institutions, political parties and civic organisations, should incorporate a broader perspective on language, moving beyond an understanding of the notion of the language barrier in integration being solely related to a lack of English proficiency (see last section (p. 33) for a complete list of recommendations and proposals). This perspective entails acknowledging derogatory comments and abusive behaviours tied to accents, English varieties, speech patterns, and other distinctive linguistic features as manifestations of racism and xenophobia.

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Introduction: Background and context

According to the 2022 census of Ireland, non-Irish citizens account for 12 percent of the population and of course there are also many migrants who have adopted Irish citizenship. People from migrant backgrounds have an increasing impact on the Irish economy and society and significant effort has been made to integrate them[1][2][3]. However, the level of political engagement of migrant communities is significantly low. While the number of candidates of migrant origin in local elections[4] has increased slightly (37 candidates in 2009; 31 in 2014; 53 in 2019)[5][6][7], migrants are chronically underrepresented within the Irish political system[8].

In 2019, 53 of almost 1,900 candidates running for election to local councils were naturalised/non-Irish citizens and only nine were elected[9]. According to population figures included in the 2016 census, 86 "New Irish" councillors should have been elected in the 2019 local elections for the representation of migrants to be proportionate[10]. At the national level, the representation is even worse, with no non-Irish national or naturalised Irish national among the 166 members elected to Dáil Éireann. Hence, the society has not managed to integrate migrants sufficiently in the political process[11].

1   O'Connor, A., Ciribuco, A., & Naughton, A. (2017). *Language and migration in Ireland*. Immigration Council of Ireland. https://immigrantcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/2020–05/Strength%20in%20Diversity%20FULL%20REPORT%20FINAL%20060520.pdf.

2   Lima, V., Buczkowska, T., & Chaudhury, P. (2022). *Running in local elections in Ireland:* A toolkit for candidates from a migrant background. Immigration Council of Ireland. https://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/2022–11/Running%20in%20local%20elections%20in%20Ireland%20-%20A%20toolkit%20for%20candidates%20from%20a%20migrant%20background.pdf.

3   Social Change Initiative. (2018). *Attitudes towards refugees, immigrants and national identity in Ireland*. https://www.socialchangeinitiative.com/attitudes-towards-refugees-immigrants-and-national-identity-in-ireland".

4   All residents of Ireland, irrespective of their nationality, can vote and run in local elections.

5   McGinnity, F., Fahey, E., Quinn, E., Arnold, S., Maitre, B., & O'Connell, P. (2018). *Monitoring report on integration 2018*. ESRI and Department of Justice and Equality. https://emn.ie/files/p_201811071011402018_MonitoringReportonIntegration.pdf.

6   Kavanagh, A. (2014, January 2). New Irish (Non-Irish/UK nationals) candidates contesting the 2014 local elections. Retrieved 31 October 2023, from Irish Elections: Geography, Facts and Analyses website. https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2014/01/02/new-irishnon-irishuk-nationals-candidates-contesting-the-2014-local-elections/.

7   Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). (2019). *Ireland and the convention on the elimination of racial discrimination*. https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2022/08/IHREC_CERD_UN_Submission_Oct_19.pdf.

8   O'Boyle, N., Fanning, B., & Di Bucchianico, V. (2016). Polish immigrants and the challenges of political incorporation in the Republic of Ireland. *Irish Political Studies, 31*(2), 204–222.

9   IHREC (2019).

10 Kavanagh, A. (2018, October 30), New Irish (non-Irish/UK nationals) candidates contesting the 2019 local elections. Retrieved 31 October 2023, from Irish Elections: Geography, Facts and Analyses website. https://adriankavanaghelections.org/2018/10/30/new-irish-non-irish-uk-nationals-candidates-contesting-the-2018-local-elections/.

11 Pszczółkowska, D., & Lesińska, M. (2022). One step forward, two steps back in political integration: Why are Polish candidates not making progress in Irish local elections? *Irish Political Studies, 37*(1), 125–146.

Research on migrant engagement in Irish politics[12 13 14 15 16] has highlighted infrastructural, socioeconomic and motivational factors underpinning the imparity in political participation. Most frequently, these studies highlight the lack of knowledge among migrants about the political system and electoral procedures, including running for and voting in elections[17]. Compared with native Irish candidates, migrant candidates are also more prone to experience discrimination and racism, with one third of the candidates included in a study about the experiences of migrant candidates in the 2019 local elections reporting cases of discrimination and racial harassment during the campaign[18].

These studies suggest that language proficiency may be a potential barrier to migrant representation in politics. Certainly, language is often regarded as a key predictor for social and political integration among migrants in receiving societies, including in multilingual Ireland[19]. According to the 2022 census, 751,507 people (14.5 percent of the total population) speak a foreign language at home. Out of those, 57 percent reported that they spoke English very well, while an additional 26 percent stated they spoke English well. Meanwhile, 11 percent indicated that they did not speak English well, and 2 percent that they did not speak it at all.

Within the aforementioned studies and strategic plans aimed at fostering migrant integration, the conception of language as a *barrier, disadvantage* or *weakness* for migrants is confined to the notions of a lack of proficiency, a linguistic deficiency[20] or "poor English language skills"[21]. Consequently, the ensuing measures and actions recommended for institutions and NGOs revolve around providing migrant people with English language courses.

However, as will be shown in this report, language-based discrimination arises in some circumstances regardless of the proficiency of migrant speakers. It follows that oversimplified characterisations of the *language barrier* as only a matter of "poor English" overlook other sources of potential language-based discrimination, which remain unaddressed in institutional initiatives to tackle discriminatory behaviours and practices in society. Since language has not been one of the foci of previous studies and strategies, little is known about the extent to which and the ways in which language and culture may hinder migrants' participation in the specific realm of political life. Even beyond the Irish context, this relationship has not been researched thoroughly[22] and has normally only focused on migrants as voters[23].

12 Fanning, B., & O'Boyle, N. (2010). Immigrants in Irish politics: African and East European candidates in the 2009 local government elections. *Irish Political Studies*, 25(3), 417–435.

13 Okigbo, E. A. (2014). Immigrant political integration in Ireland: Unpacking the puzzle. *African Identities*, 12(2), 152–164.

14 Szlovak, P. (2017). Exploring the reasons for migrant under-representation in Irish electoral politics: The role of Irish political parties. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 40*(5), pp. 851–870.

15 Lima, V. (2020). *Strength in diversity: The experience of migrant candidates in the 2019 local election.* Immigrant Council of Ireland.

16 Pszczółkowska, D., & Lesińska, M. (2022).

17 McGinnity, F., Enright, S., Quinn, E., Maitre, B., Privalko, I., Darmody, M., & Polakowski, M. (2020). *Monitoring report on integration 2020.* Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Research Series. https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BKMNEXT403_0_0.pdf

18 Lima, V. (2020).

19 McGinnity et al. (2020).

20 Ramjattan, V. A. (2022). Accenting racism in labour migration. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 42,* 87–92.

21 Lima, V. (2020: 21).

22 Piller, I. (2016). *Linguistic diversity and social justice: An introduction to applied sociolinguistics.* Oxford University Press.

23 Parkin, M., & Zlotnick, F. (2011). English proficiency and Latino participation in US elections. *Politics & Policy*, 39(4), 515–537.

Against this background, this study aims to shed light on the relationship between language and political participation. More specifically, the research seeks to:

(a) understand the language and culture challenges that migrant actors encounter in their engagement with politics;

(b) assess the nature of language-related bias and its effects, jointly with culture-related and other forms of bias, on the political endeavours of migrant candidates;

(c) identify patterns in the strategies that migrant candidates use to counter language and culture challenges in order to produce recommendations.

The following three questions will guide the study:

(1) What is the impact of the language barrier, understood as language competence, on migrants' participation and representation in institutional political life in Ireland?

(2) What kind of language-related biases do migrant people involved in politics encounter in the course of their public engagement?

(3) How do migrant candidates react to language-related challenges and counter their effects?

Political integration of migrants

In order to enhance trust within migrant communities and ensure a healthy democratic society, it is imperative that political participation is fully open to everyone, provided by law, and reflects the diversity of Irish society. Various initiatives at both international and national levels have been proposed to achieve these goals. For instance, Action 16.7 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals is to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels"[24]. The Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe[25] refer to the participation of minorities in public affairs, indicating that states should adopt measures to ensure effective participation in democratic decision-making processes and bodies.

At the national level, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has proposed on several occasions the active promotion of equal political participation of members of minority ethnic communities to tackle the lack of diversity in political representation. Proposals have included, among other targeted interventions, reserving seats in parliament and local government for minority ethnic candidates and introducing a quota system in the selection of candidates by political parties as a complementary measure to the introduction of gender quotas[26].

In the same vein, the Irish Government's Migrant Integration Strategy (2017–2021) advocates that migrants play a full role in Irish society[27]. The strategy states that public institutions should work together to facilitate the integration of migrants, including through them participating in public life and contributing to policy development. Some of the proposed actions include offering multilingual electoral materials to increase the proportion of non-Irish nationals registered to vote and facilitating the participation of migrants, particularly migrant women, in local and national politics. Political parties and NGOs would be the responsible bodies for these actions.

At a more grassroots level, NGOs such as New Communities Partnership, the Immigrant Council of Ireland, Nasc and AkiDwA work actively towards the civic and political inclusion of migrants and refugees. The Immigrant Council of Ireland runs the Migrant-Councillor Internship Scheme, a mentoring programme that pairs migrants with local councillors and provides practical educational experience to migrants who are interested in Irish politics.

However, despite some progress in these areas, the Monitoring Report on Integration remarks that "much work is needed to ensure migrants are included in the political life of the State"[28]. The present study aims to contribute to reducing inequality in political participation by exploring the overarching impact of language on the political experience of migrant candidates.

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24 United Nations (2015). *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. https://sdgs.un.org/goals

25 OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. (2012). *The Ljubljana guidelines on integration of diverse societies*. HCNM Office.

26 IHREC (2019).

27 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2019). *Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2020*. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5a86da-the-migrant-integration-strategy-2017-2020/

28 McGinnity et al. (2020: 95).

The right to non-discrimination on the basis of language is enshrined in international and national law. For example, the Human Rights Act makes it illegal to discriminate against anyone on grounds including "sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth or other status"[29]. Discrimination or bias is an unfair inclination for or against a person or a group. It involves the association of values-based attributes (e.g., positive–negative, reliable–unreliable) with social categories such as nationality, race, gender and language.

While language, understood as named languages, is thus a category on the basis of which it is illegal to discriminate in many countries, legislation does not normally offer legal protection against, for example, accent-based prejudice. In the Irish context, the issue of negative prejudice related to accent is not entirely novel in political and policy-making deliberations. The Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021, presently under consideration in Dáil Éireann, aims to establish legal safeguards against class-based and accent-based discrimination in the workplace context. However, discrimination on the grounds of accent or language is still absent from important initiatives such as the National Action Plan Against Racism[30].

29 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014. https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/enacted/en/pdf

30 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. (2023). *National action plan against racism.* https://inar.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/National-Action-Plan-Against-Racism-2.pdf.

Language and participation

Language plays a key role in the ability of newcomers to integrate into host societies. The acquisition of a language of wider communication in a society is normally considered the basis for a functioning social, labour and economic life and a first step in the process of integration. Because social and political participation is mediated by language, having proficiency in the national or main language(s) is needed for full participation in democratic life.

Language (understood here as named languages, language varieties and individual linguistic repertoires) is not just a neutral tool for communication. Instead, it is often associated with differential access to various social, economic and political resources. Language is, therefore, one of the factors involved in the constitution of disadvantage, subordination and exclusion and the perpetuation of social hierarchies. Understanding language-related challenges in participation in public life is vital to fostering equality of access and harmonising the success of political actors regardless of their background.

Socially and legally, biases associated with accents seem to be more acceptable and encounter less resistance compared to discrimination based on race, religion or gender. In social sciences research, language has often been omitted from the range of factors that may lead to discrimination suffered by individuals and groups in social practices and institutional structures. However, relatively recent theoretical and empirical work under the broad umbrella of linguistic justice[31], most notably in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and political philosophy, has brought language to the fore in the research agenda on inequality, discrimination and oppression. Applied linguistic and sociolinguistic scholars have articulated approaches and conceptual tools such as *linguicism*[32], *raciolinguistics*[33] and *linguistic racism*[34] to examine imbalances in power dynamics among speakers based on language.

Language-related bias or discrimination is an explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious prejudice against someone that is based on language and that can have real implications for the career opportunities, social mobility or personal well-being of that person. This kind of discrimination results, for example, in one dominant language or a small group of privileged languages being favoured to the detriment of others in similar ways to societal structuring through sexism, racism and classism[35]. According to this *inter*linguistic understanding of linguistic justice, while certain languages are attributed with desirable characteristics for reasons such as usefulness or high prestige (e.g., the dominant language of the host country), non-valued languages are sometimes associated with negative attributes (e.g., national minority or foreign languages are considered of little utilitarian value).

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31 Van Parijs, P. (2011). *Linguistic justice for Europe and for the world*. Oxford University Press.

32 Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2015). Linguicism. In C. A. Chapelle (ed.), *The encyclopedia of applied linguistics*. Blackwell.

33 Rickford, J. R. (2016). *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*. Oxford University Press.

34 Dovchin, S. (2020). Introduction to special issue: Linguistic racism. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 23*(7), 773–777.

35 Phillipson, R. (2015). Linguistic imperialism of and in the European Union. In H. Behr and Y. Stivachtis (eds.), *Revisiting the European Union as an empire* (pp. 134–163). Routledge.

On the other hand, the *intra*linguistic dimension[36] of linguistic justice concentrates on the differences among speakers within one single language. More specifically, it deals with contexts and domains in which different repertoires of speakers of a given named language are valued differently. These internal differences include linguistic repertoires associated with regional, class-based, ethnic and non-standard varieties which co-exist alongside the standard language. In other words, the focus is now on the ways in which linguistic discrimination intersects with gender, class and racial discrimination. Similar to other kinds of discrimination, language discrimination can take many forms, ranging from blatant acts of violence to subtle micro-aggressions conveyed through daily derogatory remarks[37].

The notion of language-based prejudice is closely related to the concept of language ideology, namely, conceptions of the nature, use and functions of language[38]. One example of such language ideological beliefs is so-called *native-speakerism*,[39] the construct that positions native speakers of a language as superior to non-native speakers. Another example is *accentism*, the practice that normalises certain accents following a restrictive idea of native-speakerism while casting doubts on foreign or non-standard accents because of the stereotypes that they evoke in some listeners[40]. Speakers who differ from the standard form may be judged, marginalised and penalised for the way their accent sounds. Accent-related and other kinds of language-related discrimination matter[41].

Returning to the idea noted in Introduction Section, the so-called *language barrier* goes beyond a lack of language proficiency. As Bourdieu reminds us, social acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality or proficiency in the dominant language[42]. This occurs because speakers lacking legitimate competence, as conferred by the status, position, rank and other non-linguistic characteristics of the speaker, might be not accepted or properly listened to. This results in a de facto exclusion from the social domains, such as politics, in which this symbolic competence is required. Language is, therefore, a key component in the symbolic struggle for recognition and legitimation that is waged in politics, a domain firmly characterised by ingrained notions such as community membership, sense of belonging, proximity and representation.

36 De Schutter, H. (2020) Intralinguistic justice. In Y. Peled and D. Weinstock (eds.), *Language ethics* (pp. 146–177). McGill-Queen's University Press.

37 Piller, I. (2016).

38 Kroskrity, P. V. (2004). Language ideologies. In A. Duranti (ed.), *A companion to linguistic anthropology* (pp. 496–517). Blackwell.

39 Holliday, A. (2005). *The struggle to teach English as an international language*. Oxford University Press.

40 Lippi-Green, R. (2012). *English with an accent: Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States*. Routledge.

41 Peled, Y., & Bonotti, M. (2019). Sound reasoning: Why accent bias matters for democratic theory. *The Journal of Politics, 81*(2), 411–425.

42 Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.

Conceptual and terminological remarks

This study adopts a broad conceptualisation of language as a socioculturally situated and embodied practice. The use of the term *language* is not intended to conform to any disciplinary boundaries and refers, instead, to any phenomena involving language, society and culture. The report follows an understanding of culture as essentially a relational and communicative phenomenon. Consequently, the use of *language, language-related barriers* and similar expressions in the report is intended to involve the cultural dimension of interactive phenomena.

Language intersects with intercultural communication, culture and the identity of individuals and groups. Identity is not taken as structurally determined or ascribed to a single group-defined category. In other words, this research departs from essentialist notions of identity, according to which there is a direct relationship between language, cultural affiliation and group membership.

Migrant refers in this report to first-generation people who arrived in Ireland from another country, regardless of their citizenship status in Ireland. The reason for excluding the descendants of first-generation migrants in this study is that language is a factor that seems to play a less important role in the integration of people who were born and educated in the host country[43].

There is no overall agreement around the meaning, dimensions or modes of action of political participation. The continuous expansion of the repertoire of forms of participation in democratic life makes this even more complex. This study adopts a narrow approach to political participation, which is understood as active engagement within conventional institutional structures with the aim of managing collective affairs and representing fellow citizens. Participation here entails political actors' activities that are mediated predominantly through political parties in institutional settings; specifically, in this report, at the local level. In short, the focus here is on electoral and institutional politics in local government.

A working assumption made in this study is that candidates in local politics in Ireland must be proficient in English. This assumption is made on the basis that English is the dominant language in Irish society and that most of mainstream politics in Ireland is conducted through the medium of English. However, this does not imply that multilingualism should not have a place in institutional politics or that it must only be in the vernacular[44]. The role of the Irish language or of foreign languages in the political realm of the country lies outside the scope of this study; but it does not intend to support a monolingual habitus or viewpoint that monolingualism is the norm in the wide range of political activities throughout the country.

A final remark needs to be made about the nature of the realm of politics. As is the case with other social structures, the political field is characterised by its hierarchical and competitive nature. It is therefore conceived in this study as a terrain of struggle for resources and, ultimately, power.

43 Erdocia, I. (2020). Language rights and groups of immigrant origin: The case of language claims in the Spanish cities in North Africa. *Language Problems and Language Planning, 44*(2), 146–169.

44 Cf. Kymlicka, W. (2001). *Politics in the vernacular: Nationalism, multiculturalism, and citizenship.* Oxford University Press.

Methodological procedure

Due to the limited prior research on language issues in the specific social domain of politics, the complexity of the relationship between language and political participation, and the small number of migrant candidates who stand for election in Ireland, the research design is exploratory in nature and follows a qualitative approach, consisting of data from interviews with political actors.

In order to qualify for participation in this study, individuals had to (1) be first-generation migrants in Ireland, and (2) demonstrate substantial involvement in institutional politics at the local level. Substantial involvement encompasses various forms, such as holding official positions within local government, standing as candidates in past or forthcoming elections, or having initiated formal processes towards such political candidacies or engagement with political parties.

Once ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of DCU's Faculty of Humanities and Social Science was granted, a total of 35 potential participants were approached, of whom 13 responded affirmatively; a response rate of 37 percent. There are 10 female and three male participants. Five are currently councillors, with an additional five participants who have contested or shortly will contest local elections; the other three are considering formal political participation in elections. They are located in both rural and urban areas throughout the country. Participants migrated from a diverse range of countries, from across Africa, Asia and Europe. Four have a variety of English other than Irish English as a first language, while the other nine have English as an additional language.

The interviews with the participants followed a semi-structured format. They were guided by a set of predetermined questions designed to open up topics and allow respondents to share their perceptions and experiences, as well as to steer the conversation in different directions. The questions were clustered as follows:

- background details, including linguistic information
- general perceptions about integration in Irish society
- personal political engagement both in Ireland and in countries of origin
- barriers to political participation, with a focus on language-based challenges
- experiences of bias, with a focus on language-related discrimination
- relationship between language, culture and identity in political activity
- proposals and suggestions to overcome language-related challenges in politics

The interviews were conducted online and in English in the period from February to October 2023. They had an average duration of 40 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Analytical method

The analytical approach relies on latent content analysis, a framework that uses concepts and theory to identify patterns in the data. This framework assumes that meaning is not always superficial and that making it clear requires uncovering contextual cues and connections, and interpretation. The initial part of the analysis was deductive and driven by the focus of the three questions guiding the study: language competence, language bias and reactions to language challenges. The second part consisted of both deductive searches driven by concepts associated with the categories found in the initial part and inductive coding to find additional patterns within each of the categories. After establishing a first set of codes, the relationships between these codes were considered, to form subcategories that represent a higher level of abstraction in the data than the initial codes; and these were grouped in relation to the three areas of focus of the study. The presentation of the findings follows the structure resulting from the analysis (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories and subcategories used in the analysis, and their interrelationship

Code	Categories	Code	Subcategories
A1	Language competence for political participation	A1.1	Communicative skills
		A1.2	Politics in English as an additional language
		A1.3	Irish English and cultural references
		A1.4	Intercultural communication
A2	Language bias in political participation	A2.1	Perception of competence
		A2.2	Credibility
		A2.3	Clarity and understanding
		A2.4	Cultural biases
B	Reactions to language-related challenges	B1	Resilience
		B2	Safe and welcoming spaces
		B3	Accent and identity
		B4	Mediation and representation

Findings

A1. Understanding: Language competence for political participation

" *Language is something which is a significant barrier or a challenge with the migrant communities* "

As social life is constituted by communication, language is a factor that may impair the participation of some migrant people in the public sphere. This section explores the role of language competence as a potential barrier to communication and its impact on the everyday political involvement of individuals with a migrant background. *Language competence* is defined as the range of available linguistic resources that a speaker can mobilise to carry out a social activity.

The section attempts to answer the following question:

What is the impact of the language barrier, understood as language competence, on migrants' participation and representation in institutional political life in Ireland?

> Structure:
>
> — A1.1. Communicative skills
> — A1.2. Politics in English as an additional language
> — A1.3. Irish English and cultural references
> — A1.4. Intercultural communication

A1.1. Communicative skills

Political candidates must have an infrastructure in place to have a successful career, including a strategic plan, a team of collaborators, financial backing, support from the party and a network in the community. They also need the transferable skills that are required in daily political life, such as leadership, decision-making, problem-solving and negotiation skills. Since politics is primarily realised through language, one skill stands out in the context of this study: communication. Candidates must be skilled in clearly structuring ideas, persuasively conveying a message, sounding convincing, showing active listening and projecting self-assurance. The following reflections from two participants illustrate the relevance of language and communication in the political endeavour.

> Excerpt 1
>
> I think language is of huge importance in general. I think the accent you have, the way you speak, definitely influence how people react to you. If they can't understand what you're saying, which is one of the main barriers, so if you're trying to communicate and you're not being understood, then you're not getting your message across. So that definitely has an impact. (Participant 1)

> **Excerpt 2**
>
> Identity is important and when you link it with the language barrier ... let's say, if I am running a campaign or I'm showcasing something and my language is not very proficient for the listeners, they might not listen to me. Of course, when they're not listening to me, they won't listen what I am telling, what is my agenda, what is my notion of social-political change, what is my policy, how I'm going to change Ireland and all that. (Participant 6)

It is important to clarify at this point that all of the participants are of the belief that their own pronunciation and accent are clear enough and do not pose problems for understanding and effective communication.

Communicative skills are an essential part of the political capital of any candidate, including those with English as an additional language (EAL), who are expected to have a high proficiency level in English. It is probably unsurprising that the candidates included in this study have a very good command of communicative skills in English. The majority of participants have been living in Ireland for an extended period, received formal education in English, or pursued professional careers in English-speaking environments. Consequently, when it comes to linguistic proficiency, participants generally do not view language as a major hindrance to their political activities, regardless of whether English is their first or second language. However, it is worth mentioning that a small number of EAL participants recognise that they sometimes experience minor communication issues (see Section A1.2).

As the participant in Excerpt 1 suggests, the ability of candidates to communicate clearly influences the way they are perceived by others. It is important to note here that language-related challenges involve dimensions other than linguistics alone, conceived as an autonomous system of structures and meanings disconnected from social and ideological structures. Simply put, language is not simply a neutral means of communication. This point will be taken up more in Section A2.

Finding: In general, the participants have good communicative skills and high proficiency in English, but a small number of participants acknowledge occasional minor communication issues.

A1.2. Politics in English as an additional language

Factors such as education in English, time residing in the country, quantity of exposure to the language, and multilingual practices in the private sphere play a role in the development of linguistic competence of those who do not have English as a first language. As anticipated, the findings show that issues associated with linguistic competence can pose occasional difficulties for this category of participant in some circumstances. Excerpt 3 illustrates the experience of one of these participants.

> **Excerpt 3**
>
> Obviously as an immigrant or migrant, I have my own mother language that's called [X] and we always used to speak [X] at home or anywhere. That was my first language. But English language, definitely there is barrier, because that's not the first language. That's why I felt a little bit difficulty to face that. Because sometimes if you cannot express what you want to say, yes, it is a problem you will face. (Participant 5)

When asked if they could avail themselves of some specific training to address any language-related limitations, candidates reported that the support from their political parties does not include specific English language-focused training.

While issues associated with language competence only apply to a small number of participants, they are nonetheless indicative of a potential barrier that could dissuade some actors contemplating active involvement in politics from pursuing this path. In support of this point, many participants recognise that the lack of language proficiency represents an actual barrier for some migrant people with whom they have collaborated in a range of political activities. The following fragment captures some of the difficulties faced by people with English as an additional language.

> **Excerpt 4**
>
> Having lived in Ireland for over [X] decades, you get accustomed or fairly acquainted with the language [...] Now, for people that haven't lived in Ireland as long as I have, maybe English is not their first language, that might be a barrier for sure, where you don't get the message initially and it has to be explained. And when you're explaining, you lose the humour, for example, in a conversation. Personally, I don't have that barrier, but I understand how people that haven't lived as long in Ireland would be faced with that as a barrier. (Participant 7)

This comment illustrates how the lack of a high level of proficiency in English can pose a challenge to the political engagement of migrants. Along the same lines, another participant shares their direct experience of helping migrant people get involved in politics. Excerpt 5 provides an example of the feelings and beliefs of some migrant people about their English skills.

> **Excerpt 5**
>
> And I'm just training them to do even better than I have done and helping them understand. That's their accent, and a lot of them worry about that. "What if people don't understand me?" And I say, "but do you understand Irish people when they speak?" And they're like, "no, sometimes they're too fast". I say, "So you don't understand them; they don't understand you. But the bottom line is you've got the heart to serve. So if you help them understand that then you will not be afraid when they are speaking." (Participant 3)

In the same vein, other participants express the idea that as long as candidates are able to interact successfully with others and are given the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment and willingness to serve the communities, language proficiency no longer represents an impediment to other forms of political engagement. Serving and getting problems solved, they argue, are more important than having high proficiency in English or sounding Irish.

Finding: While it is not the case for the vast majority of participants with English as an additional language in this study (who were, of course, selected on the basis of already having substantial involvement in politics), the perceived pressure of meeting high English proficiency expectations may deter migrant people from entering mainstream politics.

A1.3. Irish English and cultural references

The participants indicate that features of language such as uniquely Hiberno-English words, idioms and pronunciation do not represent a communication problem for them. Most of them have incorporated Irish English words and expressions into their repertoires, though to different extents.

The participants share a strong sense of awareness of the direct relationship between the way they speak English and their personal and group identity. They express their inclination to maintain most features of their idiolect rather than assimilating themselves linguistically by attempting to speak English by imitating "the Irish way". This aspect and the relationship between language and identity will be expanded on in Section B3.

Political conversations are not only limited to issues involving local communities. They also revolve around cultural, social and historical aspects of Ireland. The participants report that they are not always familiar with cultural references or do not have the specific knowledge referred to in such discussions, as Excerpt 6 exemplifies.

> **Excerpt 6**
>
> **I didn't get my primary [and] secondary education here so some of the learnings in terms of the Irish history, I wouldn't have those. So in an environment where history has been talked about or the troubles, for example, I always try to stay quiet and let people who have the experience, who have families who have had the experience, take over the conversation more. (Participant 1)**

The participants note that, while this lack of shared cultural references might affect the involvement of candidates in very particular situations, it does not pose a problem or barrier in their daily political life.

Finding: Features of Irish English do not pose a barrier to communication for the participants. Some may lack familiarity with specific cultural knowledge during occasional political discussions but this does not impede their political activity.

A1.4. Intercultural communication

Research on intercultural communication has identified common misunderstandings in multicultural settings. They include verbal factors, such as the intended meanings in chosen vocabulary, distinct combinations of words and speech rhythms, as well as non-verbal factors, such as non-shared cultural conventions and expectations, and different perceptions of a given situation by people who have different cultural backgrounds.

Interestingly, however, the participants in the present study do not recall any cases in which cross-cultural differences resulted in any significant misunderstanding or limitation in communication in their daily political life. In addition, they do not refer to non-shared cultural norms as a potential obstacle in the activity of other political actors.

Again, most participants argue that because they have been residing in the country for a long period of time, they tend to experience few issues related to intercultural communication. This point is illustrated in the following fragment in which one participant explains the importance of pragmatic elements such as humour or sarcasm for social relationships in the Irish context.

> **Excerpt 7**
>
> **Having lived in Ireland for over two decades, you get accustomed or fairly acquainted with the language and thankfully, I'm able to kind of pick when there's humour or sarcasm, as it were, banter, and engage in it as well, which also helps to build relationships as well and helps people to feel comfortable around you. (Participant 8)**

As this fragment shows, the ability to adapt to existing linguistic practices and to communicate within that environment are key assets for full integration into Irish society and, probably, for achieving a successful political career. From an intercultural perspective, communication in the political realm is not considered so much as a dynamic process of mutual adaptation to the interactions between dominant and underrepresented group members. Instead, the notion of effective communication is understood as the acquisition and use by acting and potential politicians of the linguistic practices of the host country. That said, this does not mean that participants simply acculturate into the dominant society in their political capacity. Rather, this process often results in an intercultural identity within individuals. As will be explained in Section B3, in many cases migrants undergo a process of adaptation to the dominant culture in the political sphere while maintaining some aspects of their personal linguistic repertoires and cultures.

Finding: Intercultural communication does not seem to pose a problem for the participants due to their familiarity with linguistic practices in Ireland and their nuanced intercultural identity.

Table 2. The four areas that participants talked about that relate to language competence for political participation, with a quote illustrating each of them.

Code	Finding	Example
Communicative skills (A1.1)	In general, the participants have good communicative skills and high proficiency in English, but a small number of participants acknowledge occasional minor communication issues.	"Language is of huge importance in general. I think the accent you have, the way you speak, definitely influence how people react to you."
Politics in English as an Additional Language (A1.2)	While it is not the case for the vast majority of participants with English as an additional language in this study, the perceived pressure of meeting high English proficiency expectations may deter migrant people from entering mainstream politics.	"Personally, I don't have that barrier, but I understand how people that haven't lived as long in Ireland would be faced with that as a barrier."
Irish English and cultural references (A1.3)	Features of Irish English do not pose a barrier to communication for the participants. Some may lack familiarity with specific cultural knowledge during occasional political discussions but this does not impede their political activity.	"I didn't get my primary secondary education here so some of the learnings in terms of the Irish history, I wouldn't have those."
Intercultural communication (A1.4)	Intercultural communication does not seem to pose a problem for the participants due to their familiarity with linguistic practices in Ireland and their nuanced intercultural identity.	"You get accustomed or fairly acquainted with the language and thankfully, I'm able to kind of pick when there's humour or sarcasm."

A2. Understanding: Language bias in political participation

" *They will pretend like they don't understand what I'm saying* "

The previous section has presented the findings of the present project in relation to the language-related barriers, or lack thereof, that migrants encounter when participating in politics. That section followed the analytical move of separating the notion of *language barrier*, primarily understood from a linguistic competence perspective, from ideological structures that research has identified as potential constraints for full integration.

Adopting a holistic perspective to the analysis, the aim of this section is to delve into another dimension of the notion of language challenge, namely language-related bias or discrimination. To do so, the section explores the intersection of language with culture, nationality and race in political life.

The question that guides the presentation of the findings is:

> What kind of language-related biases do migrant people involved in politics encounter in the course of their public engagement?

Structure:

— A2.1. Perception of competence

— A2.2. Credibility

— A2.3. Clarity and understanding

— A2.4. Cultural biases

A2.1. Perception of competence

As a general remark, based on the relatively small number of instances shared by participants, language-based discrimination appears to be an occasional phenomenon within the context of this study. Here a methodological cautionary note is needed, as the absence of disclosure regarding negative experiences does not definitively imply that discriminatory practices do not occur. That being noted, the following comment from an EAL candidate captures the general perception of around half of the participants.

> **Excerpt 8**
>
> I personally haven't experienced any kind of discrimination or anything. So my experience has been good ... I don't think it [speaking with a foreign accent] matters to anyone, to be honest. I have never even seen someone being biased [against] because of their English accent or the way they speak. Right. Because obviously, coming from different countries and where you have other languages as well, your accent might not be the same as the country that you're living in. (Participant 2)

Perceptions of competence or aptitude are often indexed to the social, cultural and economic status of the speakers. The case of Participant 2 is a good example: at a later stage during the interview, they explain that the perception of them as being competent is due to the leadership skills that they developed in their previous career in industry, suggesting that their professional reputation prevails over other considerations such as accent or nationality. This idea that they are perceived as competent by others as a result of accumulated capital from academic experience, cultural background and professional standing was shared by several other participants included in this study.

However, it appears that for a migrant candidate to be perceived as competent by the public, their profile needs to be known in advance. Put differently, potential voters must have prior knowledge of the qualifications and experience of migrant candidates to consider them as a good fit for representing the community. The next excerpt represents this point.

> **Excerpt 9**
>
> The tone [...] of people changes, if they know my CV, like they know I am an educated person, I'm working, I'm not on social welfare so then it changes. If they don't know me, then they bracket everybody as on social welfare in order for the others to accept, to recognise you, you need to prove that you are well educated, you are capable enough to deal with them, so then it's okay. Otherwise, as a normal layman person, it's like difficult. (Participant 8)

There is a shared sense that migrant candidates need to prove themselves more than Irish-born candidates to be seen as legitimate. According to most participants, it is where language intersects with other factors such as ethnicity and race that negative bias may emerge.

However, identifying what constitutes bias can be challenging in certain instances. In fact, some participants point out that it is the difference between the political and ideological stances espoused in their electoral programme and the views of individuals in the communities, rather than the fact that they are migrants, that creates issues.

Finding: While instances of language-based discrimination affecting the way in which others judge the competence of candidates are not frequently reported, language, ethnicity and race may influence the ways in which migrant candidates are perceived.

A2.2. Credibility

One common form of language-based bias occurs when the credibility and trustworthiness of speakers with linguistic features other than the dominant ones are judged on the basis of sounding linguistically different. In the particular case of the political realm, researchers have examined the perceptions and reactions of voters to linguistic features such as the vocal attractiveness and the regional accents of candidates. Experimental research has found, for example, that candidates with certain accents are viewed more negatively by the electorate[45], which implies electoral discrimination based on language. However, research has not focused on the perspective of the political actors themselves and their experiences.

Overall, participants express satisfaction with the trust and confidence placed in them by their political party. However, two individuals expressed reservations, either questioning whether parties were genuine in their efforts to recruit candidates from migrant origin or characterising their inclusion as candidates as a mere box-ticking exercise.

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45 Amira, K., Cooper, C. A., Knotts, H. G., & Wofford, C. (2018). The southern accent as a heuristic in American campaigns and elections. *American Politics Research, 46*(6), 1065–1093.

It is especially in canvassing where some participants encounter biases related to language that affect their credibility as candidates. While they recognise that people's reactions to them are positive to a large extent, with many reactions welcoming "new faces" in politics, candidates often have the sense that they are not taken seriously or trusted as legitimate representatives of their communities. Reasons for this include their non-typically Irish names, accents, skin colour and dress. The next excerpt is from one candidate who will run for election for the first time in 2024. Referring to their experience helping with the previous campaign of another candidate, they reflect on the effect of their non-Irish accent on people.

> **Excerpt 10**
>
> It wasn't so easy, because when I see the Irish person, they are like, "What are you doing? Why are you doing this [engaging in politics in Ireland]?" They don't take me seriously. (Participant 10)

This comment captures how some people attach less credibility to the performance of foreign-sounding candidates. At a different moment in the interview, that participant shared their impressions about their electoral prospects and, more concretely, their belief about the trust and support of Irish-born people in migrant candidates.

> **Excerpt 11**
>
> Talking about the Irish people around me who I know, my feelings are that a minority of them will never vote for me. Yeah. The minority again, I don't trust. They can smile, they can be very friendly with you, but you never know … What I learned about Irish people, is that they are not so easy. You never know. Like when they smile. You just turn your back and they will show you the middle finger. And I saw it so many times, like, you know what I mean? Again, my hope when I'm going to run next year, my hope is to get support from migrants. I don't even try to count on Irish people because I don't think they will vote for us. It's [migrants running for election] too new for them. (Participant 10)

Here, it must be noted that candidates report negative experiences only when interacting with a small segment of the electorate in the community or on social media. In other words, language-related discriminatory practices do not seem to take place in other settings where they carry out their political activity, such as in institutions, within the context of political parties or in other formal contexts.

Finding: Language seems to impact perceptions of migrant candidates' trustworthiness, particularly at first encounter.

A2.3. Clarity and understanding

From a cognitive perspective, psychological studies suggest that understanding an unfamiliar accent requires additional effort. A markedly different pronunciation of words can make it challenging for some listeners with less exposure to different accents to grasp the message fully. As noted in the first part of the analysis, this does not seem to be a problem for most participants in this study. However, some report examples of how a supposed lack of clarity in their pronunciation can result in conscious or unconscious forms of micro-aggression, sometimes with demoralising effects. Excerpt 12, from a native speaker of a variety of English other than Irish English, exemplifies this point.

> **Excerpt 12**
>
> One of the things that … if you meet somebody that wants to discriminate against you, that wants to show you that you don't belong here, that you are a lesser person … Language is one of the tools that they use … correcting your pronunciation. Pretending they don't understand what you are saying. It is one of those things that make people like me feel like, feel uncomfortable. Personally, I won't feel inferior to anyone. Definitely, I'm human. I get to feel uncomfortable sometimes. (Participant 7)

This and other similar comments are symptomatic of the wider bias that candidates suffer: some individuals, when motivated by exclusionary tendencies, may employ language as a tool to belittle or shame migrant candidates, attempting to devalue candidates and undermine their sense of belonging. It follows from the comment of this participant that such reactions based on unfounded expectations regarding pronunciation go beyond mere linguistic misunderstandings in communication; they become a way to delimit group membership through language. It is where language interacts with the categories of perception of certain listeners that language bias, either intentional or unintentional, can appear.

Some individuals make the assumption that candidates from outside Ireland "do not speak good English" (Participant 13), and they express surprise when this assumption is proven wrong. Interestingly, migrant candidates typically do not categorise seemingly well-intended compliments on their English as necessarily negative or take them as covert forms of prejudice.

Finding: Some conscious and unconscious language-related beliefs and attitudes by listeners in relation to pronunciation, understanding and accent can result in discriminatory practices against migrant candidates.

A2.4. Cultural biases

Cultural bias is another type of prejudice closely related to language bias. People make assumptions about the ethnic background and cultural knowledge of participants based on their accent, and so believe that they are not competent in the Irish context. One candidate describes this feeling of being negatively stereotyped in the following fragment.

> **Excerpt 13**
>
> I can sometimes sense where there is the impression that I may not be as culturally competent at the initial stage of a dialogue or an engagement. (Participant 10)

Cultural bias is often associated with factors such as nationality, ethnicity and race. Along with other forms of bias, it tends to emerge in situations where people in the community do not have prior knowledge of the candidates. In many of the initial interactions with their constituents or the public in general, migrants involved in politics have to respond to questions about their background, accent, nationality or length of residence in the country. As reported by participants, many people in the community are not used to migrant candidates running for election, and candidates acknowledge that receiving such personal questions is not unusual. However, many participants note that they often need to repeatedly prove their competence in subsequent interactions to be taken seriously in their political roles.

The initial interactions that occur at first encounters between migrant candidates and people in the community or other local political actors appear to be prone to preconceptions based on appearances. Occasionally, these preconceived notions can result in open discriminatory conduct and practices against migrant candidates.

Migrant candidates may face challenges in being perceived as legitimate due to their visible cultural, ethnic or religious attributes. In Excerpt 14, one participant responds to the question of whether migrant people can achieve success in politics while integrating their own culture and identity into their campaign.

> **Excerpt 14**
>
> **If somebody knows you personally, then it's different. But if somebody won't know you personally, then it's very, very hard. (Participant 8)**

Proximity and being recognised as a member of the community are of paramount importance to local elections.

Finding: Cultural bias typically manifests alongside bias related to other factors like nationality and race, particularly in situations where people have not become acquainted with the migrant candidate.

Table 3. The four areas that participants talked about that relate to language bias in political participation, with a quote illustrating each of them.

Code	Finding	Example
Perception of competence (A2.1)	While instances of language-based discrimination affecting the way in which others judge the competence of candidates are not frequently reported, language, ethnicity and race may influence the ways in which migrant candidates are perceived.	"The tone of the person tone of people changes, if they know my CV, like they know I am an educated person, I'm working, I'm not on social welfare."
Credibility (A2.2)	Language seems to impact perceptions of migrant candidates' trustworthiness, particularly at first encounter.	"It wasn't so easy, because when I see the Irish person, they are like, 'what are you doing? Why are you doing this?' They don't take me seriously."
Clarity and understanding (A2.3)	Some conscious and unconscious language-related beliefs and attitudes by listeners in relation to pronunciation, understanding and accent can result in discriminatory practices against migrant candidates.	"Language is one of the tools that they use … correcting your pronunciation. Pretending they don't understand what you are saying. It is one of those things that make people like me feel like, feel uncomfortable."
Cultural biases (A2.4)	Cultural bias typically manifests alongside bias related to other factors like nationality and race, particularly in situations where people have not become acquainted with the migrant candidate.	"I can sometimes sense where there is the impression that I may not be as culturally competent at the initial stage of a dialogue or an engagement."

B. Overcoming: Reacting to language-related challenges

❝ *There are a lot of positive things [in politics]. It doesn't mean everything is positive. You know, the sun shines every day … no, it doesn't* ❞

Irish institutions and political parties have set the objective of increasing diversity in the political realm. However, the figures from previous elections at the national and local level show imparity in political representation. The findings in the previous two sections shed light on the impact of linguistic and cultural factors on migrant political figures and the nature of prejudiced attitudes associated with language.

This section concentrates on the reaction of participants to language-related challenges and the ways in which they counter the effects of discriminatory behaviours towards them. The section also includes suggestions and proposals from the participants themselves which, along with the evidence presented in the previous sections, will be the basis for the recommendations included in the last section.

The section seeks to address the following research inquiry:

> How do migrant people engaged in politics react to language-related challenges and counter their effects?

Structure:

— B1. Resilience

— B2. Safe and welcoming spaces

— B3. Accent and identity

— B4. Mediation and representation

B1. Resilience

Although several participants have experienced some kind of discriminatory treatment and offensive behaviours while participating in politics, they nonetheless show personal resilience and remain optimistic about their contribution to society. One participant explains this point in the following fragment.

Excerpt 15

Once you enter into politics or anything, then you can see the reality and there are a lot of positive things. It doesn't mean everything is positive. You know, the sun shines every day … no, it doesn't. There is some negative things you face day to day because of your ethnicity, because of your colour. Yes, I'm facing those too, but I don't think that's very bad. They are a minority, I believe. (Participant 5)

One strategy used by participants to not be impacted by harmful behaviours is to focus on the positive outcomes of their involvement in politics, including the overwhelmingly positive experiences with other political actors and citizens.

All participants provide examples showing their firm determination to serve their communities through politics, and this commitment remains steadfast despite the discriminatory attitudes they occasionally face. In Excerpt 16, one participant shares their views about the barriers encountered by candidates running for office and provides some suggestions.

> **Excerpt 16**
>
> Be determined, be resilient. Because you're going to hit a lot of barriers, a lot of challenges, but you overcome them on a daily basis. I'm super busy now. I'm being pulled in different directions, but at the end of the day, I feel like I'm making an impact. So I'm exhausted, but I'm happy. I feel fulfilled. So it's a fulfilling, rewarding career being a politician. (Participant 1)

Personal agency, understood here as one's linguistically and culturally mediated capacity to act, plays a key role in political activity. However, recognising the importance of personal attributes such as inner strength and self-confidence in dealing with adverse situations, resilience may not be an attribute available to all migrants across different contexts and political levels. As pointed out by some participants, language-related discriminatory experiences can have a detrimental impact on the willingness of migrants to pursue serving the public through politics. Excerpt 17 includes the case of one participant who has an active role in community work and social activism.

> **Excerpt 17**
>
> That makes me more vulnerable, more prone to criticism, more prone to racism. As I saw in the last election when the posters of people from other backgrounds … people used to put black ink on their posters and write some racist words under that. So that's my thing as well. That's what I am scared of. (Participant 8)

This case illustrates the potential impact of racism on people who at some point consider active engagement in mainstream politics. According to this particular participant, getting too much exposure, especially in the context of the wave of racist incidents in 2023 against migrants and asylum seekers in Ireland, is one of their reasons for not getting involved in formal politics.

Creating safe environments and networks of support for all kinds of people, regardless of their background or condition, is a proposal that could partly alleviate the adverse conditions that some migrant people encounter. This point will be the focus of Section B2.

Finding: Migrant participants display resilience against language-based micro-aggressions but language-related prejudice can discourage migrant people working at the community level and with an interest in politics from engaging in mainstream forms of political participation.

B2. Safe and welcoming spaces

Confidence-building seems to be a key aspect in the preparation of migrant politicians, according to those participants with extensive experience in politics. However, in addition to agency or resilience, candidates need acceptance and recognition from constituencies, and this act of being legitimated lies outside their remit. In other words, the responsibility of succeeding in the integration of newcomers falls not only on migrant individuals but on the whole receiving society. This idea is suggested in Excerpt 18 in the reflection of an EAL participant.

Importantly from a language perspective, this participant underscores the bidirectional nature of the comprehension process, highlighting that successful communication relies not only on speakers but also on listeners. Listeners and interlocutors, participants argue, should actively manifest an openness and willingness to engage with speakers of other varieties of English and recognise these people as valid and legitimate interlocutors in the political realm. In the opinion of participants, creating safe and welcoming spaces can help prevent social alienation.

Finding: Although resilience and self-confidence are key attributes for the success of migrants in politics, migrant candidates need acceptance and recognition from constituencies; a shift in the speaker–listener relationship and bias-free environments could facilitate political integration.

B3. Accent and identity

Accent is a major marker of one's identity and plays a key role in-group/out-group characterisation. It is therefore unsurprising that accent was a recurring theme emerging from the interviews. The participants judge themselves as speaking English with an accent other than those normally recognised as Irish. Many admit that their position as a migrant, even if they have been living in the country for decades, is recognised by others "as soon as they hear my accent".

Accent affects migrants involved in politics in various ways. Speaking English with an accent does not generally pose a problem in understanding or communicating ideas with other political actors and citizens (see Section A1.1). However, participants report some instances in which speaking English with a foreign accent shapes the way they are perceived, thus potentially influencing their electoral prospects (see the subsections in Section A2). It appears that sounding and looking different can deter migrant people from getting involved in politics.

Accent is part of one's identity. As noted by participants, possessing a distinct accent is part of their life trajectory and identity. The following comment in Excerpt 19 is a good example of the relationship between accent and identity in the context of the political realm.

In this fragment, sticking to one's own way of speaking and accent in politics is connected to identity and personal authenticity. People are emotionally attached to their accent, it is their own and forms part of their sense of belonging to a specific group.

While taking training to reduce foreign accents or sound more Irish to appeal to a certain demographic may be a practice among political elites, none of the candidates in this study have taken such training. On the contrary, they all regard attempts to sound more Irish or adopt the "right accent" as unproductive and nonsensical. One participant explains in Excerpt 19 their opinion about accent, membership and representation in the context of the training on offer from their political party.

> **Excerpt 19**
>
> **The training is more towards building confidence in the candidate and creating the knowledge and the strategies that will help you be best placed to canvas, to campaign and to maybe even attend interviews to increase your social media presence and how to kind of engage more with the public. So it's not so much language-focused, have to sound less foreign. That's not done at all because obviously everybody has a unique selling proposition. So if I am running for office, which I am, and I have a [foreign country] population in [Irish city], obviously that accent is what connects me to [the community from that country living in Ireland]. So if I'm being trained to lose the accent, I'm going to lose the connection. So it's not in anybody's interest to focus on making somebody sound more like another language [...] I don't think anybody needs to be trained to do that. (Participant 1)**

Participants do not feel any pressure from political parties or the electorate to relinquish any of their identity or cultural signals, including their accents, ethnic clothes or visibly religious symbols. Furthermore, they strongly believe this should be the case for all migrant candidates and people involved in politics. They, therefore, do not support assimilationist approaches to social or political integration.

Finding: While non-Irish accents can shape perceptions and occasionally affect electoral prospects, participants continue to embrace their accents in English, considering them as a fundamental part of their identity; they regard different cultural identities as a signal of diversity in political representation.

B4. Mediation and representation

The previous subsection concentrated on the intimate entanglement between accent and identity. In this subsection, the focus broadens slightly in order to consider the relationship between migrants and migrant communities in the context of political representation. Migrant participants depict themselves as particularly able to understand the value of cultural diversity and well-situated to represent and work for migrant communities. For example, one participant argues that migrant politicians can help migrant people make their voices heard by mediating between cultural norms and practices associated with Ireland and those of people from other backgrounds. The next excerpt illustrates this point.

> **Excerpt 20**
>
> **Of course, for me it's important to help migrants understand that if they have issues that they feel really challenged about, I am there for them. Because they might have gone to maybe an indigenously Irish counsellor who doesn't understand the cultural differences or the traditional issues, the traditional ways that people might handle issues [...]. I understand what difference feels like because I am different and that I have that mechanism to ask questions even if your culture is different from mine. (Participant 3)**

In the context of electoral politics, some migrant candidates anticipate receiving greater support from fellow people of migrant origin than from Irish-born voters. This expectation is based on a sense of mutual affinity because of their shared migrant background. However, it is important to note that a larger migrant population does not necessarily translate to increased electoral support for migrant candidates[46]. In any case, most participants acknowledge the importance of connecting with every Irish voter irrespective of culture or background as Excerpt 21 exemplifies.

Excerpt 21

My desire was to work for everybody because I'm elected to be a councillor for the people of [Irish town] and it was important for me, for the people of [that Irish town] to see me as their representative, not as a representative for just migrant people. (Participant 3)

An extra challenge that participants frequently highlight is that migrant candidates have limited networks and connections among Irish-born members of their local communities. Participants emphasise that Irish-born candidates have normally been residing in a given community for much longer than migrant candidates. Given the significance of community-based politics in local elections, migrants must exert more effort to demonstrate their ties and roots within their community.

Finding: Migrant candidates show a willingness and commitment to represent their entire constituencies, not only migrant groups, and would like to be recognised and treated by the public as legitimate representatives in political institutions in Ireland.

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46 Lima, V. (2020).

Table 4. The four areas that participants talked about that relate to reactions to language-related challenges, with a quote illustrating each of them.

Code	Finding	Example
Resilience (B1)	Migrant participants display resilience against language-based micro-aggressions but language-related prejudice can discourage migrant people working at the community level and with an interest in politics from engaging in mainstream forms of political participation.	"Be determined, be resilient. Because you're going to hit a lot of barriers, a lot of challenges."
Safe and welcoming spaces (B2)	Although resilience and self-confidence are key attributes for the success of migrants in politics, migrant candidates need acceptance and recognition from constituencies; a shift in the speaker–listener relationship and bias-free environments could facilitate political integration.	"A lot of the time, people, don't say a lot of things because again, they have the notion that they will be misunderstood or they might be judged or they might not be having a clear expression of saying the issues or raising the problem."
Accent and identity (B3)	While non-Irish accents can shape perceptions and occasionally affect electoral prospects, participants continue to embrace their accents in English, considering them as a fundamental part of their identity; they regard different cultural identities as a signal of diversity in political representation.	"If I'm going to earn any respect, I better be consistent in what I'm doing."
Mediation and representation (B4)	Migrant candidates show a willingness and commitment to represent their entire constituencies, not only migrant groups, and would like to be recognised and treated by the public as legitimate representatives in political institutions in Ireland.	"It was important for me, for the people to see me as their representative, not as a representative for just migrant people."

Summary of findings

This section summarises the main findings in accordance with the three questions.

What is the impact of the language barrier, understood as language competence, on migrants' participation and representation in institutional political life in Ireland?

Since the migrant candidates included in this study have high proficiency levels in English, most of them do not regard issues associated with language competence as a barrier to their political life. Only a small number of participants with English as an additional language report occasional minor issues in communication that do not have a significant impact on their political activity. Speaking beyond the personal experiences of participants, however, the perception that there is pressure on migrant people interested in politics to meet high English proficiency expectations may prevent them from entering mainstream politics.

What kind of language-related biases do migrant people involved in politics encounter in the course of their public engagement?

The expectations that some people in the community have regarding the pronunciation, comprehension and accent of migrants involved in politics and their attitudes as a result of this can lead to conscious and unconscious bias and micro-aggressions, especially when migrants are canvassing and in initial encounters with those who do not have prior knowledge of them. Language, in conjunction with other factors like cultural background, ethnicity and race, appears to negatively affect how migrant candidates are perceived by a small part of the community, potentially impacting how trustworthy they are perceived to be. It must be noted that these negative experiences take place in more informal interactions with the public and people in constituencies and not within institutional contexts such as city councils or political parties.

How do migrant candidates react to language-related challenges and counter their effects?

Migrant candidates demonstrate resilience in the face of discrimination; it would seem that confidence-building, social awareness of diversity and the creation of welcoming environments to discuss matters of interest to the community are crucial areas that can contribute to effective political representation and social cohesion. The participants regard the effects of language-related biases only as having a potential impact on the electoral prospects of (other) migrant candidates, but do consider that they, along with other forms of prejudice, may act as a deterrent against the active involvement in politics by migrant people more generally.

Limitations and future research

As explained in the methodology section, the study has followed an exploratory qualitative approach, and the conclusions drawn from the findings should not be generalised to all migrant political candidates and others involved in politics. For example, many participants, but not all, have experienced some instances of language-related bias in the course of their political careers. The extent to which language-related bias negatively impacts the electoral prospects of migrant candidates cannot be determined with the data provided in this research. Nonetheless, the study offers valuable evidence that institutions and political parties can use to develop strategies that address the language-related needs of migrant candidates and tackle the prejudice they may encounter (see Recommendations and Proposals Section).

The research has solely focused on political participation at the local level, and it is important to note that the specific dynamics of local politics may limit the broader applicability of some findings to the national level. Additionally, the study has specifically examined one dimension of political participation, namely formal participation within mainstream politics through institutional channels. It does not encompass other modes of political engagement that occur outside institutional structures and lack the authority and symbolism typically associated with institutional roles. These limitations open up opportunities for future research, which could include the viewpoints and procedures of political parties, the opinions of voters and the role of media.

It would be valuable to broaden the scope of this study beyond the confines of the political domain and include the civic and public spheres. This expansion could involve quantitative methods and comparative analyses between the civic and political contexts, analysis of how linguistic and cultural diversity are portrayed in the media and examinations of the role of language within public administration and other state bodies. Future research should also consider potential discrimination pertaining to Irish English regional and national minorities' accents and the relationship between accent and social class. Finally, the role of the Irish language in the political realm should also be examined.

Conclusions

Previous research has identified language as a factor that could potentially affect the political engagement of migrants. This study provides empirical evidence in this regard. Furthermore, the study has illustrated in detail the ways in which language influences civic inclusion in the form of political engagement and the quality of participation in local politics.

The findings show that language-based discrimination in the political realm is often more influenced by perceptions of foreignness rather than by communication skills. As mentioned, all participants in this study are able to communicate and be understood effectively in English. Thus the instances of language-based prejudice or linguistic racism against migrants involved in politics that they talk about here arise despite their English proficiency; indeed, some of them are native speakers of English, but a variety other than Irish English.

Hence, it can be concluded that the "language barrier" in political integration is not primarily a matter of migrants' poor English skills. That has important consequences, since the notion, often addressed in research and strategic plans, that any issues relate to a linguistic deficiency implies an exclusive responsibility on the side of the individual speaker, acting and potential migrant candidates in this case, to improve or correct their language abilities to conform to the norms of the standard language in the host country.

The study has shown that other forms of the "language barrier" occur under specific social conditions, including those where the discriminatory categories of perception of certain kinds of listeners are involved. The "language barrier" must, therefore, be conceived as relating to the representations and expectations of language use and users by interlocutors in receiving societies, because it is in such social contexts where language-related bias – conscious or unconscious, overt or covert – can arise. Hence, citizens, parties and institutions in the hosting society have their share of responsibility in the linguistic, political or other integration of migrants.

To conclude, a final reflection is in place. Voters engage in various forms of reasoning and consider multiple variables in the often intricate process that culminates in their final selection of candidates. However, if we agree that voters should exercise their judgement in good faith, it follows that not all forms of judgement about candidates are equally acceptable from a normative perspective. To be clear, the exclusion or dismissal of political candidates exclusively on the basis of gender, race, religion, disability or language is morally reprehensible in a healthy democratic system.

As this report suggests, more can be done to disincentivise and eradicate exclusionary attitudes and practices in the political realm. Yet the evidence gathered from the experience of migrant participants in this study indicates that instances of language-related prejudice and exclusionary attitudes linked to language and culture were only observed among a small number of individuals in the community. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that efforts should be directed at raising social awareness about the diverse linguistic and cultural foundations present in all domains of contemporary Ireland.

Recommendations and proposals

For migrant candidates
— Make sure to establish a strong presence in your community, including a network of supporters, well in advance of the election period.

— Be prepared to address questions about your background, as some people might not be used to migrant candidates participating in elections.

— Maintain confidence in your skills, including your language abilities. If you have dedicated yourself to running a campaign, that means that you have a valuable contribution to offer, and a large majority of people want to hear your message.

For institutions and public bodies
— Offer NGOs and community organisations working with migrants the necessary resources to implement programmes and training aimed at enhancing diversity in politics and other key social domains.

— Language and culture form an important part of people's identity. Any future integration initiatives need to understand this, and that most migrants will not be willing (or able) to give up their accent as part of integrating.

— Run awareness campaigns highlighting the linguistic and cultural diversity in Irish society, with a focus on civic society and public service.

— In targeted plans and campaigns against racism, incorporate derogatory comments, behaviours related to accents and other forms of linguistic bias as forms constituting racism and xenophobia.

— Develop strategies to cultivate an environment that values multilingualism, intercultural communication and cultural diversity among both staff and communities.

For political parties
— Prominently showcase images, audio and video of candidates with diverse cultural backgrounds and accents on websites, social media and electoral leaflets to encourage the normalisation of diversity in political representation.

— Offer targeted training and support for migrants to improve their communication skills and boost confidence where necessary.

— In order to concretise the general commitment of political parties to promote increased diversity and inclusivity, contemplate the adoption of quotas designed to enhance the representation of migrants within party ranks.

— Incorporate accent prejudice into unconscious bias training to party staff, members, senior management and nominating committees.

For the media
— Showcase the accomplishments and contributions of migrant people in their social domain and their career, with a particular focus on positions linked to prestige, responsibility and authority, to counter negative stereotypes and biases.

— Ensure accurate representation of migrant individuals in political media content, particularly during election campaigns.

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