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“They Don’t Have the Time for That, Participating in Politics”—How Local Politicians Interpret Political Integration in the USA

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Abstract

Political integration is an important aspect of immigrant integration because it strengthens ties with the host country’s political institutions. In particular, the local level is often the first step for immigrants to become politically engaged as they feel that they have a stake in the city, and, indeed, many diverse cities position themselves as advocates of immigrant rights. However, we know little about how local politicians interpret the political integration of immigrants in their communities. To identify key patterns in their interpretations, I conducted 20 qualitative interviews with local politicians and administrative employees in Maryland and Washington, D.C. and analyzed them using Bohnsack’s documentary method. Specifically, I compare immigrant and non-immigrant local politicians and administrative employees. Overall, immigrant and non-immigrant local politicians differ in their views of the relationship between immigrants and political integration. While immigrant local politicians conceive political integration and other forms of integration, such as labor market integration, as equally important, non-immigrant politicians view political integration as subordinate to other forms of integration. Moreover, immigrants are described as inherently mistrusting of politics, both due to their political socialization and current US politics. Thus, this study sheds further light on how local politicians interpret immigrant political integration in the USA.

Keywords Political integration · Local politics · Qualitative methods · USA

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Introduction

Immigration and integration have become major issues at the local level in the USA. In particular, the role of immigration on local and national identity has been highly debated as migrants increasingly settle in small towns and rural communities with little prior exposure to social diversity (Gilbert, 2009). As the setting for everyday life, the local level is often the first step for people to acquire knowledge about political institutions and processes, while at the same time resembling political institutions at other political levels. And, indeed, many cities position themselves as advocates for immigrant communities and rights. Especially, local politicians are vital in politically engaging residents in their local communities. At the same time, as political actors, they play an active role in changing the status quo because they must interpret political incidents and shape policy responses (Bruzelius, 2022). In the context of immigrant integration, the attitudes of local politicians can influence the development of integration policies, in terms of whether a municipality adopts more inclusive or more assimilationist policies (Caponio & Pettrachin, 2025; Manatschal et al., 2020). This becomes particular relevant in discussions of political integration, which is generally described as the process by which people are included in political debates, practices, and decisions (Bloemraad, 2006), as it raises the question of who is considered a member of the political community (Heinelt, 2018; Penninx, 2019). Thus, in this paper, I explore local politicians' perceptions and conceptualizations of political integration. In doing so, I answer the research question: *How do local politicians think about the political integration of immigrants in their municipality/county?*

To explore these interpretations, I conducted and analyzed 20 qualitative interviews with local politicians and administrative employees using Bohnsack's (1999) documentary method. These interviews were conducted in municipalities and counties in Maryland and Washington, D.C. Specifically, I compare immigrant and non-immigrant local politicians' and administrative employees' interpretations of political integration, highlighting differences in interpretation based on their own experiences. My study contributes to the literature on immigrant political integration in several ways. First, in contrast to other studies of integration at the local level, which mostly focus on a few large cities, such as Amsterdam, Berlin, or New York (e.g., Benton-Short & Price, 2008; de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016), I focus on small municipalities as well as Washington, D.C., as an emerging immigrant city. These small municipalities are just as relevant to local policy as larger immigrant destinations. For example, Takoma Park, a small municipality in Maryland, is one of the trailblazers in the local movement toward noncitizen voting. Second, I focus on local politicians and administrative employees, which allows me to draw on their experiences with immigrant integration in their communities and counties, as well as their perceptions of immigrant political integration. This adds to our knowledge of how local politicians, as key political actors, define immigrant political participation and how relevant they consider immigrant political integration to be within the overall integration process.

Overall, my results indicate that local politicians view political integration as an important process in the democratic inclusion of immigrants in local society. Nevertheless, non-immigrant local politicians interpret political integration as a later step in integration, after other forms of integration, such as labor market integration, have been concluded. This clear chronological sequence contrasts sharply with the interpretation of integration by immigrant local politicians, who perceive a parallelism between political integration and other forms of integration. Furthermore, interpretations vary on the activity level required of immigrants themselves. While some local politicians and administrative employees perceive political integration as something that does not require the active participation of immigrants, others associate political integration with active forms of participation that are not limited to voting but also include running for office. Based on these different interpretations of integration, expectations about the behavior of the immigrant community and the role of the municipality in promoting political integration vary. Thus, this paper not only sheds light on how local politicians interpret political integration but also helps to explain why some local communities adopt policies aimed at promoting the political integration of immigrants, while others do not.

Political Integration at the Local Level

Political integration plays a unique role as it links democratic theory and immigration debates: It raises questions about who is considered a member of the political community and what rights and responsibilities are attached to this membership (Heinelt, 2018; Penninx, 2019). Bloemraad (2006) describes political integration as “the process of becoming a part of mainstream political debates, practices, and decision-making” (ibid., p. 6). It encompasses a variety of different attitudes and behaviors, such as political trust, adherence to democratic values, and political participation (Tillie, 2004). Moreover, it strengthens ties between immigrants and the host country’s political institutions and increases immigrants’ emotional attachment to the host country, thereby deepening social cohesion (Bloemraad, 2006; Dollmann, 2022; Wallace Goodman, 2014). While political integration is often linked to the formal status of immigrants, such as their residence and citizenship status, and hence to formal incorporation into the nation-state, integration does not take place in a vacuum but is shaped by a variety of actors at many political levels (Moralli et al., 2023). Other dimensions of immigrant integration are a socioeconomic (i.e., the position in institutions such as housing, employment, or education) and a cultural-religious dimension (i.e., immigrants’ perceptions and practices) (Penninx, 2019). These examples of housing or employment illustrate that policies directed at immigrant integration are largely realized at the local level, with local governments both implementing and formulating policies (Bloemraad & de Graauw, 2012; Downs-Karkos, 2016; Heckmann, 2019). It is therefore crucial not only to examine the national level but also to consider the role of local governments in shaping integration policies.

Local Integration Politics

The political debate on immigration and integration is deeply embedded within many regions (Ellis, 2006; Gilbert, 2009) as immigrant settlement tends to be highly concentrated in some regions and municipalities (Clark, 1998; Ellis, 2006). In general, municipalities perceive immigration more quickly than nation-states (Spiecka, 2013) and are more closely connected to immigrant associations and the social sector (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008). However, municipalities do not just passively absorb immigrants into their local communities. While political integration is the form of integration in which the local level has the least competence, as access to citizenship is usually tied to the nation-state, local actors are in a position to shape migration and integration policies and can take an active stance in either limiting or promoting integration (Manatschal et al., 2020). For example, local authorities may or may not play an active role in informing immigrants about opportunities to participate in political decision-making or to become naturalized citizens. They may advocate for the establishment of local offices for immigrant affairs, thereby influencing public perceptions of immigration (Jiménez & Vargas Nuñez, 2024) or attempt to counteract discrimination against immigrants (Alizade et al., 2021). In some states in the USA, such as Maryland, local authorities may even decide to grant noncitizens the right to vote in local elections (Arrighi & Bauböck, 2017). Pham and Van (2022) illustrate changes in the climate toward immigrants created by state, county, and city legislation enacted in the USA between 2005 and 2020. The first phase, measured (2005–2012), was characterized by exclusionary policies that restricted immigrants' access to rights and resources. It consisted of policies that, for example, prohibited undocumented immigrants from getting driver's licenses, allowed law enforcement to ask for proof of residency, and included cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). However, since 2012, policies toward immigrants at the subnational level have become more inclusive (Jiménez & Vargas Nuñez, 2024; Pham & Van, 2022). In recent years, many diverse cities have actively positioned themselves as advocates for immigrant communities and rights, such as New York, Toronto, Amsterdam, Dublin, or Barcelona (Benton-Short & Price, 2008; Fernández-Suárez & Espiñeira, 2021; Wonders & Fernandez-Bessa, 2021). These municipalities extend rights to all residents and define their local citizenry (Mallet-Garcia & Garcia, 2025), providing a form of "urban citizenship" (Varsanyi, 2006) as an alternative to national citizenship. For example, Toronto committed itself to providing services to all residents regardless of immigration status by not requiring residents to provide documentation of their immigration status in 2007 (Siemiatycki, 2015). These examples illustrate that municipalities are political arenas that position themselves not only as "destination points for immigrants. They are also the stages upon which the various impacts of immigrants are negotiated and contested" (Benton-Short & Price, 2008, p. 21). The overall active positioning of municipalities in migration and integration politics has been described as a "local turn" (Bauböck, 2003). This local turn refers both to municipalities acting in ways to integrate their immigrant population and advocating for individuals with irregular immigration status (Varsanyi, 2006) and to explicit campaigns against immigrant integration (Casademont Falguera et al., 2024; Gebhardt, 2016). Thus,

with the increased immigration in many Western democracies, immigrant integration is not only a topic of popular debate but also a contested one. While some argue that integration refers to a process, others identify it as an end goal or describe it as a combination of both (Hemmaty et al., 2024; Spencer, 2022).

Perceptions of Local Politicians

In particular, local politicians’ interpretations of immigrant integration are important for understanding differences in integration policies and outcomes across municipalities and counties. First, politicians contribute to transforming the current status quo, generating new worldviews, and changing or stabilizing current worldviews. They can form views on certain issues and gather groups around these worldviews, making democratic representation an active process of producing and reproducing political issues (Brichzin, 2020, 2022). Because of their democratic legitimacy, the positions of elected politicians allow them to have a tangible impact on local policies (Bourdin, 2024). As a consequence, local politicians may play an important role in shaping local communities’ perceptions of immigrants and their integration status. Second, politicians’ opinions on immigrant integration logically precede the implementation of integration policies. Especially when resources such as money, staff, or political capital such as popular approval are limited, policies depend on their opinions about whether the issue is considered important at all, its importance relative to other issues, and who is seen as responsible for solving the problem or whether the problem can be solved at all. If local politicians view political integration as unimportant, they likely choose to ignore possible policies to promote this form of integration. On the other hand, if political integration is interpreted as important, but other forms of integration are viewed as more urgent, policies are likely to focus on these more pressing aspects. For example, if the labor market integration of immigrants within the community is simply seen as a more urgent matter than their political inclusion, local politicians may choose to promote programs that support small businesses rather than trying to activate immigrants politically.

In addition, if immigrants are deemed to be solely responsible for their integration, political integration policies may look different than if the local community is deemed to be responsible. In this case, policies may be oriented toward “helping immigrants to help themselves”. Meanwhile, if the nation-state is considered to be the key actor in immigrants’ political integration, the local level may be perceived as having no role to play. This perception may be furthered if the issue is seen as unsolvable. Furthermore, politicians tend to employ stereotypes in their decision-making processes (Bordalo et al., 2016; Wynn et al., 2024). If local politicians perceive immigrants as inherently disinterested in politics, they may be inclined to remain inactive in implementing policies to promote their political integration. Thus, an analysis of politicians’ perceptions of the political integration of immigrants illustrates not only the process of political integration (i.e., the process of including immigrants in political decision-making) but also its relationship to other forms of integration.

Research Method

I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews, with an average length of 64 min, with local politicians and administrative employees to investigate their interpretation of immigrant political integration. The interviews were conducted in municipalities and counties in Maryland and in Washington, D.C., between August and October 2024. They generally focused on immigrant political integration within the community.

Both Washington, D.C., and individual municipalities within Maryland have expanded opportunities for political participation through the introduction of noncitizen voting. While municipalities such as Takoma Park enfranchised noncitizens in local elections as early as the 1990s, other Maryland municipalities have recently enfranchised noncitizens or are in the process of doing so, such as Greenbelt in 2024. This enfranchisement can be done by municipalities amending their municipal charter, as the Maryland Constitution allows municipalities to grant voting rights to individuals outside of these qualifications without state approval (Maryland State Archives, 2022). In Washington, D.C., noncitizens have been able to vote in local elections since 2024, as implemented by the “Local Resident Voting Rights Amendment Act of 2022.” In addition, both Washington, D.C., and Maryland are shaped by immigration. While Maryland is one out of seven majority-minority states and several Maryland municipalities top rankings of the most ethnically diverse US cities (McCann, 2024), Washington, D.C., has been transforming into a multiethnic city since the 1980s, with approximately 13 percent of its residents currently foreign-born (Benton-Short & Price, 2008; Chacko, 2008; US Census Bureau, 2024). With relatively recent immigration flows, compared to cities such as New York, Washington, D.C., has been confronted with new ethnic communities and questions of identity. Hence, because of their institutional frameworks for political participation and the diversity of their residents, both Maryland municipalities and Washington, D.C., are particularly instructive for examining politicians’ interpretations of political integration.

Sampling was based on predefined criteria regarding the geographical unit (municipality or county) that the interviewees represent and the characteristics of the interviewees themselves. These were the institutional embedding of political integration (e.g., noncitizen voting), the size of the municipality or county, its proportion of noncitizens, and the function of the interviewees. Geographic units range in size from 5000 to 1 million people, with foreign-born percentages ranging from about 3.5 to 31 percent. This allows me to find common interpretations among local politicians and administrative employees, regardless of differing experiences, based on the total number of residents they represent, the proportion of immigrants, and prominent countries of origin within the geographic units. Eight of the interviewees were women. Five described themselves as immigrants during the interview. The general conditions of their immigration varied notably, e.g., in terms of their country of origin and native language. In addition, 8 of the 16 interviews with elected officials were with (former) mayors or county executives. Five of the 20 interviews were conducted with administrative

staff in order to obtain further information about the municipalities/counties, their immigrant populations, and local strategies for dealing with the political integration of immigrants. In addition to the 20 interviews with local politicians and administrative employees, one interview was conducted with two representatives of a local immigrant organization (referred to as *Organization* throughout the analysis). Both representatives of this organization are immigrants themselves. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees, their functions, and whether they described themselves as immigrants during the interview. Since these interviews were conducted with public figures within the local communities, I do not describe the individual municipalities/counties or the respective characteristics of the interviewees in more detail for the sake of anonymity.

In order to reveal the tacit attitudes of local politicians toward the political integration of immigrants within their municipality/county, I analyze the interviews using Bohnsack's (1999) documentary method. The documentary method is based on the work of Karl Mannheim and his sociology of knowledge. It was developed to uncover implicit knowledge in the context of a specific situation. In the analysis, the literal meaning is used as a reference point, while the aim is to uncover underlying knowledge (Asbrand, 2014). A focal point of the documentary method is the comparison between cases. These comparisons are essential to provide a basis for the construction of key patterns (Asbrand, 2014; Nohl, 2012). Specifically, I compare the views of (self-identified) non-immigrant and immigrant local politicians and administrative employees on political integration within the municipality or county. This comparison allows for the identification of differences in how political integration is prioritized and conceptualized between immigrants and non-immigrants. Possible differences in their interpretations represent not only different life experiences regarding immigration but also their personal distance from the topic of political integration, especially for immigrant local politicians. For example, while non-immigrant politicians may view political integration through an abstract policy lens or in terms of social cohesion, immigrant politicians may emphasize issues of access, representation, or discrimination. The documentary method was applied in four sequential steps (see Brichzin, 2022). First, the directly expressed meaning of the text was identified and summarized. Second, alternative possible interpretations

Table 1 List of interviewees

Function	Background	Pseudonym
Elected official	Immigrant	Abara, Díaz, Gómez, Sawyer
	Non-immigrant	Armstrong, Baker, Davis, Edison, Hanson, Harper, Jones, Kennedy, Nolan, Norris, White
Administrative employee	Immigrant	Pérez
	Non-immigrant	Bishop, Jenkins, Martin, Warren

Administrative employees are members of the Board of Election, city clerks, or administrative officers (county level). Elected officials are council member, mayors, county executives, and in Washington, D.C., advisory neighborhood commissioners. Categorization as immigrant or non-immigrant is based on (unprompted) self-identification as an immigrant during the interview

by the interviewees were formulated. Third, a reflective interpretation is used to extract implicit interpretative structures. This uncovers how social reality is constructed by interviewees. Fourth, the identified interpretations of the interviewees are compared, and key patterns of interpretation are described. An example of these steps is given in Table 2.

Interpretations of Political Integration

Three overarching categories, in which political integration is interpreted, emerge from the interviews with local politicians and administrative employees (see Table 3). These are as follows: (1) The relationship of immigrants to political integration, (2) the relationship of political integration to other forms of integration, and (3) the relationship of political integration to society. Individual interviewees tend to describe and interpret all three categories and their relationships to political integration and participation within the interview. However, the patterns of interpretation within these categories differ between interviewees. Notable differences emerge in particular between individuals identifying as immigrants and those who do not. While political integration is considered important and in a similar way by both groups of interviewees, their description of the connection between immigrants and political integration differs in terms of its relation to other forms of integration and in the ascribed willingness of immigrants to participate politically.

Relationship of Immigrants to Political Integration

The first overarching category, which is filled with patterns of interpretation by interviewees, is the relationship of immigrants to political integration. There are notable differences between non-immigrant and immigrant interviewees.

Patterns of Interpretation by Non-immigrant Interviewees

Non-immigrant interviewees describe a mistrustful attitude of immigrants toward politics. This mistrust is generally perceived as a barrier to political integration. While there seems to be a consensus on the existence of a mistrustful attitude, interviewees differ in their interpretation of the causes of this mistrust. Two prominent patterns emerge: either a perceived lack of integration is linked to the USA and its structures, or immigrants themselves (or their countries of origin) are blamed for unsuccessful integration.

When a perceived lack of integration is linked to the USA and its structures, mistrust of the federal government and the police is seen as the underlying cause. In this pattern of interpretation, immigrants are paralyzed by fear and hence unable to engage politically. While immigrants are interpreted as passive and at the mercy of the political system, the local level acts as the protagonist instead. Municipalities and counties are described as having to make efforts to build trust and engage immigrant communities. Primarily, the police (e.g., *Davis, Jones, White*) and trusted

Table 2 Example of analytical steps

Quote	Step 1: Formulated interpretation	Step 2: Formulation of alternative possibilities	Step 3: Reflective interpretation
<p>"I really define [political integration] as creating an accessible and easy-to-navigate system for those who want to become citizens to become citizens. And I think what we experienced with our immigrant surge was, a lot of people don't know how to navigate that system. Because it's convoluted. It's like nuanced, it's opaque, it's just not easily understandable. And it can take years" (Martin)</p>	<p>Political integration is achieved through the acquisition of US citizenship. However, the naturalization process is subject to a number of hurdles that prevent this acquisition</p>	<p>From a democratic perspective, one might expect the political rights of foreigners to be taken into account. Moreover, questions could be raised about the representation of immigrants in political decision-making or about their trust in politics From an immigrant-skeptic perspective, the loyalty of immigrants when it comes to US politics could be questioned</p>	<p>Political integration is linked to citizenship. Thus, the political sphere concerns only US citizens, while noncitizens are disconnected from US politics</p>

Own example based on the scheme by Brichzin (2022)

Table 3 Patterns of interpretation among non-immigrant and immigrant interviewees

Category	Non-immigrant interviewees	Immigrant interviewees
1. Relationship of immigrants to political integration	Immigrants as mistrusting. This inhibits their political integration	Immigrants as interested in politics and active participants
2. Relationship of political integration to other forms of integration	Subordinate in terms of time and necessity to other forms	Parallelism in terms of time and even complementary to other forms of integration
3. Relationship of political integration to society	Importance of political integration for democratic inclusion	Importance of political integration for democratic inclusion

members of the immigrant community are described as actively trying to build trust (e.g., *Abara, Bishop, Jenkins*), as are the politicians themselves (e.g., *Davis, Edison, Jones*).

"You know what they're interested in is not about voting. [...] I mean, ultimately they will be at some point in their pathway, right. But what people are really interested in [...]? What are the first questions people want to know? Well, the first thing they want to know is, hey, [...] if [...] I have an encounter with the police, you know, are they going to ask me my immigration status? Am I at risk? I don't even want to talk to an officer, potentially, because I'm scared" (*Edison*).

Meanwhile, when a perceived lack of political integration and mistrust is attributed to immigrants' characteristics, their countries of origin and (presumed) political socialization are viewed as at fault (e.g., *Edison, Martin, and Kennedy*).

"And political integration is also complicated by the fact that some of these folks are coming from [...] countries that don't really believe in political integration" (*Martin*).

"And what we've heard, it's anecdotal, it's not scientific, is that many people come from places where it's not as open, where the culture of politics is not as open to everybody. And there's in some cases, there's an element of danger, to participating openly. And so that's not part of their makeup" (*Kennedy*).

"But I mean, a lot of it, a lot of the adult people that I meet, even people who've lived here for 30, 40 years, Hispanic, Hispanic immigrants in particular. [...] I've had a number of conversations where people are like, well, you know, it's all the same, isn't it? I mean, corrupt politics and strongmen" (*Edison*).

With this view of political integration, the municipality or county can do nothing to engage the immigrant community. Mistrust is perceived as deeply rooted, as it has been socialized into immigrants. As a result, there are few ways to counteract this perceived disintegration by the municipality or county. Instead, political integration is described as something that happens in the second generation because of its connection to one's socialization (*White*, but also *Abara* as an immigrant local politician).

"But there is there seems to be a [limit to political integration] you hit, which most people can't get past in this generation where their children can. You know, the children of immigrants have held very high-level positions [...]. Kamala Harris herself is at least the grandchild. [...] Obama [...]. So like eventually, after a generation [...] But like but for first generation it's a thing that prevents them from being truly socially integrated" (*Abara*).

Hence, while non-immigrant interviewees generally agree that they perceive a great deal of mistrust in the immigrant community and, as a result, limited political integration, there are differences in the interpretations of who is to blame: Are US policies and political institutions at fault, or immigrants' socialization in their countries of origin? The resulting consequences for the local communities and possible courses of action are connected to these differing patterns of interpretation. In the first pattern, in which US policy is seen as the culprit, local politicians and administrative employees position the local level as a mediating body between immigrants and the federal level; as advocates for immigrant interests, they try to compensate for hostile policies and build trust. Meanwhile, in the second pattern, immigrants'

socialization and past experiences in their countries of origin are perceived as responsible for deep-rooted mistrust. Consequently, the local level can only wait for the second generation of immigrants to become politically engaged, according to these interviewees. In contrast to the first generation, this second generation is described as highly engaged, not only by voting but also by taking a more active role and participating in political campaigns or even seeking elected offices themselves.

Patterns of Interpretation by Immigrant Interviewees

The view of immigrants as generally mistrustful is contrasted by immigrant interviewees themselves. Nevertheless, similar to the second pattern among non-immigrant interviewees, immigrant local politicians and administrative employees perceive immigrants' countries of origin and political socialization in these countries as formative. They describe the immigrant community as highly engaged *because* of their background in their country of origin. The political limitations of their country of origin are being described as an engaging moment rather than a disengaging moment. For example, *Díaz* describes their partner (an immigrant from Syria) and their joy at being able to vote for the first time in their life because of noncitizen voting policies in Washington, D.C. *Pérez* explicitly states that Latinos are more politically engaged because they "had to leave their countries because of political persecution. Right? So they were advocates in their countries." Like *Kennedy*, *Pérez* also describes the "essence" or "make-up" of immigrants in terms of politicization. However, instead of describing this alleged essence as apolitical, it is described as highly politicized.

"And I know from many of the people that left Central America or South America, you know, [politics is] their essence. [...] So it's it's in their blood. They can't help themselves. You know, they're always thinking about it" (*Pérez*).

In these descriptions, immigrants are willing not only to participate by voting but also to take an active role in local communities. Specifically, *Díaz* describes their decision to become a local politician as the result of seeing aspects that they perceived as worse in their current community in the USA than in their country of origin. Thus, the comparison of experiences in two country contexts is described as a politicizing moment. Notably, both more positive and more negative experiences in the country of origin can generate this drive to become active.

To summarize, immigrant interviewees also perceive political integration as deeply rooted within immigrants and shaped by prior political experiences. However, perceptions of actual political engagement and attitudes toward politics differ between immigrant and non-immigrant interviewees. Hence, while they share the perception of political integration as something deep rooted, their perceptions of the direction of this political imprinting are opposite. Meanwhile, non-immigrant interviewees agree on a perceived lower level of political engagement among immigrants than among the general public. Nevertheless, the reasons for this lower engagement vary. While some attribute the disengagement of immigrants to their nature or their socialization in their country of origin, others see US immigration policy and its political institutions, particularly the police, at fault. Because the causes of this disengagement and mistrust are different, the consequences that the local community

must draw from this disengagement also vary. When the USA is seen as at fault, a variety of strategies are described to increase trust and engagement, such as local meetings with the police (e.g., *Bishop, Edison, Jones*). Meanwhile, when political disengagement is interpreted as a part of immigrants' characteristics, no local strategies are described to promote engagement and, thus, further political integration. In these cases, local strategies concentrate on other forms of integration, such as employment. This leads to the second overarching category.

Relationship of Political Integration to Other Forms of Integration

The second overarching category is the relationship of political integration to other forms of integration, such as employment, housing, or education. This relating of political integration to other forms of integration runs through all the interviews. However, the constructed relationship between political integration and these other forms varies between non-immigrant and immigrant local politicians and administrative employees. Overall, non-immigrant local politicians and administrative employees perceive political integration as subordinate to other forms of integration, both in terms of which steps of integration happen first and fastest and in terms of importance.

"[They] have to prioritize, right? Making ends meet and being able to support their family and probably then don't have the time for that, participating in politics in any way" (*Kennedy*).

In particular, labor market integration is identified as a precursor to political integration. However, other factors are also described as preconditions for political integration, especially the food supply and general health of immigrants (*Organization, Pérez*). These forms of integration are viewed as necessary and urgent, while political integration is perceived as being tied to previously acquired resources and as an addition later in the integration process. Because immigrants are simultaneously perceived by local politicians and administrative employees as having a lower socioeconomic status, this leads to a description of immigrants as generally disinterested in politics. Instead, immigrants are described as more concerned with these other, seemingly more pressing aspects of their lives, particularly their economic positioning.

"But I think a lot of integration could be more easily, done if you lower the barriers to entry to work. [...] And with that, with work comes political integration and organization, and you're building like a life for you and your family. And, I think that's the first piece is that a right to work. The right to work precedes political integration. And can really, I think, make a difference in mobilizing immigrants to become politically integrated into our system, voting advocacy, picking a political party, aligning with, certain political movements within the US. You have to have a job to be able to do that" (*Martin*).

By focusing on the perceived preconditions for political participation, local politicians implicitly portray immigrants as vulnerable and in a precarious situation. Focused on survival, they are seemingly unable to think about participation in the political sphere. Not only does this view ignore the diverse social

conditions within the immigrant group and lump them together as a homogenous group, but it also fails to recognize the similarities with many non-immigrant Americans living in poverty. Within this pattern of interpretation, lower participation rates among immigrants are viewed as inherently connected to their economic status.

In contrast, immigrant interviewees describe a possible parallelism between political integration and other forms of participation. In their depictions, political integration can take place simultaneously, in terms of time, and even in combination with other forms of integration. Instead of requirements that must be met before participation, they emphasize the value that political activity can bring to immigrants. Within these narratives, political integration has a complementary and supportive effect on other forms of integration, such as social integration. Thus, immigrant interviewees describe political integration as an active expression of one's interests that leads to a better positioning in other areas of life and, therefore, precedes or at least supports other forms of integration (*Abara, Díaz, Organization*).

"And I always say and tell my colleagues that I wish I had known an organization like [ORGANIZATION] existed, because of how much support we generally provide to the community through to our services and also our advocacy, just building power and giving immigrants a say in this country" (*Organization*).

Citizenship plays a unique role in the discussion of political integration's relationship to other forms of integration. While citizenship is a part of political integration, it is also often a prerequisite for political integration, in the form of electoral participation. In contrast to these theoretical and legal debates, however, within the interviews, citizenship is mostly seen as disconnected from the general concept of political integration (except for *Díaz* and *Martin*). Not only are forms of integration, such as labor market integration, more prominently mentioned, but when citizenship is discussed, the descriptions remain focused on the federal level. In these descriptions, citizenship is often viewed as merely a formal institution and legal status (e.g., *Davis*). It is noteworthy, therefore, that questions of national citizenship and its connection to political integration, as a form of expressing one's interests, are mostly omitted, replaced instead by the level of inclusion into the local community through work, housing, or social contacts. Only *Díaz's* interpretation, as an immigrant themselves, stands in contrast. Instead of seeing citizenship as a mere formal status, they interpret it as deeply connected to the public expectations with which they are confronted.

"So if you are a noncitizen and you just keep getting all these messages that you're harming already, that you're not contributing, that you're not paying taxes, that you're not whatever the talk is or has been in this country for years, then you maybe also feel like, well, you know, why would I even bother? If all I hear is that I am, you know, being all this negative things, and I feel that that's also has its antithesis, which is like this image of the superhero immigrant who has to do way more than above and beyond to be considered worthy. And I also do not believe in that at all" (*Díaz*).

Relationship of Political Integration to Society

The third overarching category is the relationship of political integration to society as a whole. Within this category, patterns of interpretation do not differ between non-immigrant and immigrant local politicians and administrative employees. In general, political integration is perceived as both important and multifaceted. Facets of political integration that are repeatedly emphasized are participation, in terms of political (e.g., voting, attending council meetings) and social participation (i.e., being part of community life), and trust in political institutions. Through these different facets, political integration encompasses not only the federal level but all political levels. However, while political integration is perceived as essential for democratic inclusion, the level of activity required of immigrants varies. This is illustrated in Fig. 1.

At one end, with the least activity required of immigrants, is the interpretation of political integration as simply feeling heard, regardless of whether one ever tries to make one's interests known (e.g., *Davis, Edison*). In this interpretation, the municipality/county is the active part rather than the immigrants. For example, when asked about the political integration of immigrants within the municipality, *Jones'* response is to emphasize that the municipality is a sanctuary city, "and we pride ourselves on that." *Norris*, when asked about their understanding of political integration, elaborates on the role of municipalities/counties in integrating their immigrant communities in depth. Integration is described not in terms of what immigrants do, but whether the municipality or county is able to adequately identify their needs, build trust, and "[make] the law accessible" (*Abara*). Thus, municipalities and counties are seen as instrumental in creating avenues for immigrants to voice their opinions, regardless of whether immigrants use these avenues. Instead, the mere signal of having policies in place, such as noncitizen voting, is perceived as immigrant integration.

"I think it means, listening to the voices of all residents, whether they're citizens or noncitizens, whatever they're political leaning. We're a local government, so we're nonpartisans. So, you know, we have to hear from and listen to people from across the spectrum, you know, I think understanding the needs, of the population is important" (*Norris*).

"Yeah. And I mean, I would imagine it'll be the next generation who will more take advantage of [voting in local elections]. But I still think it's an important policy to have in place because, you know, it's a signal to people that, you know, hopefully, that you're safe here and that you that we value you as a person and your right to, to have an opinion here" (*Edison*).

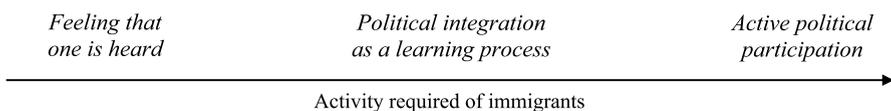


Fig. 1 Interpretations of political integration by level of activity required of immigrants. Note. Own illustration

"I would say political integration, the ideal of political integration would be that the immigrants felt that they could engage in the political process equally with citizens. [...] So they would be comfortable in every way interacting with politicians, interacting with the government and would not feel that they were, second class in any way" (*Davis*).

In the middle of the activity scale, political interpretation is thought of as something that has to be learned, albeit with institutional support (e.g., *Díaz, Gómez*). Within this interpretation, education is generally viewed as the framework condition of further forms of integration, as it concerns the younger generation (e.g., *Armstrong, Díaz, Jones, Pérez*). As a result, both immigrants and political institutions are perceived as playing an active role in the process of immigrant political integration.

"I think political integration is something that you learn. And the best place, in my opinion, to learn about these things is in school, because you cannot just leave it to your family to teach it to you, because they might not know what that is either. So for me, it's knowing and understanding" (*Díaz*).

At the other end of the spectrum, with the highest activity demanded of immigrants, is the interpretation of political integration as something that immigrants must actively do. Political integration is associated with high demands for integration, which are generally not met by the majority of the population, regardless of whether they are immigrants or not. It takes the form of direct political participation, both through voting and other forms of participation such as running for office. For *Kennedy*, this includes activities such as

"participating in council meeting, but also [...] voting. It also means running for office. And even if they don't come to council meetings, just letting themselves be heard on various issues, getting on the record with testimony on issues that we're considering" (*Kennedy*).

Related to the interpretation of how much activity is required of immigrants is the perceived separation between the participation rates of immigrants and non-immigrants. When the municipality or county was seen as providing an opportunity for individuals to use or not use, no distinction was made between immigrant and non-immigrant residents. However, in the case of non-immigrant respondents, the greater the activity expected of residents, the greater the described difference in participation between immigrants and non-immigrants. Still, no distinction is made between immigrants from different countries of origin and their participation rates. This means that non-immigrant respondents tend not to describe immigrants from a particular country of origin as more engaged than others, instead describing them as fairly homogeneous in their (lower) participation rates. This contrasts with empirical studies of immigrant participation, which find that current political participation is influenced by an individual's political socialization in their country of origin (*Voicu, 2014; Voicu & Comşa, 2014*).

Discussion and Conclusion

Although tensions over the political integration of immigrants have increased at the national level, at the local level, many municipalities position themselves as advocates for immigrant rights and declare themselves “sanctuary cities”. Even apart from these proactive approaches to immigration policies by cities such as New York (Benton-Short & Price, 2008), the local level is often the first to respond to the needs of immigrants (e.g., in the form of health care, education, or housing). Thus, local politicians play a crucial role in shaping local integration policies and public perceptions of immigrant integration. Through policies, such as noncitizen voting, they can attempt to actively engage their noncitizen residents and counteract biases that may lead to discrimination (Alizade et al., 2021). Because their attitudes (and resulting policies) can have a significant impact on immigrants’ political integration, I investigated local politicians’ interpretations of immigrant political integration in Maryland and Washington, D.C., and answered the research question: *How do local politicians think about the political integration of immigrants in their municipality/county?*

In general, political integration is interpreted as important and multifaceted, encompassing not only political participation but also trust. Nevertheless, interpretations vary in terms of the level of activity required of immigrants themselves. While some local politicians and administrative employees view political integration as something that does not require active participation by immigrants, but rather as a mere offer that residents may or may not accept, others associate political integration with active forms of participation that are not limited to voting but also include running for office. Non-immigrant local politicians and administrative employees generally agree that the immigrant community is mistrusting of politics, although they differ in their interpretations of who is to blame for this lack of trust: Are US politics and political institutions or the immigrants’ countries of origin at fault? These two patterns of interpretation were also found by Hemmaty et al. in their study of integration in Sweden. Hemmaty et al. (2024) describe two prominent patterns of interpretation: *separation*, which links a perceived lack of integration to immigrants themselves, and *de-migrantization*, which describes the state and its structures as responsible for unsuccessful integration. In this study, however, I show that in the USA, these two patterns appear to be complemented by a third, expressed by immigrant local politicians and administrative employees, who describe the immigrant community as politically engaged because of prior experiences in their countries of origin. These interpretations, which focus on only one reason for the level of participation, neglect the possibility that both the political culture of the country of origin and the political culture of the host country have a simultaneous effect on the political integration of individuals (Voicu, 2014; Voicu & Comşa, 2014).

In addition, non-immigrants and immigrants differ in their interpretation of the relation of political integration to other forms of integration. Non-immigrant local politicians and administrative employees perceive other forms of integration as preconditions for political integration. Meanwhile, immigrant local politicians

and administrative employees perceive a parallelism between political integration and other forms of integration. It is particularly noteworthy that questions about national citizenship and its connection to political integration, as a form of expressing one's interest, are mostly omitted and instead replaced with the level of inclusion into the local community through work, housing, or social contacts. These conceptions are in line with works on urban citizenship, which describe the federal level as more closely linked to questions on national identity, while the local level is more permeable in terms of constituting its demos (Koopmans, 2004), highlighting differences between urban and national citizenship (Varsanyi, 2006).

I contribute to the literature on local integration in several ways: First, previous studies on local integration mostly focus on integration in general, rather than on political integration (Hemmaty et al., 2024). Second, rather than using case studies of selected municipalities and policies, I conducted interviews with local politicians and administrative employees in several different municipalities. This allows me to find commonalities and shared interpretations among local politicians. Third, previous studies on immigrants at the local level have focused on immigrant integration in mostly a few large cities, such as Amsterdam, Berlin, or New York (e.g., Benton-Short & Price, 2008; de Graauw & Vermeulen, 2016). I, on the other hand, focus on small municipalities as well as Washington, D.C., as a rising immigrant city.

It must be acknowledged, however, that only local politicians in Maryland and Washington, D.C., were interviewed. Further research in other US states with municipalities that exhibit varying immigration and integration policies and other possible relevant differences, such as proximity to the Mexican border, would further illustrate their perceptions of the political integration of immigrants in their local communities. In addition, to further shed light on who local politicians perceive as engaged or disengaged, future studies should specifically examine communities where different immigrant groups have typically settled to more systematically compare local politicians' perspectives on different immigrant groups and their political integration. Moreover, it is important to recognize that the results describe the perceptions of local politicians and administrative employees and may differ from the actual numbers of immigrant participation. In particular, interviewees from "welcoming" cities or counties emphasize that they generally do not have specific numbers because they tend not to ask individuals about their immigration status. Furthermore, local politicians, such as mayors, are not in a position to implement their policy responses based on their attitudes alone. Rather than operating in a vacuum, they are confronted with various societal groups whose interests they must negotiate and incorporate into their decision-making processes (Beer et al., 2020). In particular, when discussing immigrant political integration, the role of immigrant-led NGOs and their active advocacy for immigrant rights must be recognized. Nevertheless, the opinions of local politicians are important because they can bring these issues to the forefront of the public's mind and give them a wider audience from the entire community, as well as take action and translate attitudes into legislation.

In summary, the results reveal differences in the interpretations of non-immigrant and immigrant local actors. While non-immigrant local politicians and administrative employees tend to describe a clear chronological sequence of immigrants'

steps toward integration, immigrant local politicians and administrative employees tend to describe a parallelism of different forms of integration. While both groups of comparison describe the importance of political integration as a tool of democratic inclusion, their interpretation of immigrants' attitudes toward the importance of political integration differs significantly. Immigrant local actors describe immigrants as a whole as politically interested and informed as a result of past experiences of restrictions on democratic expression. Meanwhile, non-immigrant local actors describe immigrants as inherently apolitical and mistrusting, either because of past experienced restrictions in their countries of origin or because of US institutions and immigration policies. This illustrates the complexity of political integration and underscores that while political integration is viewed as a normative ideal, important, and multifaceted, the importance of the political sphere is overall described as subordinate and less important than the economic sphere. Although the perceived importance of political integration relative to other forms of integration differs between local politicians and administrative employees, the consensus described at the local level on the general importance of immigrant political integration is noteworthy in light of the current rise of populism and skepticism not only about immigrants but also about their political influence. Consequently, the extent to which the discourse on political integration changes over time should be monitored not only at the national level but also at the local level.

In summary, this paper not only illustrates how local politicians interpret political integration but also the relationship between political integration and other forms of integration. This sheds light on the broader issue of local integration policies and provides a more nuanced view of how both immigrant and non-immigrant local politicians and administrative employees understand political integration. In particular, it counters dominant narratives that portray immigrants as politically apathetic by showing that immigrant local politicians and administrators see their communities as politically engaged. The findings also have important implications for public policy. Specifically, the divergent perceptions of immigrants' political interest suggest the need for further dialogue between immigrant and non-immigrant local actors. Furthermore, given that non-immigrant local politicians and administrative employees perceive political integration as occurring at a later stage than other forms of integration, such as economic integration, local governments might consider explicitly linking the two forms of integration in their policy initiatives.

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Data Availability Due to the interviewees' prominent positions in local politics, supporting data are not available.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Research was conducted in accordance with EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Consent to Participate Verbal informed consent was obtained for anonymized interview answers to be published in this article. Interviewees were given the opportunity to withdraw their responses at any time.

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

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