

Strength in Diversity

The Experience of Migrant Candidates in the 2019 Local Election

Executive Summary
April 2020

Working for **equality**



“ I ran because I decided to highlight the lack of diversity, lack of diverse voices in politics. ”
Participant 2

“ I want to do something better for my community. ”
Participant 3

“ The more I impact my community, the more people, especially the Irish residents, will think, ‘Ok, this migrant is helping us’. Then they will understand us more and embrace us more. Those are the benefits of getting involved in community activities. ”
Participant 1

“ I didn't know the policies [of the political parties] and I didn't have time to go through all of them, to join them. ”
Participant 3



“ It is very important to have a team. The fact I started my campaign two months before, and I was very new, my campaign team was basically my partner and some friends that came to help minding my children. I didn't have that many people.”
Participant 6

“ I canvassed about 75 per cent of the constituency, probably, of the housing in the areas. Obviously with my team and not on my own. That was really important as well.”
Participant 2

“ I was attending an event about women in politics, and...even though we were women, no one in the audience or even in the panel was speaking my language - not literally - but they were not speaking about how exactly it feels to be a migrant woman in Ireland. ”
Participant 6

“ I didn't have that much support, someone to tell me where to go, how to do it. ”
Participant 6

“ My party offered us training. The main thing was that during training we got to chat to the people who were already TDs. ”
Participant 5

“ The political system here in Ireland is quite complicated and difficult to understand. It can take a while to understand how it works. ”
Participant 2

“ Social media can be difficult for anyone who is involved in politics because you will always get abuse of some kind, regardless of where you are from. ”
Participant 2

“ When I decided to run for election, my level of knowledge about Irish politics was very limited, close to nothing, I didn't know how to run a campaign, I knew nothing. I had to speed up. ”
Participant 6

“ I couldn't secure a venue in a hotel or restaurant or any public place, until I asked someone to help me with this problem. The same people who refused to give me the venue accepted a booking from this person. ”
Participant 4



Introduction

In May 2019 local elections were held in Ireland. While 56 candidates from a migrant background ran for election, ultimately just 9 were voted in out of total of 949 local councillors. A further female migrant candidate was co-opted to the local council when her predecessor was elected to the Dáil in February 2020. While a significant improvement on the figure of just two voted into office in the 2014 local elections, the figure still falls far short when it comes to proportional representation of Irish society.

Ireland has inclusive voting rights for local elections. Anyone aged over 18 years of age and “ordinarily resident” can register to vote in local elections. However, there is traditionally low political engagement for migrants. In many local authority areas less than one third of eligible migrant voters are registered (this includes Dublin City and Kildare). Some of the better areas have just over half of those eligible (this includes Roscommon, Kerry and Monaghan).

In addition to being eligible to vote, the same registration rules apply to those seeking to run in local elections. In a bid to better understand the experience of migrants running in local elections and improve political engagement the Immigrant Council of Ireland commissioned research with migrant candidates who ran in the 2019 local elections.

Background

This report is designed to:

- i) Highlight the lack of migrant participation in Irish politics and why that might be
- ii) Provide useful information for people from a migrant background wanting to get politically active in Ireland
- iii) Act as a resource for political parties seeking to engage with migrant communities

This report is informed by research in the form of surveys and a number of interviews with local council candidates from a migrant background who ran for election in May 2019. There were a total of 56 candidates from a migrant background who ran in the local elections. Twenty-five ran as independents

with the remainder party affiliated. It is worthwhile noting all the successful candidates were members of a political party.

- Surveys were issued to all 56 candidates, with nearly half (46%) completing and returning the survey
- Seven in 10 of survey respondents were affiliated to a political party
- Six candidates were invited for in-depth interview (they were selected to include a cross sample of party affiliated and independent, men and women, urban and rural)

Motivation to run for election

Our research found the main reasons people chose to run for election were:

- i) promoting local area
- ii) promoting integration
- iii) prior experience in politics
- iv) need to increase migrant representation in Irish politics
- v) desire to ‘give back’ to their community

Among those who responded, one in four had been involved in politics in their country of origin. The majority of respondents said their knowledge and engagement with local issues prior to the campaign is what made them strong candidates. There was a strong consensus that it was incredibly difficult to run without the support of family, friends and their community.



Political party engagement

Irish political parties have tended to give insufficient attention to the migrant electorate and potential migrant candidates – the full report identifies a ‘start-stop’ pattern in efforts by political parties to mobilise migrant engagement. This research shows there is huge scope and opportunity to do more, especially as it is clear from this research that a party mandate significantly increases the chances of migrant candidates in the elections being successful. However, among those who did run as a political party candidate, many felt there could have been more support from the party, both financially and in terms of general support, training and guidance.

In February 2020 Ireland held a snap general election during which 34 local councillors were elected to the Dáil. As a result new members of the local councils were co-opted to replace the outgoing councillors. This presented an opportunity to support traditionally marginalised communities - like migrants - who face additional barriers to political participation. Only one person of a migrant background was co-opted amongst the 34 new councillors. As has been the case with gender equality recognition, positive action is needed to reverse the historic disadvantages and structural barriers experienced by marginalised groups.

Candidate experience

For most candidates, running in a local election was a positive experience. Positive outcomes from running included:

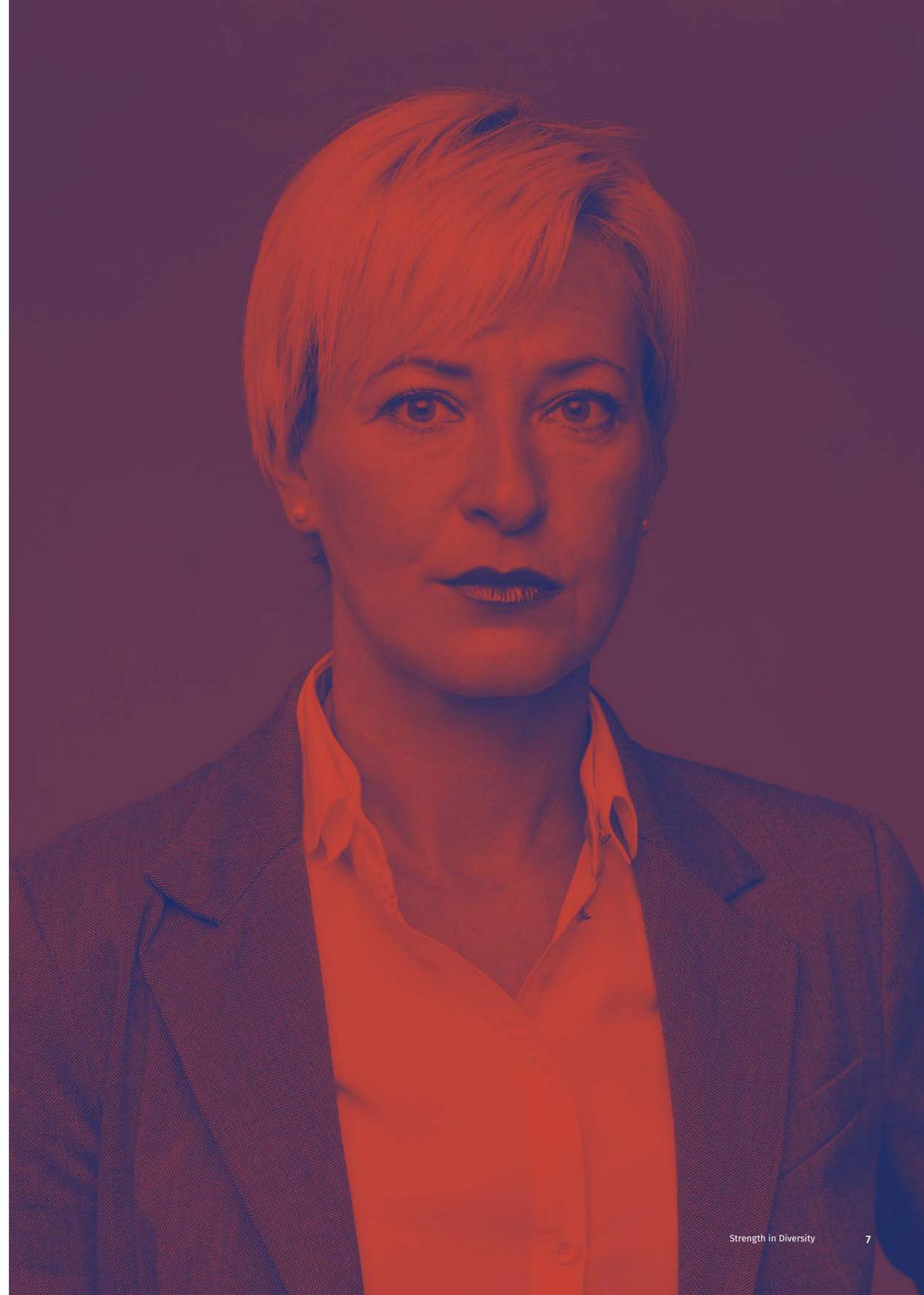
- i)** Improved skills and knowledge of the Irish political system
- ii)** Opportunity to act as a role model for their communities and the younger generation
- iii)** Increasing the number of migrants aware of their voting rights and entitlements

Candidates emphasised how much they learned from and enjoyed the process of seeking elected office, even if they were unsuccessful. Some candidates also acknowledged the positives of developing even better relationships within their local communities during the campaign. Overall, all candidates expressed a sense of accomplishment in their candidacy and some hinted at the possibility of running again in the next local election.

Negative outcomes from running included:

- i)** Experiences of racism
- ii)** Not winning a seat
- iii)** Lack of support

It is worth noting that among those surveyed, a third reported experiences of racism and discrimination during the election campaign. This issue is discussed in more detail in a following section. Candidates openly expressed disappointment with not winning a seat after a time, energy and resource intensive campaign. A few candidates only narrowly missed out on a council seat, and they had their hopes boosted during the counting of votes. However, they all understood that losing a campaign is always a part of an election bid.



The electoral campaign

The full report documents campaign experiences, electoral strategies, lessons learned and recommendations for future migrant candidates. Candidates ran campaigns which included printed materials including posters and leaflets, alongside digital materials and social media outreach. Door-to-door canvassing was mentioned as a key element of Irish elections, something that many candidates

only learned during their campaign. The size of the candidate's campaign budget and campaign team seemed to have an impact on effective campaign delivery, especially in terms of purchasing campaign posters, and covering large areas of the constituency with door-to-door canvassing. Prior activism and visibility within the local community was named as very beneficial in securing votes.

Racism

A third (33%) of the survey respondents and all those interviewed reported experiences of racism and discrimination on the campaign trail. This ranged from racist abuse on social media and anti-immigrant sentiments on the doorsteps. One candidate said it was common for people to only see the colour of their skin and disregard the electoral message they wanted to put across. Another candidate was told to "go back home" during canvassing, while another had difficulties hiring a venue for a campaign launch event. These experiences can affect a candidate's decision to run again. Anti-migrant sentiment and racist rhetoric has only recently begun to infect Irish politics, although it is, sadly, part of everyday life in Ireland, as elsewhere.

As Irish diversity increased, racism has entered Irish politics. There is a small but identifiable anti-immigration dimension within the political

discourse attempting to create segregation and tension. More worrying is the fact that much of the institutional infrastructure for responding to racism in Ireland (e.g. the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism) was dismantled during the recession and has not been replaced. This means an effective strategy to prevent racism in Ireland is largely non-existent, as identified by the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination when it examined the Irish State in December 2019.

The experience of racism could put people off running again and needs a more robust response. We are recommending the urgent development and implementation of an updated National Action Plan Against Racism plus the introduction of effective hate crime laws.

Gender

Migrant women face numerous barriers to full participation in Irish society due to their migrant identity and gender – and local politics is no exception. Childcare is a particular issue, especially as canvassing often happens in the early evening time and migrant women might have smaller support

networks. The integration of migrant women is largely absent from the programmes of political parties and anecdotal evidence suggests a tokenistic approach to adding migrant women candidates to tickets. Female candidates particularly appreciated the availability of various training and support offered by civil society.

Conclusion

Overall there was a consensus that running as a candidate in a local election was a positive experience. The learning curve about the political system in Ireland and opportunities for community engagement were the highlights for the majority of research participants. However many had to overcome various challenges (economic and racial discrimination) specific to migrant candidates and that put them at a disadvantage from the start.

The research shows that despite an inclusive electoral system, migrant participation in politics remains very low, and that political parties are failing to fully engage and integrate migrants in the Irish political landscape. The very low number of migrants engaged in politics in Ireland indicates a democratic deficit that places migrants at the margins of the political system. For a functioning

and effective democracy, it is essential we bring migrants in from the margins and open up opportunities for them to be involved in political decision-making.

Proactive measures which result in an increase in migrant voter registration and combat racism, alongside strategies to increase the viability of migrants' election are essential. This includes an urgent need for political parties to expand their membership recruitment networks and offer adequate supports for migrant candidates. Government departments tasked with local government and integration initiatives should also make efforts to identify and implement solutions to overcome the barriers to political participation faced by migrants.



Recommendations from candidates

- Get involved in a political party and/or in community activism. It does not necessarily mean joining a political party, it can be a movement or a campaign.
- Network, network, network! Reach out early to community groups as well as local businesses well in advance of the election season.
- Start your campaign early to gain visibility, relevance and acceptability.
- Running on a party ticket increases the chance of getting elected.
- Attend party meetings and contribute to them.
- Take part in community activities and get to know people who live close to you.
- Find out what is going on in your area, what communities there are, which groups are there to get involved.
- Commit to learn more about politics in Ireland.
- Organise meetings for all migrants in the area to inform them about their voting rights.
- Reach out to people in direct provision centres in your area. They are often isolated and politically excluded. Also consider providing transportation to the events you organise that involve asylum seekers.
- Support other migrant candidates. If you know other migrants running, reach out to them to share experiences and political support.
- Attend council meetings to get informed about local issues and learn the ropes of the councillor job.
- Take the time to study your own policies, so you will be able to explain and discuss your policy plans to your constituents.
- Do not necessarily focus on migrants only. Remember that if elected, you will represent the entire community.
- Stick to your values and do not be afraid that because you are a migrant or a woman people will not listen to you. The vast majority of people want to hear what you have to say.
- Prepare to financially invest in campaign materials and transportation costs.
- Be ready for all the attention – and sometimes criticism – that you will get.



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