



Part of the game or just onlookers? Political participation and social engagement among people in Germany with migration backgrounds

Summary

Migration has led to growing diversity in Germany. Migrants to Germany, like their children and grandchildren, are all increasingly participating in central areas of society. However, integration tends to be viewed mainly in terms of the labour market and education, or of access to health, housing and the social system, while integration in the areas of culture, politics and civil society is often ignored. Yet these factors are extremely important. They enhance feelings of social participation, and thus also of social belonging. Second-generation migrants in particular have become far more active and visible in politics and society in the past decades.

But in comparison to people without a migration background, people who have a migration background participate overall far less in politics and civil society. The current study, based on the most recent available data from SVR's Integration Barometer, confirms this. On average, those migrants and people with a migration background who are eligible to vote in federal elections are less likely to do so. Aside from participating in elections, they are also less likely to be active in politics in other contexts, and less likely to engage in civil society, whether formally through membership in organisations, or through less formal routes. This is not only bad news for integration. The fact that those with a migration background are less politically engaged may have serious consequences. As the proportion of the population with non-German roots continues to grow, so too does the number of people whose interests may remain unrepresented within the German political system.

The "BePart" project investigates how greater participation in democracy and society could be encouraged among people with a migration background. In the context of the project, the Expert Council's Research Unit carried out an empirical investigation based on current data collected by SVR's Integration Barometer survey. The investigation focused on political participation (not only voting in elections, but also political activities such as demonstrations, petitions or political initiatives) and on social engagement in an organisational and non-organisational context. For 2020, the Integration



Barometer therefore included questions on social engagement, which were analysed in combination with a number of other survey items included in the 2018 and 2020 Integration Barometer surveys.

A comparative lack of social participation can in part be explained by socio-economic factors. However, it is also influenced by factors related to migration. Using current data from the SVR's Integration Barometer, the SVR Research Unit analysed these factors more closely to gain new insights. **One key finding is that knowledge of German plays a particularly important role when it comes to informal social engagement. Around 25 per cent of people with a migration background who describe their knowledge of German as "fairly good" or "very good" engage with civil society outside of formal organisations. Among people who assess their knowledge of German as "fairly bad" or "very bad", this proportion is just 6 per cent.** The length of time spent in Germany also plays a role. 45 per cent of respondents born in Germany as children of immigrants are members of a civil society organisation, as are 31.5 per cent of migrants who have lived in Germany for over ten years. Among those who have lived here for less than ten years, the proportion is 18.8 per cent.

A similar picture emerges in relation to political participation beyond the electoral context. At just 8 per cent, first-generation migrants are less likely to participate in politics than their children or grandchildren born in Germany, where the figure rises to around 21 per cent. There is also a motivational component to this, which itself is partly influenced by political and cultural socialisation. The longer a person stays in Germany, the more likely they are to become interested in politics and feel a sense of "internal political self-efficacy": that is, they are more likely to feel that they understand and can participate in political life.

When considering how to increase participation, it is generally agreed that political and social forms of engagement are closely connected. **The findings from SVR's Integration Barometer show that if someone is engaged in civil society, whether as a member of an organisation or less formally, they are also more likely to vote (assuming they are entitled to do so) and/or be otherwise politically active.** This has important policy implications in terms of promoting engagement, political education and integration among people with a migration background.

To encourage participation, the Expert Council's Research Unit recommends that political activity and engagement in civil society at all levels should be supported. Civil engagement has, in itself, a positive effect on social cohesion and integration, but in the longer term it is also likely to lead to more participation at the political level. It is in this area that migrant organisations have an important role to play in building bridges. But other organisations (sports clubs, volunteer firefighting associations or music groups, to name just a few examples) can also drive participation. It might also be helpful to make Germany's Federal Volunteer Service (Bundesfreiwilligendienst) more accessible for all sections of



the population and promote it among corresponding groups, not least because people with a migration background are more likely in general to be willing to volunteer than the rest of the population.

To encourage more people with a migration background to vote, one recommendation is to focus on promoting German citizenship for foreigners with long-term perspectives in Germany; the “realised naturalisation potential” in Germany (meaning the number of naturalisations in a given year compared to the number of foreigners with at least 10 years of lawful residence in Germany at the end of the previous year), has been stagnating at a low level for many years now. In addition, migrants, both from first and later generations, should be given greater encouragement to vote. Political parties have a role to play in this, but so do organisations whose mandate includes political education. These should design their work to be as inclusive as possible, while also targeting specific groups. People who have only just moved to Germany, for example, generally view Germany’s political system and actors more positively than other groups do. As a result, they may respond well to early interventions offering access to knowledge and resources and strengthening their motivation to engage in political and civil life. By specifically targeting this group, it is possible that many of those who have moved to Germany in recent years would become actively engaged in society more quickly and more often.