

IMMIGRANTS' POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS AMONG IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

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1. Introduction

Broadly speaking, political incorporation involves the extent to which immigrants have been integrated into a host country's political processes and structures. The earliest form of political incorporation was the legal right to remain in a nation; the most advanced form is the ability to influence government policies, especially by holding high political office (Hochschild and Mollenkopf, 2009). Since political incorporation is not only a result but also a process, it gradually manifests itself along a continuum, starting with legalisation and naturalisation, passing through participation in non-electoral and electoral forms of politics and ending when the group of immigrants participates in the formulation and implementation of government policies. Citizenship and voting are the primary components of political incorporation. The political incorporation of immigrants in host countries is closely linked to a country's citizenship regime.

In Italy where there is a particularly restrictive citizenship regime that is firmly anchored to the principle of *ius sanguinis* which provides the right to vote only to national citizens¹, the possibility of full political incorporation of the more than 5 million foreigners currently residing in the country is precluded.

The acquisition of citizenship still represents the most powerful integration measure for immigrants. Possession of Italian citizenship is a necessary condition for voting and running for election and for ensuring equal rights and political representation. Since most immigrants in Italy are excluded from this important institutional channel of participation, our analysis will focus on the extra-electoral political activities through which immigrants exercise their citizenship (Bloemraad, 2006). Our study seeks to contribute to research on the determinants of immigrant

¹ In the most recent ten years, approximately 1.5 million people have become Italian citizens by naturalisation. In 2018, Italy was the second highest EU country to grant citizenship (112,500; 17%) after Germany (116,800; 17%). In 2019, there were 127,000 acquisitions, and in 52.7% of cases, they were women (Idos, 2020).

political engagement and incorporation, which is still lacking in Italy (Ortensi and Riniolo, 2020; Pilati, 2016).

Based on available data and according to other scholars (Berger *et al.*, 2004; Eggert and Giugni, 2010; Jacobs and Tillie, 2004), we consider both political behaviours and attitudes as crucial dimensions of political engagement. In particular, we want to test the role of the country of origin with respect to political engagement. This variable is of particular interest in the case of Italy, given the heterogeneity of the immigrant population. Immigrants from different countries of origin migrate to Italy for many reasons, have distinct cultural experiences and experience different forms of settlement and inclusion. We wondered if country of origin would influence the type and extent of immigrant political incorporation in Italy, even after other important explanatory variables for political engagement were controlled. We expected that different countries of origin would affect political incorporation in diverse ways.

2. The country-of-origin effect on immigrant political engagement

Research on the determinants of immigrants' political incorporation has flourished in both the US context and in that of North-western European countries. Several theories have been advanced and different explanatory models have been identified. Only a few scholars have analysed the influence of country of origin on political engagement (Bilodeau, 2008; Bueker, 2005) and unfortunately, their limited attention to immigrants from only some parts of the world (such as Latin America for US studies) had significantly limited the generalisability of their results. McAllister and Makkai's (1992) study of Australian immigrants showed that newcomers from countries with a shorter democratic history (from Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia) demonstrated a more authoritarian political vision compared to the population of Australian origin and immigrants from Northern Europe and the United Kingdom. In Canada, Harles (1997) indicated that immigrants from Laos referred to their pre-migration political experiences to justify their reluctance to participate and discuss politics. In the United States, Bueker (2005) indicated that immigrants from undemocratic regimes were less likely to vote as compared with those from democratic countries. Finally, Bilodeau (2008) in his comparative study of Canada and Australia found that immigrants who experienced authoritarianism prior to their arrival in the host country were more reluctant to participate in unconventional forms of activity, especially the signing of petitions. Overall, the evidence suggests a systematic correlation between immigrants' political attitudes and behaviours and their countries of origin.

Previous studies have concluded that immigrants from the most distant countries, from hostile political regimes or, in general, when return to the country of origin is hindered are more likely to acquire citizenship and participate in politics than immigrants from societies with fewer barriers to return (Bueker, 2005). Other scholars have argued that similarities between the home country and the host country lead to greater levels of political incorporation. Moreover, immigrants who have experienced democratic elections in the origin country will be more likely to engage in host country politics as compared to their counterparts. Lastly, migrants from EU countries have both faster access to citizenship and free movement between Member States; therefore, they are more likely to be incorporated in host country politics. Based on the available data and starting from the suggestion of examining ‘other types of political activity as measures of political integration between and across multiple country of origin groups’ (Bueker, 2005, 136), we analysed the relationships between country of origin and political engagement among eleven immigrant groups in Italy (from three countries and eight areas of origin) to test the role of the country of origin on both political interest and political participation beyond voting. We expected that the geographical distance and the political environment of the country of origin would impact the immigrant’s level of political integration in Italy. Country of origin also indirectly influences political incorporation by mediating the effect of other characteristics. There are still few works aimed at understanding how different characteristics interact with the country of origin to influence political engagement.

Despite the strict rules governing the acquisition of citizenship, the number of individuals of immigrant origin is increasing, although their political engagement is currently under-researched in Italy (Riniolo and Ortensi, 2021). Turning to intergenerational differences, existing research suggests that first generation immigrants face obstacles to political engagement related to language barriers and the difficulty in acquiring citizenship (Wong *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, second generation immigrants tend to experience fewer barriers. Therefore, we expect that next to other control variables, second generation immigrants are more likely to engage in politics than are their first generation counterparts. In other words, we expect that for second generation immigrants, the socialisation process that occurs thanks to school attendance and speaking the Italian language mitigates the country-of-origin effect.

3. Data and methods

We used data from the multipurpose survey on ‘Social Condition and Integration of Foreign citizens (SCIF)’. The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) designed this source of data in its system of multipurpose household surveys in 2011–2012. It collects data on families with at least one foreign citizen. Respondents represent more than 25,000 individuals. SCIF data provide information on foreigners’ political integration and allows the exploration of less studied fields, such as attitudes towards acquisition of Italian citizenship, social trust, and political involvement of respondents. Our analysis is focused on foreign citizens at birth (both born abroad and born in Italy) who are aged 15 and over, corresponding to 16,851 cases.

In order to study foreigners’ political engagement, two separate dependent variables were considered. On the one hand, the SCIF survey provided information on a respondent’s interest in Italian politics. This is a categorical variable equal to 1 if the individual is interested in Italian politics and equal to 0 otherwise. On the other hand, the survey allowed us to measure political participation beyond voting. Specifically, political participation was measured considering the following five types of nonvoting activities: giving money to a political party, listening to political debates, taking part in political meetings, taking part in political demonstrations and volunteering for a political party. The political participation variable is equal to 1 if migrants engaged in at least one activity, otherwise we assigned 0.

This contribution focuses on two target variables. First, we included in our models a covariate on migratory generation that was measured as a dichotomous variable equal to 0 for first generation (G1) immigrants (83.2% of respondents) and to 1 for children of immigrants who arrived in Italy before age 18 (born in Italy are included), hereafter generation 1.5 (G1.5). The second target variable was country of origin measured by the variable of citizenship at birth. In order to assure significant and robust results, we considered the first three countries of citizenship at birth: Romania (21.4%), Albania (10.3%) and Morocco (9.8%). We regrouped the remaining countries of origin into larger categories with a sufficient size for the statistical analysis. Therefore, we differentiated between Eastern Europe EU (4.4%), Eastern Europe not EU (14.0%), North Africa (4.4%), other Africa (6.2%), far East Asia (7.1%), other Asia (8.2%), Latin America (8.6%) and More Developed Countries (5.6%).

The weighted data reported in Table 1 indicate that about half of the sample (52.2%) is interested in Italian politics, although only about one in ten respondents (10.8%) declared that they will participate (beyond voting) in Italian politics. While there are no differences between G1 and G1.5 in political participation (both nearly 11% of political participants), G1 immigrants have a higher percentage of

individuals interested in Italian politics than do G1.5 immigrants (53.8% and 44.7%, respectively). As expected, both for interest and political participation, the highest percentages were those of More Developed Countries (MDCs). Conversely, Asians (from both Far East and other Asia) show the lowest rates of political interest and participation. Considering specific nationalities, while the Albanians have a percentage of political participation above the national average (12.1%), the Romanians placed third – last place – in the ranking (9.1%).

Table 1 – *Summary statistics: column percentages and percentages of interested and participating in politics by country of origin and migratory generation.*

Migratory generation and Country/area of origin	%	%interest in politics	%political participant
G1	83.2	53.8	10.8
G1.5	16.8	44.7	10.7
Romania	21.4	53.1	9.1
Albania	10.3	55.7	12.1
Morocco	9.8	48.4	10.2
Eastern Europe EU	4.4	58.2	11.4
Eastern Europe NOT EU	14.0	56.0	10.6
North Africa	4.4	54.1	11.5
Other Africa	6.2	50.4	13.7
Far East Asia	7.1	29.7	5.8
Other Asia	8.2	37.9	8.0
Latin America	8.6	60.4	11.1
MDCs	5.6	72.8	21.5
Total	100.0	52.2	10.8

Source: our calculations on SCIF data. Weighted data.

In order to verify whether there are country of origin and migratory generational differences in the overall level of political engagement both in terms of political interest and participation, we performed a set of logistic regressions estimated and presented in the form of average marginal effects (AME) to compare the coefficients of ethnic groups in different models (Mood, 2010). In this case, we opted to run the regressions on unweighted data in order to study the mechanisms behind immigrant-specific differences and to control for several variables. Three different models were proposed: Model 1 refers to the whole sample, while in Models 2 and 3, the regressions were repeated on the G1 and G1.5 subsamples, respectively.

In addition to the variables previously described and in accordance with the existing literature, we included four sets of independent variables in our regressions.

The *structural variables* included in the model were gender, age, geographical area of residence, educational level and occupational status. To evaluate the role of *situational variables*, we included variables for living in a partnership and number of children. Regarding *migration-related variables*, we included information on

naturalisation, attitudes towards Italian citizenship and Italian language proficiency. Finally, the *group-related variables* were feeling at home in Italy and social trust variables.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the probability of being interested in Italian politics in the form of average marginal effect. Model 1 synthesises the results of the full model. While the descriptive analysis in Table 1 indicates that the first generation has a higher percentage of interest in politics as compared to generation 1.5, the average marginal effect in Table 2 shows the opposite result. Next to the control variables, generation 1.5 has a higher probability of becoming interested in Italian politics as compared to its counterpart. With reference to the country of origin, all other things being equal, we find that compared to Romanians, individuals from Asian countries have a lower probability to be interested in politics. Conversely, respondents from MDCs, Eastern Europe and Latin America have a higher probability of political interest as compared to Romanians.

The results in Model 1 confirm the central role played by structural factors. Migrant women have a significantly lower propensity to be interested in Italian politics as compared to migrant men. Compared to migrants who reside in Northern Italy, those residents in the Southern part of the Peninsula have a lower probability of political interest. Moreover, we find that the probability of being interested in Italian politics is positively associated with increasing age but with a decreasing rate and is also positively associated with increasing levels of education. Unemployed migrants have less probability of being interested in Italian politics as compared to their counterparts. Considering situational variables, having three or more children tends to inhibit the probability of being interested in politics, although being married or living in a partnership does not change the likelihood of being interested in Italian politics. Turning to migratory-related and group-related variables, we find that those who are more integrated (specifically, who have a good knowledge of the Italian language, are naturalised, feel at home in Italy and have social trust) have a greater probability of being interested in Italian politics as compared to their counterparts.

The results of Model 2, which refers to the subsample of G1 migrants, confirm all the evidence described in Model 1. The only difference from the previous model is that in Model 2, those with one child have a (slightly) higher probability of being interested in Italian politics than those without children. In other words, first generation migrants drive the results of Model 1. In the case of G1.5 migrants (Model 3), the variables are generally less significant. Specifically, the differences between

areas or countries of origin are not significantly different from the reference modality (Romanians).

Table 2 – Binary logistic regression: the likelihood to be interested in Italian politics.

Independent variables	Total		G1		G1.5	
	AME	p-val	AME	p-val	AME	p-val
<i>Migratory generation (Ref. First generation)</i>						
G1.5	0.192	**	
<i>Country of origin (Ref. Romania)</i>						
Albania	0.101		0.043		0.237	
Morocco	-0.013		-0.101		0.243	
Eastern Europe EU	0.253	**	0.263	**	0.311	
Eastern Europe NOT EU	0.245	***	0.287	***	0.095	
North Africa	0.142		0.131		0.055	
Other Africa	0.031		0.040		-0.137	
Far East Asia	-0.646	***	-0.708	***	-0.341	
Other Asia	-0.323	***	-0.411	***	0.114	
Latin America	0.348	***	0.390	***	0.153	
MDCs	0.593	***	0.670	***	-0.189	
<i>Gender (Ref. Male)</i>						
Female	-0.542	***	-0.623	***	-0.195	**
Age	0.087	***	0.073	***	0.164	***
Age Squared	-0.001	***	-0.001	***	-0.001	***
<i>Residence geographical area (Ref. Northern Italy)</i>						
Central Italy	0.309	***	0.272	***	0.501	***
Southern Italy	-0.432	***	-0.460	***	-0.301	**
<i>Educational level (Ref. Low)</i>						
Medium	0.474	***	0.472	***	0.343	**
High	0.923	***	0.912	***	0.910	**
<i>Occupational status (Ref. Employed)</i>						
Not employed	-0.190	***	-0.182	***	-0.069	
<i>Married or living in partnership (Ref. No)</i>						
Yes	0.042		0.023		0.078	
<i>Number of children (Ref. Having no children)</i>						
Having only one child	0.077		0.123	*	-0.461	**
Having two children	-0.024		0.012		-0.346	
Having three or more children	-0.175	**	-0.146	*	-0.468	
<i>Italian Proficiency (Ref. Low)</i>						
Medium	0.442	***	0.430	***	0.566	***
High	0.772	***	0.745	***	1.000	***
<i>Naturalization and attitude toward Italian citizenship (Ref. Naturalized)</i>						
Not naturalized willing to acquire Italian citizenship	-0.058		-0.234		0.238	
Not naturalized unwilling to acquire Italian citizenship	-0.376	***	-0.554	***	-0.101	
<i>Feeling at home in Italy (Ref. No)</i>						
More not than yes	0.239	*	0.227	*	0.380	
More yes than not	0.110		0.098		0.254	
Yes	0.370	***	0.361	***	0.507	
<i>Social trust (Ref. No)</i>						
Yes	0.221	***	0.242	***	0.100	
Costant	-2.586	***	-2.001	***	-4.599	***
Pseudo R2	0.110	***	0.114	***	0.104	***
N	16,851	***	14,182	***	2,669	***

Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: our calculations on SCIF data. Unweighted data.

Table 3 – Binary logistic regressions: the likelihood of participating in Italian politics. Unweighted data.

Independent variables	Total		G1		G1.5	
	AME	p-val	AME	p-val	AME	p-val
<i>Migratory generation (Ref. First generation)</i>						
G1.5	0.468	***	
<i>Country of origin (Ref. Romania)</i>						
Albania	0.264	**	0.380	**	-0.330	
Morocco	0.129		0.198		-0.372	
Eastern Europe EU	0.232		0.312	*	-0.297	
Eastern Europe NOT EU	0.229	*	0.299	**	-0.219	
Other Africa	0.583	***	0.669	***	-0.004	
North Africa	0.290	*	0.372	*	-0.343	
Far East Asia	-0.413	*	-0.469	*	-0.450	
Other Asia	-0.050		-0.057		-0.114	
Latin America	0.345	**	0.472	***	-0.455	
MDCs	0.948	***	1.093	***	-0.161	
<i>Gender (Ref. Male)</i>						
Female	-0.381	***	-0.418	***	-0.176	
Age	0.075	***	0.079	***	0.093	**
Age Squared	-0.001	***	-0.001	***	-0.001	*
<i>Residence geographical area (Ref. Northern Italy)</i>						
Central Italy	0.311	***	0.289	***	0.417	*
Southern Italy	-0.369	***	-0.415	***	-0.118	
<i>Educational level (Ref. Low)</i>						
Medium	0.525	***	0.552	***	0.454	**
High	0.831	***	0.838	***	0.765	*
<i>Occupational status (Ref. Employed)</i>						
Not employed	-0.171	*	-0.205	**	-0.057	
<i>Married or living in partnership (Ref. No)</i>						
Yes	0.005		-0.003		-0.044	
<i>Number of children (Ref. Having no children)</i>						
Having only one child	-0.036		-0.004		-0.330	
Having two children	-0.220	**	-0.232	**	-0.061	
Having three or more children	-0.271	**	-0.295	**	-0.146	
<i>Italian Proficiency (Ref. Low)</i>						
Medium	0.225	**	0.234	**	0.052	
High	0.468	***	0.419	***	0.659	*
<i>Naturalization and attitude toward Italian citizenship (Ref. Naturalized)</i>						
Not naturalized willing to acquire Italian citizenship	-0.038		-0.168		0.236	
Not naturalized unwilling to acquire Italian citizenship	-0.347	*	-0.461	**	-0.166	
<i>Feeling at home in Italy (Ref. No)</i>						
More not than yes	-0.363	**	-0.423	**	0.163	
More yes than not	-0.605	***	-0.634	***	-0.335	
Yes	-0.424	**	-0.457	***	-0.122	
<i>Social trust (Ref. No)</i>						
Yes	-0.142	*	-0.140	*	-0.151	
Costant	-3.840	***	-3.773	***	-4.145	***
Pseudo R2	0.066		0.071		0.061	
N	16,851		14,182		2,669	

Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: our calculations on SCIF data.

Moreover, while the other structural and situational variables remain significant and influence the interest in Italian politics in the same way described in Models 1 and 2, the migratory-related and group-related variables lose statistical significance. Therefore, for migrants who arrived in Italy before the age of 18, Italian proficiency, naturalisation (and the attitude toward Italian citizenship), feeling at home in Italy and social trust become irrelevant in determining political interest.

Table 3 summarises the probability of participating in Italian politics beyond voting. The three models that compose this table refer to the same subsamples described with reference to Table 2. As expected, these regressions confirm most of the evidence already described with reference to political interest. However, some interesting differences emerged as compared to the previous analysis.

Considering the whole sample (Model 1), respondents in this regression who came from Asia had a lower probability of participating in Italian politics than did Romanians. However, in the case of the political participation dependent variable, in addition to Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans and MDCs, migrants from Africa also had a significantly higher probability to participate in Italian politics as compared to Romanians.

The other structural, situational and migratory-related variables of Table 3 show similar effects in comparison to those already described with reference to Table 2. Conversely, in the case of political participation, the group-related variables have AMEs of the opposite sign as compared to the regressions with the dependent variable of political interest (compare Tables 2 and 3). Our results indicate that feeling at home in Italy and having social trust play a negative role in political participation. This result seems to indicate that contrary to political interest, political participation (beyond voting) of migrants mainly has the connotation of protest, and for this reason, the lower the sense of belonging and trust in the host country, the greater the political participation of respondents.

Model 2 relating to G1 migrants indicates evidence like Model 1. In Model 3 referring to G1.5, the role played by the variables of ethnic origin, gender, occupational status, number of children, naturalisation, feeling at home in Italy and social trust become statistically irrelevant.

5. Conclusion

According to our results, the country-of-origin effect on migrant political engagement is confirmed in the Italian context; however, it loses its strength in the case of second-generation migrants. On the one hand, evidence emerged which indicates that migrants from countries with a history of democracy are not always more inclined to engage in Italian politics as compared to their counterparts.

Moreover, the geographical distance and the difficulty of returning to the country of origin does not always lead to a greater political engagement in Italy. On the other hand, the assimilative hypothesis seems to be confirmed, namely that more integrated individuals – who have spent more time in Italy, who have good Italian proficiency and who have acquired Italian citizenship – will engage more in politics compared to their counterparts.

The migratory generation plays a central role in determining immigrants' political engagement. While descriptive analysis indicated that G1 has a higher percentage of political interest next to the control variables, the average marginal effect from logistic regressions proved that G1.5 has a higher probability of interest in Italian politics. Furthermore, of particular significance for G1.5 in determining political engagement are migratory-related and group-related variables. However, these variables lose statistical significance in the case of G1.5 migrants.

The main limitation of our analysis is that due to the small number of respondents, we had to jointly consider all individuals who arrived before the age of eighteen. In other words, we could not distinguish individuals born in Italy from decimal migratory generations (second generation, 1.75, 1.5 and 1.25 generations, the last three corresponding to migrants who arrived before age 6, between the ages of six and 12, and between the ages of 13 and 17, respectively) who could have political behaviours very different from each other. Thanks to the progressive absolute and relative increases of second-generation immigrants in Italy, future research should fill this gap by proposing distinct analyses for decimal migratory generations.

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SUMMARY

Immigrants' political engagement: attitude and behaviours among immigrants in Italy by country of origin

The persistent lack of voting rights in Italy for immigrants and the rigid citizenship regime based on *jus sanguinis* preclude immigrants from formal political participation. However, there are other forms of political participation practiced by immigrants. This article analyses the characteristics that are associated with immigrants' non-formal political participation in Italy. A target variable in our analyses is the country of origin of immigrants. The prevailing scientific literature has highlighted that immigrants' countries of origin play an important role in their psychological, social, economic and political behaviour. The country of origin and the associated background can in both repressive political systems and pre-migration discrimination have a negative effect on political attitudes and the behaviour of immigrants in the host country. Using data from the 'Social condition and integration of foreign citizens' (SCIF) survey conducted by the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) in 2011–2012, our paper examines the determinants of immigrants' political engagement in Italy with a focus on both country of origin and migratory generational differences. Using logistic regression models, we explored the engagement differences in immigrant groups in Italian politics as determined by taking an interest in Italian political issues and by participating in different non-electoral political activities, controlling for the main variables used in the literature. Moreover, our data allowed us to investigate the differences in political engagement by migratory generation. The results confirm the country-of-origin effect in spurring political engagement. In general, immigrants from more developed countries, Eastern Europe and Latin America are more interested in Italian politics than are those from African and Asian countries. Moreover, next to other control variables, being in the second generation increases the likelihood of engaging in politics as compared to the first generation.

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