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Catarina Reis Oliveira & Isabel Estrada Carvalhais

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Immigrants’ political claims in Portugal: confronting the political opportunity structure with perceptions and discourses

Catarina Reis Oliveira\textsuperscript{a,b} and Isabel Estrada Carvalhais\textsuperscript{a,b}

Observatory for Migrations and Unit of Research and International Relations of the High Commission for Migrations of Portugal, Lisboa, Portugal; Department of International Relations and Public Administration, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

\textbf{ABSTRACT}
Previous research highlighted the underrepresentation of immigrants in receiving societies’ political system. Furthermore, in countries with authoritarian legacies, a tendency for civic apathy and weak parties was identified. Under such circumstances, what are the chances for immigrants’ political claims within the political opportunity structure (POS)? What role do individuals and groups play – their agency – in propelling immigrants’ political claims? Taking Portugal as a case study, this article analyses how immigrants’ political inclusion is influenced by access to political rights, the party system, and the citizenship regime, envisaging a comprehensive view upon the macro-structure that creates the conditions for such inclusion. The POS’ analytical role is discussed to understand immigrants’ political mobilization and involvement with political parties. Additionally, acknowledging that political contexts can be appropriated differently by actors, we consider the weight of perceptions (and its mismatches with the objective POS), by analysing the discursive environment in which political strategies occur.

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\textbf{KEYWORDS}  Political opportunity structure; discursive environment; immigrants; Portugal; political actors

\textbf{Introduction}

Immigrants have long been politically underrepresented in hosting societies, whether as political party members, electoral candidates or as registered voters (Bird 2005). While several countries have reviewed citizenship regimes and policies on political rights for immigrants, beginning to acknowledge them as voters, many barriers still persist (Koopmans 2004; Huddleston and Niessen 2011). The political incorporation of immigrants and its multiple challenges have attracted several scholars (Martiniello 2005; Hochschild and...

For studying immigrants’ political mobilization three explanatory components should be considered: one highlighting how the political opportunity structure (POS) – considered in its objective (structuralist) form – can restrain or encourage immigrants’ political integration (Koopmans and Statham 2000); a second underlining the role of social networks and groups’ political resources (Odmalm 2003), which may vary among groups (Strijbis 2015); and a third focusing on the individual-level component (Soehl 2013), emphasizing how political actors are affected by their personal resources and perceptions on political opportunities.

Monocausual explanations that isolate the impact of structures, groups or individual dimensions, are inconsistent with reality, missing the different impacts that each dimension might have on individuals, members of a certain group (or groups) in the hosting society. Immigrant communities are not homogenous groups whose members have equal access to (political) resources, nor do individuals perceive resources in the same way (McAdam 1996, 25–26; Suh 2001, 437).

Joining political parties of a receiving society may require a background of citizenship experience, some level of civic capital to enable mobilization or simply the perception that this is relevant for individual social mobility or for collective claims. However, backgrounds and perceptions will not do much in integrating immigrants in politics, unless there are objective opportunities and accessible political resources to do so. What receiving societies decide on the legal and institutional frameworks for immigrants will influence their political integration and their perceptions on opportunities for political involvement. We are not claiming that the POS defines a single, straightforward way for immigrants’ political mobilization based on opportunities or constraints; instead, we acknowledge it as being also subjectively appropriated by individuals and groups. In this regard, we agree with Meyer (2003, 20) when he argues that “in order to be meaningful, opportunities must be perceived”, adding that “purely materialist conceptions of political opportunity are inadequate as they neglect the socially constructed elements of opportunity”, which means that the role of individual and collective perceptions and actions must also be considered, as only by looking at these “volatile elements of opportunity” (Gamson and Meyer 1996), can researchers see actors emerge as real agents actively engaged in the making of the POS.

Based on research findings on a specific country – Portugal –, this article explores the relationship between macro-structural elements that form the POS and micro-subjective elements that reveal how it is actually interpreted by different political actors (with and without immigrant background), thus enhancing the role of group and individual claims. The findings reveal that the POS cannot be considered as a self-evident, determining, standardizing
edifice that affects immigrants equally. The role of group and individual claims and strategies must also be acknowledged (Statham 1999).

As a second relevant contribution, this article argues that the country’s previous colonial and authoritarian legacies play a role, both in designing the Portuguese POS (e.g. citizenship regime, political rights, party regulations), and in the immigrants’ perceptions about such structure and their political mobilization and strategies.

The POS concept revisited

Since its earliest conceptualizations within the context of social movements’ mobilization (Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978) the concept of POS has gone a long way before actually helping explore immigrants’ political participation (Koopmans 1999; Koopmans and Statham 2000; Hochschild and Mollenkopf 2009; Bloemraad and Schönwälder 2013). The concept has propelled the analysis of macro-structural dimensions, considering the role of policies and political institutions, in the mobilization and political integration of different groups (Soehl 2013). This approach mainly argued that immigrants are framed by constraints and opportunities that define their chances for being politically active in a receiving society.

Under this definition, the concept focuses on the idea that external contexts dominate the political behaviour and, consequently, analysing the opportunities or obstacles of mainstream politics (the structure) can help a better monitoring of behaviours (and actors’ agency’s inner rationality) that could otherwise look random and “spontaneous” (Meyer 2004, 128). Immigrants’ political claims and mobilization strategies are not defined in a vacuum rather are framed by a political context with institutions and laws. Hence creativity in the political discourses and claims of political actors (the agency) can only be fully understood by looking at the political context, its rules and institutions (the structure).

Nonetheless, the POS as context-dependent (Meyer 2004, 126) and as an “objective” reality (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Kitschelt 1986; Tarrow 1998) encompassing “the nature of resources and constraints external to the challenging group” (Meyer 2003, 19), has been largely questioned (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Koopmans (1999) had already acknowledged this by introducing the distinction between institutional and discursive dimensions. Other authors find it insufficient to identify existing opportunities, arguing that the concept should also help identify missed and prospective opportunities (Sawyers and Meyer 1999) and those deemed as the most effective actors (Meyer 2004, 135).

In a more incisive way, for Gamson and Meyer (1996, 275) “The concept of political opportunity structure is (...) in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up every aspect of the social movement environment”; while
Goodwin and Jasper (2003, 126) questioned the capacity of the concept to explain all that it promises (cit. in Meyer 2004, 126). Soehl (2013, 1992) further considered that political actors are not only framed by the structure, but also by the organizational context and its mobilization capacities and, as such, the POS should not be over-determined, nor the remaining degrees of group/individual freedom, underestimated.

Others operationalize the POS as an analytical tool that unveils “the extent to which powerful groups, including governments, are vulnerable or receptive to new claims made by groups that hold a marginal position in the political system” (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005, 828), thus revealing the “degree of openness or accessibility of a given political system for movement initiators” (Bird 2005, 428), in the form of resources and institutional arrangements that promote or inhibit social and political participation.

None of these conceptual arguments are actually enough to close the debate on what the POS is really about. Why then have we chosen a concept that is neither original nor consensual in its content and utility?

Looking at Portuguese reality, we noticed a lack of research on the analytical use of the POS applied to immigrants’ political participation. While the opportunity structure has been analysed and discussed in research on immigrants’ economic strategies in Portugal (Oliveira 2007), proving to be an important complementary explanatory dimension – along with community opportunities and individual resources –, it has been overlooked as far as immigrants’ political strategies. Why? Is it because Portugal is a recent immigration country, and therefore immigration is still new to its political agenda? If so, for how long is it reasonable to consider a country a “recent destination”? Or could it be that the lack of political discussion around political integration is rooted in Portugal’s post-authoritarian and post-colonial context, generating a political structure of “weak parties” and general civic apathy (Jalali, Silva, and Moreira 2012; Fernandes 2012), affecting, in turn, the behaviour and perceptions of immigrants? Or is it because immigrants residing in Portugal tend to show a lack of political mobilization and interest (weak agency)? The answers may lie in the explanatory power of both the “objective” and “subjective” POS in political actors’ perceptions.

In highlighting the relevance of perceptions, Opp (2009, 169) argues that assuming certain structural opportunities, as objective reality, is not enough to solve the possible mismatch between those, and the way they are sometimes perceived by actors. Meyer and Minkoff spot this tension by summarizing the logic underneath the “structural model” – which “includes variables that track formal changes in rules and policies affecting political access, as well as the changed practices that follow from them” (2004, 1467–1468) –, and the “signals model” (2004, 1470), focusing on how actors actively monitor the political environment in search for “signals” that will ultimately shape their actions.
Our approach to the accessibility of the political system by immigrants includes two steps: one, analysing the “objective” POS, the legal context (access to political rights), the regulatory framework of political institutions and the political system as it is. The second exploring how these independent variables are perceived by actors as corresponding (or not) to real opportunities for political involvement, by looking at their discursive environment. Our intent was to search for explanations for the underrepresentation of immigrants in Portuguese politics, and more specifically within political parties. As discourses are privileged windows to look at the perceptions that actors hold on reality, we have granted particular attention to parliamentary debates on immigrants’ rights, and to the discourses that emerged from semi-structured interviews conducted.

The prerequisites and policies that frame immigrants’ political rights in a receiving society, existing bilateral agreements, political parties’ regulations, the discursive environment on immigration, as well as the acknowledgement of cultural differences among immigrant groups, are key factors in explaining immigrants’ participation in a political system and in providing an integrated approach to the POS. Cultural differences, for instance, are difficult to measure (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005, 826) and may not be helpful as explanatory ground if disconnected from the impact caused by the legal framework.

In analysing the POS we considered three dimensions that objectively frame the access of immigrants to political life: (1) the legal prerequisites to passive/active political rights accessed by foreigners; (2) the party system and political parties’ internal regulations on immigrants’ freedom to join and act within their structures; and (3) the citizenship regime that establishes access to nationality, as well as to its various rights. Additionally, we considered a fourth dimension to underline the subjective and perceived POS in the discursive environment, therefore recognizing that political opportunities may exist, but are irrelevant unless acknowledged by the relevant actors.

These explanatory dimensions unveil the limitations and prospects of the participation of immigrants in Portuguese politics in general and in the political parties in particular.

Methodological setting and challenges

To set the structure of political opportunities for immigrants in Portugal, we have scrutinized several legal pieces – for example, Constitution, Parties’ legal act, Citizenship act – plus the internal regulations of the six political parties represented in the Portuguese Parliament.

The structure responsible for enhancing or inhibiting immigrants’ political integration in Portugal is intertwined with the agency role, analysed through the discourses of various political actors in parliamentary discussions (MPs)
over the last decade on immigrants’ political rights, and the discourses of 51 interviewees integrating five profiles of actors: (1) politicians with immigration background (PIB) and (2) without immigration background; (3) party members and workers of political parties, with and without immigrant background; (4) other relevant political actors not affiliated to any party; and (5) leaders of immigrant associations and other civil society organizations. Interviews included three persons from BE (Left Block), five from PCP (Portuguese Communist Party), two from PEV (The Greens), eleven from PS (Socialist Party), nine from PSD (Social Democrat Party), four from CDS-PP (Popular Party), and seventeen independents, or without any formal affiliation. The fieldwork took place between May 2013 and January 2014, under the European Commission co-funded project DIVPOL.

A major challenge in this study has been the identification of our target group – immigrants – as the fieldwork showed that it includes both foreigners, as well as citizens with immigrant origin. While the legal and institutional frameworks mainly focus in distinguishing nationals from foreigners, in establishing access to political rights, the discourses and perceptions of political actors tend to underline other subjective contrasts among nationals, foreigners, and citizens with an immigrant background and with ethnic identity. To simply delete any references to these would mean replacing reality with artificiality. In other words, the article focuses on the legal-institutional components that set the POS of foreigners in Portugal, while at the same time looking at the perceptions subjectively assessed by various political actors on immigrants and citizens with a migrant background.

The POS for immigrants in Portugal

Portugal is an experienced emigration country, as illustrated by its visions on citizenship, much carved by the Diaspora’s weight. Portugal is also a recent immigration country with post-colonial and authoritarian legacies dating back to the 1970s, when it joined the “third wave of democratization”, giving rise to a young party system. Altogether, this has shaped the country’s approaches to citizenship, political organization, and integration policies.

Following the assumption that any given POS may potentially influence the political participation of immigrants, we analysed: (a) the scopes and modalities for granting political rights to immigrants, and (b) the parties responses to immigrants over the last decades. The analysis of (a) enters the realm of the independent variable of “change in public policy” (Meyer 2004), while the analysis of (b) enters broadly the realm of the independent variable of ideological positions and openness (closeness) of political parties (Rucht 1996).

The Portuguese POS reveals that regulatory options on immigrants’ political rights have been quite influenced by the country’s double migratory experience (with inflows and outflows). This experience has prioritized
former-colonial relations and reciprocity rights given to Portuguese emigrants residing abroad – two legacies that presently are neither spared from criticism and alternative approaches, nor totally dismissed.

Portugal became acknowledged over the last decade for ranking its integration policies among the best worldwide (Huddleston and Niessen 2011). Furthermore, it has gathered wide political convergence upon integration policies, with immigration appearing as a non-fracturing issue, both in political discourses and electoral campaigns. However, this positive context did not extend to foreigners’ political rights, with political parties showing diverging positions in this regard.

Thus, it is relevant to monitor the impacts of the POS on immigrants’ participation and representation in political parties, as a way to unveil what obstacles and opportunities may inhibit or enhance such participation, considering two basic forms of political participation: through formally exercising electoral rights, and through political affiliation.

**Access to political rights**

National citizenship is not an exclusive precondition for political rights in Portugal. Several non-national residents may enjoy the right to vote and stand for office in local elections following certain conditions.

According to Article 15.1 of the Portuguese Constitution, foreigners and stateless persons residing in Portugal shall enjoy the same rights and be subject to the same duties as Portuguese citizens. Article 15.2 clarifies that political rights, the exercise of public offices not predominantly technical in nature, as well as the rights that the Constitution and the general law exclusively reserve to Portuguese citizens, are exempt from the provisions of the previous Article. Article 15.3 further asserts that citizens from Portuguese-speaking countries (Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, East Timor, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, São Tome and Principe) residing permanently in Portugal are entitled (subject to reciprocity) to rights not otherwise granted to other foreign residents (exception for the offices of President of the Republic, President of the Parliament, Prime Minister, President of supreme courts, service in the armed forces and diplomatic corps), highlighting the relevance of the colonial legacy and historical ties in granting those rights.

The reciprocity principle is also explicit in Articles 15.4 – “subject to reciprocity, the law may grant foreigners residing in Portugal the right to vote and stand for election as local councillors” –, and 15.5 – “subject to reciprocity, the law may also grant citizens of European Union (EU) Member States residing in Portugal the right to vote and stand for election as Members of the European Parliament”. This principle highlights how the country’s migratory experience influences the granting of political rights, considering that it has
been fostered as a political and diplomatic tool to enhance the rights of the
Portuguese Diaspora.

Under the formal exercise of electoral rights granted to third-country nationals (TCN), those whose countries of origin have reciprocity agreements with Portugal, may access active and passive political rights in local elections for local government bodies (Parishes and Municipalities). However, Portuguese law foresees some differences between nationals of Portuguese-speaking countries and other TCNs under reciprocity agreements: (a) immigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries, as legal residents for more than two years may enjoy active political rights for local elections, while other TCNs need three years; (b) regarding eligibility for local government bodies, immigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries are entitled after four years of legal residence, while other TCNs need five years; and (c) residents from Cape Verde and Brazil can be candidates as well, though only Brazilians granted with “special statutory political rights equality” can vote in national elections.

Hence, political opportunities, although important to all immigrant groups, are differently distributed in Portugal on the basis of constitutional precepts. The different access to passive and active political rights is based on positive discrimination towards communities closer to Portugal, similarly to what is promoted by other countries (Waldrauch 2003). In this regard, the impact of the colonial legacy in shaping the formal dimension of the POS is quite notorious. One should also note the relevance of the condition of EU Member-State, as the law cannot provide less to European citizens in Portugal than allowed by European Law, regarding political rights. The POS is therefore a result of domestic dynamics, as well as of historical paths and contemporary international environments (Strijbis 2015).

The characterization of formal access to political rights for immigrants evidences that the Portuguese electoral system, as it stands, seems quite ineffective as an opportunity structure. Why? In the past decade, although the rate of eligible foreign resident voters per total number of foreign residents has increased (53.3 per cent in 2001, 62.9 per cent in 2011), 37 per cent still have no active electoral capacity (Table 1). Furthermore, in the same period, the rate of registered foreign resident voters per total of foreign resident eligible voters in local elections has decreased (21.7 per cent in 2001, 13.5 per cent in 2011). Electoral records by nationality are not available, rendering it impossible to determine to which extent eligible foreigners actually exercise their voting rights. However, given that such rights are not automatically granted to foreigners (unlike the procedure for Portuguese citizens), we can assess the extent to which foreign residents register to vote. In the last decade, the number of registered foreign voters increased by 37 per cent (20,044 in 2000, against 27,441 in 2013). However, since 2008, there has been a slight decrease due to a reduction in TCNs listed to vote (19,727 in
2007, against 14,995 in 2013). This decrease reflects, notably, the upsurge of “new” Portuguese citizens, following the 2006 Citizenship Act. Nearly 270 thousand foreigners (especially TCNs) acquired Portuguese nationality between 2007 and 2013 (Oliveira and Gomes 2014, 165), thus accessing full citizenship rights, obtaining automatic electoral rights, and disappearing from the data on registered foreign voters. This decrease also reflects the decline of immigrants in Portugal due to the economic crisis.

The constraints of the legal framework are important to explain the low rates of registered voters among foreigners, although they do not explain everything, as numerous citizens with political rights at local level do not register to vote (although registering to vote, is not the same as voting). Why is it that immigrants whose nationalities entitle them with political rights are not registering more?

Among TCNs registered to vote, the most interesting cases are Brazilians and Cape Verdeans, the nationalities with the most political rights in Portugal, the longest standing, and the largest immigrant communities (representing 109,787 and 38,895 residents in 2011, respectively). They also display contrasting features regarding the motivation for political participation: Cape Verdeans have a higher share of residents above 20 years old that registers to vote in local elections (36.4 per cent), while Brazilians have the lowest share (4.9 per cent), out of the total TCN share (12.9 per cent). Although these figures do not tell how Cape Verdeans and Brazilians actually vote, it is puzzling to see that the community with the widest set of political rights (Brazilian) shows the lowest rate. Considering that being a registered voter is a basic step to engage with traditional political rights, these rates reveal a lack of political involvement with Portuguese politics among Brazilians. For most interviewees, the main reason lies in their general lack of interest on Portuguese politics.

According to this perspective, the POS explains less than individual and collective features. Nevertheless, in the Brazilian case, one should also consider the interference of the originating country’s POS. The exercise of political rights at national level by Brazilians in Portugal implies suspending their rights in Brazil. This condition has been highlighted by interviewed Brazilian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Registered foreign voters (A)</th>
<th>Foreign residents above 20 (B)</th>
<th>Foreign residents above 20, eligible to vote in local elections (C)</th>
<th>Percentage of A/C</th>
<th>Percentage of C/B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>20,602</td>
<td>178,426</td>
<td>95,036</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>26,957</td>
<td>316,406</td>
<td>199,064</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>62.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variation 2001–2011</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>109.5</td>
<td>−37.5</td>
<td>141.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Administração Eleitoral and Census, cit. in Oliveira and Gomes (2014, 173).

Table 1. Registered foreign voters
associative leaders and party members, as a disincentive to register and to benefit from wider access to political rights in Portugal. On the other hand, residing in a country where voting is not compulsory – unlike what happens in Brazil – can be quite “liberating” in the words of some interviewees, who assess as a “good thing” not being obliged to vote. Either way, transnational experiences rooted in the originating country’s POS can actively interfere in the way the POS of receiving societies is ultimately perceived.

The party system

The Portuguese party system is quite young, when compared with other European polities. The military coup of 25 April 1974 initiated a revolution and inscribed the country in the third wave of democratization worldwide (Huntington 1991, 3–4). Portugal’s political parties emerged from this revolutionary period, leading several authors to argue that Portugal acquired a strong party system with “weak” parties, dominated by low rates of membership and heavy top-structures (Jalali, Silva, and Moreira 2012, 300–301). Furthermore, the country’s “authoritarian legacy” rooted a tendency for civic apathy.

Although the revolution generated an immediate wave of popular mobilization and associational building, involving strong competition among political parties (Fernandes 2012, 12–13), there has been a decline in the levels of affiliation since the mid-1990s. After the initial impact of the revolutionary period, it seems like the country recovered the apathy that had been its collective survival tool under the dictatorial regime. Democratic stability and economic growth, along with joining the European Community in 1986, inaugurated a new cycle that seemed to justify, paradoxically, a return to old habits of civic apathy, whose roots were ultimately not overcome by the revolution. According to the 2008 European Value Survey, only 3.4 per cent of the Portuguese surveyed population was party affiliated. The results of the Immigrant Citizen Survey also show that immigrants’ membership to political parties in Portuguese cities is quite low (varying between 0.7 per cent and 2 per cent), compared to Northern European cities. In another survey, out of 5,669 immigrants surveyed in Portugal, only 1 per cent stated to be a party member. Although these figures show that immigrants are underrepresented in Portuguese political party structures, membership across the Portuguese population is not that high either, highlighting a POS that generally does not attract political party affiliation. Fernandes (2012) argues that such weak affiliation might be related to the political system itself, that has produced “a downsizing of institutional involvement with civic society”, a sign of the authoritarian legacy.

Despite closely linked, electoral rights and freedom to join and act within a political party are not exactly coincident. This has lead Canotilho and Moreira (2007, 363) to argue that someone who accesses an exclusive right, such as
the right to vote, should also benefit from a broader one, such as participating in a political party.

The 2003 Portuguese Political Parties Act establishes that “political parties are constituted by citizens who hold political rights” (Article 7), and that “no one shall be denied membership in any particular political party or expelled on grounds of… place of origin” (Article 20). Therefore, in general terms, foreigners enjoying political rights are free to join political parties. However, taking into account the regulations of the parties represented in the national parliament, it is possible to identify some variations in the admittance criteria for foreigners.

Since 1985, votes concentrate mostly in two main parties: PS (centre-left) and PSD (centre-right). These two parties have managed to consolidate their position in the electoral system, and to become “the key political institutions” of democratic Portugal (Bruneau 1997, 19). Four other political parties are also represented in the Portuguese Parliament, reflecting a very stable hemicycle: three left-wing parties (PCP, PEV, and BE), and one right-wing party (CDS-PP). To characterize the POS, it is important to analyse the regulations and discourses of these six political parties on immigration and immigrants’ political participation.

According to PSD’s regulation, in addition to Portuguese citizens, “foreign residents who have been legally recognized the right to vote may also enrol in the party” (Article 5). This Article suggests an approach to voting rights as underlined in the Portuguese Constitution.

The PS regulation defines that “in addition to Portuguese citizens, legal residents from other countries may also apply for membership” (Chapter II, Article 6.2). However, it also states that “those who are subject to civic and political incapacities defined by Law may not become members of the Party”, thus excluding foreigners without political rights.

CDS-PP defines that “foreign nationals with legal residence in Portugal, who are holders of political rights, may also affiliate” (Article 5), reinforcing that the capacity to access political rights is the requirement (an argument enshrined in the Political Parties Act).

BE follows the previous parties, in terms of requiring the capacity to access political rights, excluding however any reference to nationality: those “who have expressed their desire to join the Movement and are in full possession of their political rights” (Article 3). In practice, however, this implies that foreigners from countries not covered by reciprocity agreements are excluded.

The only two parties that do not express any formal requirements or legal constraints towards the admission of foreigners, besides ideological ones, are PCP and PEV. For PCP “whoever accepts the Programme and its Regulations may become a member” (Article 9). Regarding PEV, any citizen who “shows actual ecological commitment, whether at individual or professional level” can become a member (Article 11).
As for decision-making capabilities, such as voting rights within the party, once foreigners become party members, they enjoy the same rights and duties as any other member. However, legal constraints limit foreigners to only being eligible candidates for local elections. Ultimately, this explains the absence of foreigners in the Parliament, only possible for members holding “dual citizenship”.

What our fieldwork has also revealed is that parties have neither specific concessions for immigrants, nor targeted programmes or party manifestos. Although most respondents mentioned certain concerns in including immigration in the party’s agenda, this seems to follow very random strategies. PCP, for instance, mentioned a “Working Group on immigration affairs”, formed by members with immigrant background, to help the party make a more targeted approach during electoral campaigns. Members of PS also mentioned a working group devoted to social movements and immigration issues, formed by various independent citizens. However, an interviewed PS member with Cape-Verdean background argued that the group had been working mostly on, and not necessarily with immigrant communities.

In a less structured form, respondents also mentioned the organization of debates where relevant members of immigrant communities were invited to participate. Despite the significance of these efforts, respondents were too evasive on providing further details on their parties’ forms of interacting with immigrant communities.

Additionally, respondents tended to say mea culpa on behalf of their parties about the insufficient presence of PIBs in their internal structures, and about the lack of information by the parties in this regard. There are no ways to statistically assess the presence of immigrants or citizens with immigrant background in party structures, situation explained by party members as an option, as they do not wish to make any sort of distinction among members on the basis of nationality or immigrant background.

Clearly, political parties in Portugal still lack a pragmatic approach to the growing presence of immigrants (similar to what Bird 2005 observed in other countries). This might be explained by the parties’ view of immigration as a non-divisive issue, meaning that what may be deemed as an important political capital, may also have its less positive dimension, which is to dispossess immigration of its potential political relevance.

Promotion of candidates with immigrant background, for instance, has been almost absent, although left-wing parties began to be more attentive to this matter in recent years, as part of their electoral strategy in the Lisbon metropolitan area. Some politically active interviewed immigrants stressed the lack of parties’ awareness to the electoral relevance of immigrants, while nonetheless believing that once parties realize that they are demographically expressive, they will be more interested in calling candidates closer to these communities.
Some respondents also stressed the existence of very complex balances of power within the parties that undermine the access of immigrants, or that make them not consider immigrants’ claims as priorities. In their view, the existence of a prevailing status quo hard to challenge inside the parties, explains, at least partially, the underrepresentation of PIBs in party structures, especially in political leading roles, and as candidates in eligible positions in local election lists.

Complementarily, according to some interviewees, various PIBs had been placed in non-eligible positions in the parties’ lists of candidates to local elections. As a result, there was a widespread feeling of having been used as electoral baits for specific immigrant residential areas. For these interviewees, this was the main reason why various PIBs and immigrant leaders began to turn down invitations to join new lists, and are not committed to politically mobilize their communities. The ways the POS is perceived, helps explain the lack of immigrants’ political mobilization, which may be less a direct consequence of the structure in se, and more of how these actors acknowledge opportunities.

The political underrepresentation of immigrants can be a proxy to dysfunctions and constraints of the POS. As argued by Bird (2005, 455), the openness of the political system, the selection of party candidates, and the existing electoral rules, do affect the presence of immigrants in the political system.

Nonetheless, a socialist MP raised the question on how really important this all is for immigrants. To this MP, although it is true that at the moment there is no political agenda on immigrants’ participation in political parties, it should be considered that immigrants may not perceive their involvement (or lack of it) as a real issue. Behind this MP’s reasoning, was the idea that Portugal has a rather generous naturalization regime, a strong element of the POS that allows escaping “the urgency of the principle of compensation” (Bauböck 2005, 685).

**Citizenship regime**

The Portuguese POS reveals that national citizenship is not an exclusive pre-condition to access political rights. Still, numerous non-nationals are legally excluded from accessing political rights because there are no reciprocity agreements between their countries of origin and Portugal. In such cases, political participation is totally dependent on accessing Portuguese nationality.

Respondent politicians, especially from left-wing parties, underlined the negative consequences of the Portuguese POS for immigrants’ participation. However, at the same time, some interviewees who had been actively committed in preparing the 2006 Citizenship Act, were prompt to consider that this framework has created other “more relevant” opportunities, widely offsetting the restrictions imposed by Portugal on immigrants’ access.
to political rights. In this regard, the citizenship regime is broadly assessed as counterbalancing the constraints posed by other elements of the POS.

The 2006 Citizenship Act – approved under strong political consensus, with 91 per cent of MPs voting in favour and none against – has been considered as the current best policy in the EU (Huddleston and Niessen 2011). Such political consensus is a sign of the relevance awarded by politicians to the integration of immigrants and their descendants, also proving that political elites tend to see immigration issues as non-divisive.

While Portugal has historically sponsored *jus sanguinis* citizenship lineages (Carvalhais 2010), a more inclusive law was sought to integrate immigrant descendants born in Portugal. The new citizenship regime was thus conceived to free immigrants from the constraints of the 1981 Act, through an advanced form of *jus solis*, facilitating access to full citizenship by individuals holding strong ties to Portugal.

These changes had significant impacts on the rise of applications for and acquisition of Portuguese citizenship after 2006. The refusal rate of applications between 2007 and 2013 averaged 6.1 per cent (16,397 refusals in total), against 30 per cent between 2001 and 2006. Moreover, 268,831 individuals acquired Portuguese citizenship between 2007 and 2013, a number far beyond the 14,865 between 2001 and 2006 (Oliveira and Gomes 2014).

While this legal framework facilitates the creation of “new” citizens, it also promotes, though indirectly, access to political rights. Thus, according to various politicians interviewed, the limitations for immigrants accessing political rights have been broadly offset by the “generous Portuguese citizenship framework”.

**Discursive environment and political actors’ perceptions**

Although the above-described legal and institutional contexts determine the formal possibilities for immigrants’ political participation, and shape how they can make political claims, it is important to acknowledge that there is always room for originality in the way actors perceive existing political opportunities (or lack of them) and, based on that, define their own political strategies to overcome obstacles or mobilize opportunities. The POS does not impinge a homogeneous influence on individuals, nor should be understood as transparent or self-evident for all individuals. Furthermore, the POS does not create an automatic and common reaction in all actors. As argued by Soehl (2013, 1993–1994):

> Once we begin disaggregating the political opportunity context, we see that different aspects of the context can be interpreted to favour the promotion of different distinctions. (...) we pay attention to how strategic political actors perceive or mis-perceive the opportunity context. (...) given the complexity of political situations, there will always be multiple interpretations of any given
context. The question then is not only what the political opportunity context is but also the ways in which can be read.

Contradictory elements may emerge when the “objective” POS faces the subjective (or perceived) POS, considering that the actors’ perceptions about the context, its rules and institutions are dynamic, and change over time. To capture this subjective POS we considered the discursive environment. Although the discursive environment is a very broad explanatory dimension (Donovan 2007, 474), we limited the analysis to MPs’ speeches and debates on immigration and immigrants’ political rights, and to the perceptions of fifty-one political actors interviewed, enhancing the political parties’ positions regarding who participates in the political system and its institutions.

A first contradictory element that follows from the comparison between the objective and the subjective dimensions of the POS, relates to access to political parties. The respondent politicians were consensual in stating that their parties have no constraints against nationality in the rules of admission for new members. Some also stated that the lists of candidates are guided by criteria of competence and merit only. However, it became quite obvious that most of them did not fully master their parties’ regulations, and were not aware that there are some actual legal limitations imposed by law.

Over the last decade, there has been wide convergence on immigration matters among the Portuguese political parties: “We are lucky that immigration is not a wedge issue in our society” (MP from PS); “Immigration is more consensual as an issue than what it may look like” (MP from PSD). The most revealing examples were the voting of the 2006 Citizenship regime, and of the Immigration Act (2007 and 2012), both achieving major political consensus. Which was confirmed by a 2008 survey to MPs (Freire and Viegas 2009), where out of 141 respondents, only 2 disagreed with the statement that “immigration enriches Portuguese society”, while 103 agreed, and 36 completely agreed.

Political arguments by the extreme right, promoting racist attitudes and xenophobia, have not led to any significant electoral gains. The extreme-right party that advertises “Portugal for the Portuguese”, only obtained 17,548 votes in the 2011 parliamentary elections (one third of these voters being Portuguese residents in Brazil), that is 0.31 per cent of casted votes, and 27,269 votes in the 2015 parliamentary elections, representing only 0.5 per cent of total casted votes. Such results reflect the voters’ lack of willingness to back-up xenophobic and anti-immigration agendas, as well as the insignificant political weight of this party. Unlike other European countries, both the extreme-right and the nationalistic agendas in Portugal have had no influence, either upon government formation or upon the definition of policies, including those affecting immigrants.
Despite such consensus around immigration and integration policies, the differences among political parties on the granting of political rights to immigrants should not be overlooked.

The positive discrimination of nationals from Portuguese-speaking countries in accessing political rights, for instance, was non-consensual among our interviewees, although most PIBs and party members with immigrant background were in favour.

At the Portuguese parliament, the last debate regarding the widening of foreigners’ political rights (January 2011, under the Parliament’s Constitutional Review Working Group) highlighted different positions. Left-wing parties argued in favour of enlarging the political rights of immigrants, stressing that they should not be limit to the principle of reciprocity. Still, their positions were not homogeneous. While BE argued for political rights at local and national levels, and for immigrants’ opportunity to be elected in local elections, PCP and PS underlined that political rights, passive or active, should be gradually provided to all immigrants, fundamentally at the local level. In the same debate, MPs from PSD and CDS-PP held a quite different position, stating that the principle of reciprocity should be kept, as a way to pressure other states to offer equal electoral rights to Portuguese emigrants. It was further argued that discriminating citizens from Portuguese-speaking countries and from other countries outside the EU regarding political rights should remain, to honour historical ties.

As also found by Bauböck (2005, 685), most interviewees stressed the principle of reciprocity as a paramount obstacle to immigrants’ political participation. Electoral capacity, in their view, at least at the local level, should be given to all immigrants on the basis of legal residence. Indeed, while most respondents within the entire political spectrum agree that reciprocity is relevant in diplomatic relations between states, they also consider that for the practical purpose of fostering integration of immigrants at local level, it has become quite constraining.

However, for some MPs, the POS’ constraints do not fully explain the lack of political participation among immigrants. Therefore, reforming the reciprocity principle may not be enough to change the whole dynamics of immigrants’ political integration, and its abolition should not be seen as a panacea for the issue of low political involvement. The same cautious attitude was found with regard to the virtues of a quota system for immigrants. This was spontaneously mentioned by some respondents, as a way to – at least theoretically – improve POS effectiveness, increase the number of immigrants in political leading roles, and stimulate the involvement of communities with electoral registration and voting. Nevertheless, even those theoretically in favour of quotas, consider it as a last resource that could create more harm than good, since it could force individuals to assume ethnic belongings that would not be otherwise relevant in their lives, and further stimulate a fake sense of “ethnic confrontation”.
Interviewees also mentioned the lack of immigrant lobbying, and underlined the need for communities to start identifying their best political actors to collectively lobby on their behalf within political parties. To note, however, that lobbying as a means to achieve stronger descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967) was mentioned as a way to explore the presence of immigrant communities within already existent political structures, and not as a means to create new political structures with ethnic affiliations. Ethnicization of politics was not only recognized as being constitutionally forbidden, as also widely rejected by all interviewees.

Simultaneously, as for the possible reasons underlying the lack of immigrants’ political involvement, respondents highlighted a set of obstacles. One was the lack of political capital. For some interviewees, the political system in the immigrants’ countries of origin might explain their lack of interest for politics in general or at least for politics in the receiving society. PIBs interviewees totally opposed this idea, stressing that many immigrants (e.g. Cape Verdeans) come from societies with a strong civic activity, where rates of electoral participation are higher than those recorded among Portuguese citizens. The transnational dimension is thus assessed differently by the various actors. Although an important variation within countries should be acknowledged, a discussion between what has a greater impact – the hosting society’s structure or the groups characteristics (agency) – is implicit.

Political culture was yet another obstacle highlighted. Portuguese society in general distrusts politicians, which, according to some respondents, is the result of the political parties’ conservativeness; of the citizens’ perceptions on the (in)capacity of public policies to solve structural problems (e.g. cyclical economic crisis); and of the citizens’ perceptions on the integrity of politicians in office and on institutional transparency. Immigrants, as part of society, are influenced by these attitudes, joining the general feelings of frustration about politics, which become more acute in their case, as their condition usually puts them under greater vulnerability. The thesis that explores the idea of an attitudinal and behavioural “transference” seems to contradict the previous idea argued by some interviewees, in particular PIBs, that considered immigrants to be more influenced by their transnational paths and former citizenship experiences, than by the political culture of the hosting society. Besides, such thesis also weakens the arguments on the benefits of lobbying, and of communities identifying the best among them to lobby within political parties.

Language was also highlighted as an issue, both when immigrants do not speak it, and also when they do. For some respondents, not speaking Portuguese has been one of the reasons underlying the lack of political and governmental involvement, and for deeper and better social and political integration of Lusophone immigrants.
Finally, most respondents also mentioned economic obstacles. From left-to-right-wing parties, with and without immigrant background, respondents were rather consensual in linking immigrants’ lack of political involvement to their economic vulnerability or labour motivations to being in Portugal. Indeed, political action requires some level of motivation and commitment (Schönwälder 2009), and this is often not compatible with immigrants’ economic needs and daily priorities.

Each opportunity and obstacle was given a different weight and capacity to foster or inhibit the political system. Nonetheless, none of them seemed to be as relevant for interviewees as what they signalled as individual motivation: “individuals must be pro-active, must search for opportunities” (PS member), and by adopting this attitude, “obstacles may turn into opportunities” (PSD member).

Hence, in the Portuguese discursive environment, the lack of immigrants’ political participation, and their underrepresentation in political structures, is mainly explained by immigrants’ own underlining individual features and subsequent individual obstacles, thus minimizing the impact of the POS and the role of politicians on that matter.

**Conclusion**

This article highlights how the POS shapes immigrants’ political involvement in a receiving society and, consequently, their motivation to and possibilities of accessing political parties. Whether in the form of regulatory/legal requirements, or of aspects less easy to grasp, such as political and organizational cultures and discourses, the POS presents elements that contribute to inhibit immigrants’ participation.

So far, immigration has not been a wedge issue in Portuguese politics. This of course, should not be mistaken for lack of disagreements and intense political debating. However, this rather positive aspect may also generate a lack of political prioritization of immigrants’ claims, namely political ones.

Portugal’s achievements regarding immigrants’ political integration are modest. The presence of immigrants in the political system is still incipient, showing through empirical evidence, that reality may also defy the intentions of normative sets, as seen in the case of the low rates of registered voters among communities entitled with political rights. The explanations for this reside both in the objective dimension of the POS (e.g. limitations created by the Constitution), and in its subjective dimension, in the way actors perceive reality as an obstacle or as an opportunity. Structure and agency are thus connected in ways that can only be separated for academic purposes. As for what explains the external context, that is, the political options underlying the citizenship regime, or the Constitution, this article has tried to highlight the relevance of the post-colonial and post-authoritarian legacies, as
reasonable explanatory elements. As for what triggers perceptions – if the external context (the legal sets, the electoral system, the citizenship regimes, the parties’ complex internal balances of power, and lobbying strategies), or individual characteristics; if the local experiences with the receiving society’s available structure, or the transnational experiences with political structures in the countries of origin – there was also a variety of answers emerging from our data, testifying the plurality of perceptions among interviewees. Still, none of the perceived obstacles or opportunities was assessed by interviewees as strong enough to justify the creation of ethnically oriented parties and, therefore, the ethnicization of politics.

Furthermore, while the electoral and the party systems have constraints that explain immigrants’ underrepresentation, the citizenship regime was claimed to offer several opportunities to widen political participation.

The discursive environment has also interesting contrasts. General political consensus on immigration and integration – which may be identified as an opportunity – coexists along with differences on the utility of the reciprocity principle, which many assess as a major obstacle for immigrants’ political participation.

In conclusion, we would say that the POS only highlights the opportunities and constraints set by the environments in which mobilizing groups operate. It does not determine whether immigrants will actually participate or not, once they have the possibilities to do so. Hence the POS must be considered in articulation with other explanatory variables, such as the influence of the POS of the country of origin in immigrants’ perceptions, or the characteristics of immigrants as groups and as individuals. Though not all-determining, since groups and individuals always have their own agency (Donovan 2007, 477), the POS is an important explanatory tool, as we have tried to show in the case of Portugal, by looking at its objective and subjective dimensions.

Notes

1. Agreements signed with Norway, Iceland, Argentina, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela and Chile. These are countries that Bauböck calls “purely residence-based local franchise” (2005, 685), which explains why it is easier to conceive an extension of political rights to immigrants under these liberal models, as opposed to ethnic-based models.


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