



Political participation and civic engagement of immigrants in Lisbon Metro Area: main actors and agencies

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Political participation and civic engagement in the Portuguese society

- Portuguese society has traditionally very low levels of political participation and civic engagement. Despite the end of dictatorship in 1974, 50 years of this political regime left a deep imprint of apathy and institutional dependence among the citizens.
- The State is regarded as the “big-father/mother” that should provide comfort and resources for its citizens, although there has been an increase in the activities relying on the voluntary sector.
- The role of the State in the political participation and civic engagement processes is very relevant because it defines the juridical and political framework in which national and foreign citizens can participate.



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- It is the State that defines who has/has not the right to vote or to be elected and in which elections. The partners for dialogue and negotiations with the governmental agencies are also defined and recognized by the State (ex: COCAI)



Political participation

- Democracy is legitimized through the vote of the citizens and in a society where the proportion of non-nationals is growing steadily, their political participation is more pertinent than ever (1960: 0.3%; 1981: 1.1%; 1991: 1.1%; 2001: 2.2%; 2005: 4.4%).
- Very recently (January 2006) the High Commissioner for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (ACIME) voiced his opinion in favour of the immigrants' right to vote ("... in democracy, the person without voting rights doesn't exist. He/she is a non-citizen.")



The right to vote and to be elected

- The first step to vote or to be elected is to be enrolled in the Electoral Census; this process is voluntary for foreign citizens (compulsory for Portuguese people) who must have legal residence in Portugal.

Who can vote?

- Citizens from Argentina, Chile, Israel, Norway, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela residing in Portugal for more than 3 years in local elections (these countries respect the reciprocity principle)
- Citizens from Cape Verde and Brazil (local elections) residing in Portugal for more than 2 years (these countries respect the reciprocity principle)
- Citizens from EU countries (local elections and EU parliament)



Who can be elected?

- Citizens from Cape Verde and Brazil residing in Portugal for more than 4 years
- Citizens from Peru and Uruguay residing in Portugal for more than 5 years
- All EU citizens

In the metropolitan area of Lisbon there are several municipal deputies from Capeverdean origin (ex: in Oeiras and Loures).



Electoral results

- Despite having separated electoral registries, it is extremely difficult to know the proportion of foreign citizens who actually vote because STAPE does not count them. Using the data from the electoral census it's possible to have an idea of the interest foreign citizens show for Portuguese politics.

*Cape Verde, Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Peru, Norway, Uruguay, Chile, Israel

% of foreign legal residents enrolled in the electoral census (2005)

European Union	11.3
9 countries *	20.5
Cape Verde	29.1
Brazil	7.1
UK	11.3
Spain	10.9
Germany	12.2
France	10.5
Total	16.3



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- Lisbon region – EU: 9.2%
9 countries: 24.4%
 - Considering the lack of data, one may think that if these citizens bother to enrol for the electoral Census, they most probably will vote in the elections.



Civic engagement

- Considering the voting constraints imposed on foreign citizens by the law, the civic engagement of non-nationals becomes even more relevant in democratic countries.
- What can be considered civic engagement?
 - To volunteer for community work
 - To belong to a neighbourhood/local/national association and taking an active role in its activities
 - To take part in public debates about issues interesting for the ethnic/local community
 - To lobby for a cause and becoming involved in processes



Programmes, initiatives and activities fostering civic engagement

- At the government level
 - Portugal Hosts programme: free classes of Portuguese language and civics for legal foreign residents (classes are given in schools, parishes, associations, NGOs)
 - Choices programme: targeting teenagers in problematic neighbourhoods; one of the 4 strategic areas is “civic and community participation”
 - ACIME has a consultative council for immigration issues (COCAI) where officially recognized immigrants associations have a seat
 - ACIME sponsors research on immigration issues that always include a session for public discussion
 - ACIME has published several brochures about access to health, education and social security, immigration law, recognition of academic diplomas and professional skills



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- At the municipalities level
 - Some municipalities in Lisbon metro area have/had local consultative councils (ex: Lisbon, Amadora, Loures, Odivelas) for immigration issues, specially those with higher proportion of foreign residents
 - The municipalities with major concentration of immigrants in their territory have special offices for dealing with the requests of immigrants' associations (ex: Loures, Sintra).



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- At the associations level
 - Legal support and advice during the extraordinary regularization campaigns
 - Training programmes benefiting from EU funds
 - Important role of informing immigrants during the re-housing process of late nineties (from shanties to social housing)



Main constraints for immigrant political participation and civic engagement

- In order to be an active citizens, immigrants have to be informed, must know how to participate and where to participate.
- The small proportion of immigrants enrolled in the electoral census shows that Portuguese politicians and politics have little meaning to immigrants.
- Many immigrants don't know their associations even at the neighbourhood level; these often don't reflect their interests and concerns.
- Due to long working hours or multiple jobs, immigrants don't have much time and energy to actively take part in public discussions or debates; very often they don't know where or how they can do it.



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- A field survey in Lisbon metro area showed that a remarkable proportion of immigrants had never heard of ACIME or COCAI.