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Immigrant Political Integration in Times of Permanent Crisis: A Multi-Level Governance Perspective from Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates immigrant political integration in Italy through the lens of Multi-Level Governance (MLG), examining whether a framework so far applied mainly to socio-economic integration and refugee reception also illuminates the political dimension, and how its core dynamics unfold there. Building on three concepts associated with MLG in immigrant integration studies – the local turn, governance decoupling, and battleground – the article examines how these unfold when the focus shifts from service provision and social inclusion to political participation and representation, drawing on national policy analysis and a case study of immigrant consultative bodies in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, focusing on the city of Parma. The findings confirm the relevance of the local turn and governance decoupling, but in a more pronounced form than in socio-economic integration, whereas the battleground dimension proves the most distinctively reshaped in this policy field, mobilizing a partially different constellation of actors and introducing stronger internal fragmentation within immigrant constituencies. The analysis reveals a broader weakening of immigrant councils in Italy – marked by declining activity, a shift from elected to appointed membership, and persistent ambiguity over their representative mandate – as institutional retrenchment unfolds within a broader process of “permanent crisis” (crisification). The article contributes to MLG theory by exposing distinctive governance dynamics challenging representation, legitimacy, and voice under conditions of weak institutional consolidation.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant political integration; immigrant political representation; multi-level governance (MLG); local consultative bodies; local governance

Introduction

In Western Europe, social rights were historically extended early to immigrant workers¹ (Geddes & Scholten, 2016), while political rights, including the right to vote in national elections and the opportunity to be represented politically, are typically granted last to immigrants, and often coincide with naturalization. Hammar (1990) has captured this anomaly using the term “denizens”.

As a result, the study of immigrant integration policies has mainly focused on the socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions, which have long been at the top of the integration policy agenda (see for example Scholten, 2013). The political component of immigrant integration tended to be overlooked in policy scholarship and instead explored more commonly by studies on social movement and conventional participation.

Despite the emergence in the 1990s of a strand of literature focusing on immigrant political representation—a key institutional dimension of political integration examined in this article (Günter & Stanton, 2013; Martiniello, 1999, 2006; Però & Solomos, 2010)—the debate

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subsequently stalled. Since the end of the 2000s, only few contributions (e.g. Schiller, 2023) have discussed instruments that promote the political representation of the disenfranchised.

This shift coincided with the “refugee crisis”, which redirected migration policy—and much migration scholarship—towards asylum reception and border control. The COVID-19 pandemic may have further reduced the salience of immigrants’ political representation in the eyes of both policymakers and academics.

This article addresses both an empirical and a theoretical gap. Empirically, it investigates participatory channels activated by public actors in Italy, revisiting a policy field that has received little systematic scholarly attention over the past two decades. More specifically, it analyses consultative bodies established in the Emilia-Romagna region and, particularly, in the city of Parma, where a recent process of institutional reform has led to the redesign of the local immigrant consultative council. From a theoretical perspective, the article extends the multi-level governance (MLG) framework—widely employed in the study of immigrant socio-economic integration and, more recently, refugee reception policies (Bassoli & Campomori, 2026; Caponio & Pettrachin, 2025; Hepburn & Zapata-Barrero, 2014; Scholten, 2013)—to the political dimension of integration, examining how horizontal interactions among state and non-state actors and vertical relations across different levels of government shape policy dynamics.

Our research question asks how immigrant political integration unfolds when examined through a Multi-Level Governance (MLG) lens, and whether this domain reveals specific features of core MLG dynamics that refine and extend our understanding of the framework beyond its established application to socio-economic integration and refugee reception policies. In particular, we build on three MLG-related concepts that have become central in the study of immigrant socio-economic integration and refugee reception policies: the *local turn*—which has put emphasis on local integration policies after a long-standing scholarly focus on the national level (Caponio & Borkert, 2010; Zapata-Barrero, Caponio & Scholten, 2017); the *governance decoupling*, highlighting the lack of effective coordination and integration across different levels of government in policy implementation (Scholten, 2013); and the *battleground*, pointing out conflict, competition, and strategic maneuvering among the various stakeholders involved in integration policies (Ambrosini, 2018; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). Overall, the article seeks to determine whether the insights from socio-economic integration policies can be extended to the political dimension of integration and what is possibly specific in the MLG dynamics shaping political integration.

Studying immigrant political integration in contexts of permanent (refugee) crisis

In recent years, migration debates across Europe have unfolded against the backdrop of what Geddes (2021) conceptualizes as a “permanent crisis”: crisis as the routine framework through which migration is governed (crisification), sustaining the framing of migration as a problem constantly warranting emergency-oriented interventions. This interpretive framework extends beyond borders and asylum governance: processes of immigrant structural inclusion—especially political integration—have been progressively sidelined in favor of short-term policy responses, a focus that has also shaped much of the scholarly debate. Yet institutional retrenchment is not matched by immigrant political disengagement: grassroots mobilizations, especially among younger generations with a migration background, continue to articulate demands for equality, recognition and political voice.²

A valuable analytical foundation is offered by the tripartite model advanced by Penninx and Garcés-Mascreñas (2016, p. 14), which identifies three interrelated dimensions “in which people may (or may not) become an accepted part of society”: the legal-political, the socio-economic, and the cultural-religious. This model places the focus on the institutional positioning of immigrants within receiving societies; their location across the spectrum of each dimension determines their degree of integration. The legal-political dimension pertains to residence status, access to citizenship and political rights, ranging from irregular migrants to naturalized citizens, with an

increasingly stratified landscape of statuses in between, shaped by restrictive national citizenship laws and the EU's differentiated mobility regime (Morris, 2002).

Political integration can be further unpacked following the four-fold delineation developed by Martiniello (2006). First, it concerns the political rights granted by the host society—the broader the access to rights, the higher the level of integration. Second, it involves identification with the host political community, such as through feelings of belonging and recognition. Third, it requires the internalization of democratic norms and values. Fourth, political integration encompasses participation,³ mobilization and representation.

In this article, we use “immigrant political integration” as an umbrella concept, drawing upon the work of Penninx & Garcés-Masareñas and Martiniello. Empirically, we focus on its institutional dimension—namely the public policies and arrangements that aim to enable immigrants' participation and representation in local governance. Accordingly, “political representation” is treated as a specific component of political integration, operationalized here through local consultative bodies and related institutional participatory channels.

Scholarship has investigated immigrant political participation through multiple disciplinary lenses. Voting-behavior and conventional-participation studies initially focused on turnout, partisanship and political engagement (Verba, Nie, & Kim, 1978; Norris, 2009); as immigrants gained access to voting rights, they came to be examined as constituencies with distinct patterns of mobilization and party ties (Jacobs & Tillie, 2004; Morales & Giugni, 2011; Umpierrez de Reguero & Finn, 2024), including how political opportunity structures, discursive environments and individual grievances shape both turnout and protest (Cinalli & Giugni, 2011; Montesoglu Tardivo, 2026).

A second line of inquiry, rooted in citizenship studies, has examined how legal frameworks and membership regimes shape opportunities for political participation, highlighting how restrictive citizenship laws and the absence of local voting rights for non-citizens produce forms of semi-membership and democratic deficits (Bauböck, 1994; Fabbrini, 2014; Groenendijk, 2014; Kymlicka, 1995; Piccoli, 2022; Soysal, 1994). This perspective draws attention to the tension between territorial residence and political exclusion.

Third, social movements and contentious politics scholarship has examined mobilizations and protests by people with migration backgrounds challenging exclusion, precarity and discrimination, showing how immigrants assert agency amidst legal vulnerability and hostile political climates (Corrado, Macciani, & Caruso, 2023; Nicholls, 2013; Però & Solomos, 2010).

A fourth, less extensive strand of literature has analyzed immigrant integration from an urban governance perspective, examining the features and impact of consultative institutions such as local immigrant councils. Early studies highlighted their potential and limitations, often entailing weak mandates, lack of resources and vulnerability to political cycles (Anderson, 1990; Caponio, 2006a; Ireland, 1994; Martiniello, 1999). A small branch of recent research continues to problematize these bodies, showing how institutional design and inter-actor dynamics influence their role in local governance (Günter & Stanton, 2013; Schiller, 2023). A related body of research emphasizes the importance of social capital and organizational fields, identifying immigrant associations as key intermediaries for information flows, political learning and mobilization (Jacobs & Tillie, 2004; Vertovec, 1999), while noting that they do not always reflect the diversity of the people they claim to represent (Boccagni, 2012; Klarenbeek & Weide, 2020).

Across these perspectives, the multifaceted nature of immigrant political participation recurs: it spans electoral and non-electoral arenas (Vintila & Martiniello, 2021), conventional to contentious action, individual and collective forms. However, much of the scholarship has focused on immigrants as grassroots political actors or on normative questions of citizenship, paying comparatively less attention to the public policies and governance arrangements that shape political participation and representation at the national, regional and local levels. This gap is particularly salient in contexts such as Italy, where political rights for non-citizens remain limited, and consultative mechanisms have emerged in fragmented, discontinuous ways, fading from public debate within the broader framework of a “permanent crisis”.

Theoretical framework: immigrant integration from a multi-level governance perspective

Although criticized for some theoretical limitations (Scholten, 2013) and for overemphasizing cooperation and coordination dynamics (Alcantara & Nelles, 2014; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Spencer, 2018), MLG demonstrated considerable analytical value in the study of immigrant integration policies.⁴ MLG can be considered as an umbrella concept that in immigrant integration policies has often been associated with the three key approaches of “local turn”, “decoupling” and, more recently, “battleground”. The *local turn*, which emerged in the late 1990s, highlighted the growing role of local authorities in shaping socio-economic integration policies of immigrants, challenging a predominantly national-level focus often framed in terms of “philosophies of integration” (Favell, 1998). Scholten (2013, p. 220) defines “localist governance” as an approach that emerges when issues are framed as local problems, prompting local policymakers to move beyond a hierarchical relationship with the central government and to develop their own definitions. In Italy, this dynamic was reinforced by the implicit delegation of integration measures to subnational actors, resulting in diverse local arrangements and partnerships (Campomori, 2008; Caponio, 2006b). In France, the republican assimilationist model has been challenged by the emergence of local multicultural practices. One notable example is Marseille in the early 2000s, where ethnic associations gained visibility and received public support, acting as intermediaries between immigrant communities and local authorities (Moore, 2004).

The *governance decoupling* perspective, identified by Scholten (2013, 2018) as a distinct mode of governance in multilevel settings, emphasizes the lack of meaningful interaction across levels of government, which can result in conflicting policy agendas and formulations, particularly in contexts characterized by “intractable policy controversy” (Scholten, 2013, p. 218), such as migrant integration. The Dutch case examined by Scholten (2013) focusing on the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, provides a clear illustration of this governance pattern: national and local authorities adopted conflicting policy frames, prompting local actors to assert greater autonomy. Divergences in problem definition became particularly evident across several European Union countries during the refugee crisis, when numerous local authorities adopted practices that departed from restrictive national asylum policies, often leading to tensions with national governments (Dimitriadis et al., 2021). Such dynamics have also fueled scholarly and political debates on the emergence of “Cities of Refuge” (Oomen, 2019) and “Sanctuary Cities” (Bauder, 2017; Bazurli & de Graauw, 2023).

Finally, the *battleground* concept explicitly challenges the view of MLG as a negotiated order (Alcantara & Nelles, 2014), arguing that coordination is the exception rather than the norm. It foregrounds, in particular but not exclusively, the governance (horizontal) dimension of MLG, focusing on conflictual interactions among public and private actors, as well as among institutions operating at the same level of government, rather than solely on vertical relations. This approach has proven particularly useful in explaining highly politicized domains such as asylum reception (Ambrosini, 2018; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). One of the most visible manifestations of this battleground in Italy was the resistance of municipalities to the reception of refugees allocated by the central government. Many mayors found their stance reinforced by vocal protests framing arrivals as an “invasion.” Conversely, a range of civil society actors mobilized to defend refugees’ right to reception and to provide on-the-ground support, often in open opposition to local authorities.

As mentioned in the introduction, the MLG lens has rarely been applied to the political dimension of immigrants’ integration, which nonetheless appears to display intergovernmental features and significant horizontal relationships between local governments and civil society, both native and immigrant. This article investigates the extent to which insights from socio-economic integration policies can be applied to the political dimension of integration, and explores the specific features of multi-level governance (MLG) dynamics that shape political integration.

Our theoretical expectations are threefold. First, although political integration is primarily associated with the national level—particularly with regard to voting rights—we expect, in line with findings on socio-economic integration and on existing literature on immigrant political participation (e.g. Günter & Stanton, 2013; Però & Solomos, 2010), that subnational levels of government also play a significant role, thereby confirming the relevance of the local turn within the MLG perspective.

Second, given that the recognition of political rights has become an increasingly contentious issue in the context of the “permanent crisis” surrounding migration, we expect different levels of government to frame the issue in distinct ways, potentially leading to forms of decoupling or even to a governance arena characterized by open political contestation, as it happened in socio-economic integration.

Third, in light of the contentious nature of immigrant political rights, we expect diverging perspectives and interests to emerge among actors in the horizontal dimension of multi-level governance (MLG), similarly to the “battleground” observed particularly in refugee reception policies. At the same time, we hypothesize that the constellation of actors involved is partly different, reflecting the greater importance of migrant communities and associations in their interactions with political actors. In fact, urban governance research has examined how institutional participatory arenas, including immigrant councils, often become contested spaces shaped by power asymmetries and limited recognition (Però, 2008; Schiller, 2023).

Italian national context: institutional tools for promoting immigrant political integration

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, debates on extending local voting rights and other forms of political inclusion for immigrants entered the national political agenda for the first time (Mosconi & Rodano, 2004). The Strasbourg Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at the Local Level (1992), adopted by the Council of Europe, contributed to stimulating discussions on immigrant enfranchisement and local forms of representation across Europe, including Italy (Piccoli, 2022; Zincone, 2000). Nevertheless, the attempt to introduce local voting rights in the 1998 immigration law failed, and the issue subsequently disappeared from the political agenda.

The aforementioned Law No. 40 of 1998, Italy’s first comprehensive immigration law, explicitly encouraged immigrant participation in local public life, but left the implementation to local authorities’ discretion without making it mandatory. In the absence of a national legal framework, several Italian municipalities attempted to grant local voting rights to non-citizen residents in the early 2000s, including Genoa and Turin (2005) and Padua (2006). Comparable efforts emerged at the regional level across Europe, but these initiatives frequently faced judicial opposition and were often struck down by constitutional courts (Piccoli, 2022). In the Italian context, Tuscany (2003) and Emilia-Romagna (2004) were among the regions that attempted to introduce such reforms.

The introduction of immigrant consultative councils (*consulte*) and deputy councillors (*consiglieri aggiunti*) was added as a voluntary recommendation in some regional laws, including Emilia-Romagna’s. In fact, some municipalities had already set up immigrant consultative councils and deputy councillors before the 1998 law came into effect, such as Nonantola (Emilia-Romagna), Bologna, Macerata, Urbino, Ancona, Turin, Modena, Padua (Caponio, 2000, 2006a). Their aim was to reflect the presence of the different stakeholders on integration policies, including immigrants’ associations. Both deputy councillors and immigrant councils can be nominated or elective and were established at the regional, provincial, municipal, inter-municipal or neighborhood level. Beyond their purely consultative function, these bodies have also displayed poor financial autonomy, generally lacking a dedicated budget. Deputy councillors act as mediators between the City Council and the Immigrants’ consultative body, and as representatives of the latter.

They may attend City Council meetings and propose motions on any subject, but lack voting rights.

A precise analysis of these bodies' evolution and territorial distribution would require a national survey, which has never been conducted. However, Bertazzo (2021) collected data on Consultative Councils and Deputy Councillors in Italy, focusing the analysis on municipalities with more than 15,000 residents.

The data show that 22% (157) of the 725 municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants include forms of foreign representation in their statutes (Table 1), yet only 32 (4.2%) currently have an active body. Data also point to a strong territorial unevenness and, consequently, inhomogeneous trajectories of immigrant political integration.

Research methods and rationale for case study selection

This study draws on fieldwork conducted in the Emilia-Romagna region, focusing on the city of Parma.⁵ Emilia-Romagna is among the regions with the largest number of active experiences of immigrant representation and was among the first regions to introduce these instruments, actively promoting immigrant participation and monitoring local representative bodies. Within the region, the city of Parma was selected as a privileged area of investigation because: (a) it is one of the few cities that has introduced and maintained both the Deputy councillor and the Local Immigrant Council; (b) the municipality has recently revised its system to meet new immigrant representation needs.

Parma offers a particularly informative case for addressing our research questions. Typically, a case study involves a phenomenon situated within a defined spatial and temporal frame (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). In this instance, the specific combination of the two participatory instruments, together with the ongoing revision process, provides a rare opportunity to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. The research complements document analysis with a set of 36 interviews with local policymakers, experts, stakeholders and participants of Local Immigrant Councils.⁶ Fieldwork ran from April to June 2024, with a final interview

Table 1. Non-citizens representation at the regional level in 2021 (municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants).

Regions	N° of municipalities >15,000 inhabitants	Total number of participation bodies included in the statutes	Statutes foreseeing the Deputy councillor	Statutes foreseeing the Immigrant local Council	Statutes foreseeing both Immigrant local Council and Deputy councillor	Active bodies in 2021
Valle d'Aosta	1	0	0	0	0	0
Lombardy	107	16	1	15	0	5
Liguria	11	1	0	1	0	0
Piedmont	45	9	0	8	1	1
Emilia-Romagna	54	12	1	10	1	5
Veneto	58	7	0	7	0	0
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	11	4	0	4	0	2
Trentino-Alto Adige	10	5	0	5	0	2
Marche	23	19	12	5	2	7
Tuscany	56	18	6	11	1	1
Umbria	16	5	1	3	1	0
Lazio	51	10	3	5	2	1
Abruzzo	16	8	5	1	2	2
Campania	84	14	6	7	1	2
Puglia	72	13	8	4	1	1
Molise	3	1	1	0	0	1
Basilicata	5	0	0	0	0	0
Calabria	20	1	0	1	0	0
Sicily	66	14	2	12	0	2
Sardinia	16	0	0	0	0	0
ITALY	725	157	46	99	12	32

Source. Bertazzo 2021, p. 210.

in July 2025. Interviews were conducted online, while participant observation took place during two on-site meetings organized by the Municipality of Parma as part of the Consulta revision process (see Appendix). In addition, the research team obtained access to a dataset of 18 anonymized interview transcripts collected by the Emilia-Romagna Region in 2022.⁷ Data were analyzed thematically, using the MLG framework to interpret how interactions across governance levels, institutional arrangements, and the relationships among actors shaped processes of immigrant political participation and representation.

Emilia-Romagna and Parma: promoting immigrant representation

This section presents the findings of our research. It begins with an overview of the regional context of Emilia-Romagna, followed by a detailed case study of Parma. It then identifies and discusses four key aspects: representation, the functioning of these bodies, latent paternalism, and the emerging generational divide.

Emilia-Romagna

This region has a tradition of promoting immigrant representation, although this has declined since the mid-2010s. From 2005 to 2016, a regional consultative body comprising 18 non-Italian citizens from the nine provinces was in place. In 2014, following a reform, provinces were removed from the administrative system and the regional consultative body discontinued. In 2016, the Regional Law on Immigration was amended, assigning to the Region itself the main function of monitoring local experiences of immigrant participation and representation. This task was supported by two regional reports published in 2016 and 2022 (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2016, 2022). Their key findings include the diversity of these experiences in terms of the rationale for representation, internal composition, objectives, institutional mandate, and relationships with institutional actors. Between 2016 (first report) and 2022 (second report), 7 of the 12 immigrant councils became inactive, while 5 have been active for less than ten years (see [Table 2](#)). The selection process for council members has also evolved over time: in the 1990s, members were primarily elected, but from the 2000s onwards, low turnout and organizational challenges led to appointments by mayors, typically based on recommendations from immigrant associations. Consequently, since 2010, most immigrant councils ([Table 2](#)) have functioned as non-elective bodies. This evolution underscores the persistent challenge of immigrant representation, understood as “who is given ‘the voice’ of a particular segment of the population” (Vertovec, 1999, p. 26). As noted by one regional official:

[Originally] the idea was to create representative bodies promoted by local authorities, with a truly representative—meaning electoral—dynamic. They were meant to assert a political and participatory right, but above all a political right, which at the time was largely missing. It’s still missing today, but back then it was seen as a real gap. I remember that the councils were also seen as a kind of democracy lab, a chance for foreign citizens to learn about and engage with Italian democratic institutions. Expectations were high, and if I recall correctly, we (as Region E.R.) were overseeing almost forty of these councils at some point in the early 2000s. (Interview 2)

However, these bodies have always faced an inherent weakness linked to their ambiguous identity as either temporary mechanisms preparing for full participation or permanent structures with limited influence. As one external expert noted, “they cannot have a future precisely because they were originally born undermined, in the sense that they were designed for temporary use” (Interview 4).

The Consulta dei Popoli: Migrant Representation in Parma

In Parma, the Council was established later than in many other cities in Emilia-Romagna, emerging more from a broader wave of citizen participation initiatives than as a direct response

Table 2. Local experiences of immigrant political participation and representation in 2016 and 2022.

Denomination	Reference Territory	Year of establishment	Selection of members	Active in 2016	Active in 2022
Peoples' Council (<i>Consulta dei Popoli</i>) + Deputy Councillor	Parma	2015	Non-elective (NE)	Yes	Yes
Council for the Integration of Foreign Citizens	Union of Terre d'Argine (MO)	2011	NE	Yes	Yes
Municipal Council of Foreigners	Zola Predosa (BO)	2004	NE	Yes	No
Council of Foreign Communities	Ferrara	2014	NE	Yes	No
Immigration Council	Cotignola (RA)	2002	Mixed (direct election and nomination) (Mixed)	Yes	No
Council for Integration	Portomaggiore (FE)	2013	NE	Yes	Yes
Council of Foreign Citizens	Forlì	2011	Mixed	Yes	No
Council of female and male foreign non-EU citizens and Stateless Citizens Residing in the Municipality of Faenza	Faenza	2018	NE	Yes	No
Peoples' Council	Castelfranco Emilia (MO)	2015	NE	Yes	No
<i>Mondinsieme</i> Foundation	Reggio Emilia	2010	Elective (E)	Yes	Yes
Council for Intercultural and Integration	Imola (BO)	2007	E	Yes	No
Representation of Foreign Citizens Outside the EU and Stateless Persons+ Deputy Councillor	Ravenna	2003	E	Yes	Yes
Total				12	5

Source: Region Emilia-Romagna (2022, p. 49).

to debates on immigrants' voting rights, unlike earlier pioneer Consultas. The *Consulta dei Popoli* (People's Council), introduced in 2015, includes both an assembly body and a deputy councillor, who participates in municipal Council meetings and related commissions with speaking rights.

Under municipal regulations, the *Consulta dei Popoli* “performs advisory, propositional, and guiding functions of a non-binding nature with regard to the municipal administration in matters falling within the competence of the Municipal Council” (art. 40). It is a non-elected body: members are appointed by immigrant associations, while the deputy councillor is chosen internally and acts as the main link with the local administration. As one civil servant explained:

The idea is that, although the deputy councillor does not have the right to vote, they can still exercise political and public influence. Their main role is to inform the municipal administration and raise issues that may become the concern of councillors who do have voting rights. (Interview 13)

The *Consulta* does not have a pre-defined number of members: its composition depends on the representatives designated by local associations in response to the City Council's public call (26 formal members as of 2024). Since 2019, Italian citizens with an immigrant background can also become members. For the 2025–2027 mandate, each eligible association or group may nominate two representatives—one without Italian citizenship and one having acquired Italian citizenship,⁸ while based on municipal regulation the Deputy councillor must be a non-citizen.

Some changes were made to the rules of the *Consulta* in 2019, with the aim of improving its functioning and effectiveness. The most relevant are: 1) introduction of a 2-year term of office for members, including the Deputy Councillor; 2) abolishment of the role of President, deemed redundant by the municipality (Interview 3), retaining only the Deputy Councillor; 3) extension of membership to naturalized citizens; 4) introduction of compulsory attendance (after 3 absences the person forfeits the position). Following a journey of reform, the new public call

of 2025 introduced a more formalized and transparent procedure for the constitution of the *Consulta*, stipulating that members must be formally designated by each association or group through a specific public act. It also confirmed the dual-representation model, clarified residency requirements, and reaffirmed the *Consulta*'s consultative and propositional role.

The thorny issue of institutional representation

As noted in relation to other immigrant councils in Emilia-Romagna, the *Consulta* of Parma also faces significant challenges regarding its claim to represent immigrant communities. This raises fundamental questions concerning the methods of selection (electoral or not), the rationale for selection (usually nationality) and the “content” of this representation. It is evident that immigrant associations have become the municipality's primary interlocutors in the pursuit of immigrant representation. However, this has not always ensured that appointed or elected members engage with a broader immigrant population, rather than primarily articulating the interests of smaller groups—often limited to their own co-nationals. Moreover, the “what” of representation is questionable: does the immigrant local council and the deputy councillors represent and act only on immigration issues, or do they represent and act also on other matters? Parma's regulation, like many others, is not entirely clear: while it states that the Council may exercise its consultative role on all matters within the remit of the Municipal Council, it also specifies that its functions relate, “in particular”, to issues concerning immigration. What is more, it happened that the appointed deputy councillor had individually decided how to interpret this role also according to his ambitions and personal abilities.

As the formal representation, with all its rules, was felt to be too rigid and ultimately unworkable, the rules were revised in June 2024 to make the process more flexible. A municipal official explains this shift as follows:

We have moved somewhat from the theme of *representation* to that of *active participation*. (Interview 3)

Even within the *Consulta* and the broader foreign community, views on this issue are not uniform. At a municipal co-design meeting on the future of the *Consulta* (11 June 2024), one participant identified “representation” as the primary need, highlighting the importance of institutional political participation. However, a former city councillor with a migration background noted:

The main problem is that it (the *Consulta*) does not represent foreigners because they are not even aware of its existence, and also because it carried out activities other than political ones (e.g. festivals, cultural events...), while there was no awareness of the institutional role. [...] An instrument like the *Consulta* no longer makes sense today; it may have made sense in the 1990s. It is necessary to involve the ‘new Parmesans’, treating them as ordinary citizens and within the existing participatory channels and instruments. (Interview 6)

In this respect, accounts by both members of the *Consulta* and civil servants point to an additional issue: the risk that an institutional body created to enable the participation of immigrants might foster dynamics of ghettoization. Furthermore, youth with a migration background but raised in Italy can hardly identify with a body “for foreigners” (Interview 7).

These tensions are not solely questions of political representation, but reveal a broader governance challenge: the difficulty of designing participatory arrangements capable of mediating between institutional actors and increasingly heterogeneous immigrant constituencies.

Functioning: entitled but not enabled

Immigrant consultative bodies face constraints stemming from both formal rules and the degree of support provided by local administrations.

Starting from the formal regulations, the case of Parma—echoing findings in other contexts (Bertazzo, 2021)—shows that neither *Consulta* members nor deputy councillors are entitled to leaves for their duties, a constraint that particularly affects deputy councillors given their

obligation to attend both City Council and Commission meetings (Interview 8). Moreover, neither the Consulta dei Popoli nor the Deputy Councillor has a dedicated meeting room and, as noted by a municipal official in Parma, they lack independent resources and must rely on the municipality (Interview 3). About the limits posed by the attitude of the local administration towards these bodies, it is important to note that their existence is often the result of the pressure and sensitivity of a member of the cabinet, but when he/she is no longer in charge, attention may fade (Interview 2). Moreover, even on the part of the civil servants, some are more inclined and willing to support the functioning of these councils, while others make the members feel abandoned by the institution.

These constraints ultimately limit the capacity of consultative bodies to operate as effective governance arenas, despite formal institutional recognition.

Latent paternalism

Although these bodies were established on the premise that immigrants could contribute to political decision-making, elected officials and civil servants sometimes displayed a form of latent paternalism. A notable example occurred in Parma in 2019, when the City Council revised the rules of the Consulta dei Popoli, abolishing the President's role without involving Consulta members in the decision-making process. Although intended to address an overlap of responsibilities, the reform reinforced members' perception that they had little influence over the functioning of the body meant to represent them (Interviews 3 and 7). From an MLG perspective, these dynamics illustrate how formally participatory governance arrangements may reproduce asymmetrical relationships between public institutions and immigrant actors.

The generational divide: new aspirations, old structures

In the 1990s, when the debate on the political participation of immigrants through foreign municipal councils began, the second generation of immigrants was almost non-existent in Italy and the immigrants who had acquired citizenship were quite few.

The situation changed rapidly, with second and third generations steadily increasing, as reflected in the 872,320 non-citizen pupils enrolled in Italian schools in 2021, many of whom are expected to acquire citizenship in the coming years. As a civil servant from the Emilia-Romagna Region noted, young people with a migration background now have distinct and evolving participation needs.

They see themselves as part of a broader 'youth condition' rather than tied to long-settled immigrant communities. It's hard for them to imagine participating in the same bodies as immigrants who have been here 20 or 30 years, are 50 or 60, and have very different backgrounds and concerns. Unsurprisingly, they are much more focused on issues like citizenship and reform of the citizenship law, and that's where they tend to be most active. (Interview 2)

Interviewees with an immigrant background living in Parma even stated that young people with a migration background are not interested at all in these forms of participation.

In the *Consulta*, there are no young foreigners: their fathers participate, their mothers participate, but the young people are not there. The associations that represent the communities are not able to intercept the youngest and make them participate. (Interview 3)

The focus of the struggle for rights has changed: a large portion of the youth with an immigrant background is much more interested and involved in the citizenship campaign (Interview 2) than in the consultative body and wants to play the "real" game, not the one in the consultative bodies (Interview 9).

These emerging perspectives challenge governance arrangements originally designed around more homogeneous conceptions of immigrant participation and representation, highlighting the need for greater institutional adaptability.

Ongoing changes

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the Consulta entered a prolonged crisis. A key turning point was the acquisition of Italian citizenship by the Deputy Councillor, which made it impossible for them to continue in the role and difficult to identify a replacement. At the same time, the body was unable to meet formally due to the lack of a quorum. In response, Parma's Department of Active Citizenship launched a reform process (2023–2025) involving a broad range of stakeholders.⁹ This led to the reconstitution of the Consulta for the 2025–2027 period, with the aim of broadening participation—especially among young people and new associations—and increasing its influence on local policymaking through thematic working groups.

The Parma case highlights two key issues. First, participants in the Consulta often express frustration at their limited capacity to fulfil the representative role formally assigned to them, owing to procedural constraints and the paternalistic attitudes of local authorities (see also Caponio, 2006a). Second, a growing generational divide has emerged: while first-generation immigrants continue to engage in consultative bodies, politically active second-generation immigrants are more likely to mobilize around citizenship rights than to participate in institutional consultative mechanisms.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that immigrant political integration is shaped not only by the formal existence of participatory institutions, but also by the interaction between institutional design, administrative practices, and changing forms of political mobilization.

Discussion from an MLG perspective

The empirical findings discussed in the previous sections point to a progressive weakening of institutional arrangements for immigrant political representation in Italy. While this trend is uneven and territorially differentiated, it is visible at the national and regional levels through declining activity, reduced institutional support, and increasing ambiguity around representational mandates. The case of Parma illustrates how these broader dynamics unfold locally, where immigrant consultative bodies have become sites of contestation, fragile legitimacy, and institutional redefinition.

Theoretically, the first expectation advanced in Section 2 concerned the role of subnational levels of government in political integration, mirroring their established importance in socio-economic integration. Our findings show that regional and local actors have played a pivotal role in developing concrete participation mechanisms, including the establishment of immigrant councils and the cultivation of ties with foreign communities. This confirms that the “local turn” in socio-economic integration also shaped immigrant political integration policies in the 1990s. In addition to subnational authorities, supranational actors proved influential, notably the Council of Europe through the 1992 Strasbourg Convention, which contributed to shaping debates on immigrant participation. The centrality of supranational actors already from the early 1990s emerges as more pronounced in political integration than in the field of socio-economic integration.

By contrast, national governments have only sporadically addressed the issue of local voting rights, without fully engaging with the conditions required for their implementation. In practice, responsibility for immigrant political integration—much like other dimensions of integration—has largely been devolved by the Italian state to subnational levels, which were partly inspired by the supranational one.

The second expectation concerned patterns of *governance decoupling* in political integration, mirroring those identified in socio-economic integration. The establishment of the *Consulta dei Popoli* by the Parma municipal administration in 2015 illustrates this dynamic. The initiative was launched in a context of increasingly restrictive and hostile national discourse on immigration, which often failed to distinguish between different categories of migrants, instead reducing immigration to its most politicized category, namely asylum seekers. Its adoption therefore signaled a local framing of immigrant participation that was largely decoupled from the national

government's approach. In other words, national-level indifference toward political integration, particularly after the 2010s, contrasted with Parma's local initiatives, revealing a decoupling between the framing of political integration at the national and local levels.

Finally, we hypothesized that—similarly to what has been observed in refugee reception—the horizontal dimension of MLG could generate tensions among local-level actors, following a “battleground” pattern. In addition, we expected the constellation of actors to differ partly from that observed in socio-economic integration or refugee reception, where pro-immigrant associations of native citizens often play a predominant role in their interaction with public authorities. The case of Parma indeed highlights strained interactions between the city council and immigrant communities in relation to the *Consulta*, particularly regarding what we have termed the “thorny issue of representation.” Local policymakers are required to engage immigrant communities and foster participation in the *Consulta*, which, being a non-elected body, depends on active involvement. At the same time, there are divergent views regarding its proper function, as well as conflicting expectations across communities and generations; for instance, younger immigrants often do not perceive its relevance.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the structure of discursive opportunities (Giugni, 2011) has shifted substantially in relation to immigrant political integration following the mid-2010s refugee crisis. This changing climate has also been reflected in Parma, where, despite the introduction of the consultative council, support for the council has weakened—particularly among opposition parties—while among the governing majority it has gradually become more lukewarm, as noted by a Cabinet member (Interview 1).

Conclusion

Political integration has remained one of the least institutionalized dimensions of immigrant integration in Italy, relying largely on local experimentation rather than coherent national policy. Our findings suggest that Multi-Level Governance offers a fruitful analytical framework to study immigrant political integration, and highlight the forms in which its core dynamics unfold in this domain.

First, the study confirms the enduring relevance of the *local turn*, as local authorities remain central actors in the creation and management of participatory arenas. However, compared with socio-economic integration policies, these institutions appear more vulnerable to political cycles, leadership changes, and symbolic instrumentalization. This is largely because participatory mechanisms are often regarded as ancillary rather than as effective instruments of integration. Consequently, governance arrangements in the field of political integration tend to be more susceptible to reversal, as demonstrated by the experiences of Emilia-Romagna and Parma.

Second, the findings refine the notion of *governance decoupling*. While divergence between national and local levels is also present in socio-economic integration, in the case of political integration decoupling takes a more radical form: it is not only about differences in implementation, but about the absence of a stable national policy field altogether. Political integration is thus largely “hollowed out” at the central level, producing a structural dependence on local experimentation without overarching coordination or institutional anchoring.

Third, the analysis of the *battleground dimension* shows that conflictual governance is particularly intense in the political domain, but also qualitatively different from socio-economic integration. Contestation is not limited to intergovernmental tensions or state–civil society relations; it is also internal to immigrant representation itself. The Parma case highlights how fragmentation emerges across associations, generations, and conceptions of political voice, producing a multi-layered battleground in which the very meaning of representation becomes contested. This adds a further analytical layer to MLG: conflict is not only vertical or horizontal across institutional actors, but also intra-constituency.

Overall, the study suggests that political integration is characterized by weaker institutional consolidation, stronger dependence on local initiative, and more fragmented constellations of

actors and claims. Viewed through an MLG perspective, political integration emerges as a field in which political representation and participation are negotiated across levels of government.

The findings presented in this article, grounded in a single in-depth case study, raise claims that warrant further exploration in future research. As such, future comparative studies could investigate their validity across other contexts and a larger number of cases, while also opening new theoretical avenues—particularly investigating how different multi-level governance configurations shape immigrant political representation, and how institutional and non-institutional forms of political mobilization interact, across Europe.

Notes

1. However, the acknowledgement of social rights was not without limitations. This phenomenon is encapsulated by the concept of 'civic stratification' (Morris, 2002).
2. In the Italian context, recent examples include the mobilization of youth with a migration background for the reform of citizenship laws, particularly through the campaigns associated with the 2025 national referendum initiative.
3. In this framework, political participation is understood as the active dimension of citizenship and can range from conventional forms of participation to the wide spectrum of demonstrative action, undertaken individually or collectively.
4. The other influential approach to the study of the migration policy process is "venue shopping" (Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000). However, this approach exclusively deals with the control of immigration.
5. The research has been conducted within the framework of the INTERREG Central Europe funded project GEtCoheSive – Government Enhancement for Cohesive Societies.
6. All interviews conducted by the authors were carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the authors' home institution. Participants provided informed consent and were guaranteed anonymity.
7. Research conducted within an AMIF-funded research (2014–2020) on immigrant participation. We are grateful to Regione Emilia-Romagna for this opportunity.
8. All nominees must have been residing in the Municipality of Parma for at least one year at the time of designation.
9. The process unfolded in connection with the GEtCoheSive project (funded by Interreg Central Europe, 2023–2026), within which one of the project's participatory pilot actions was explicitly developed as part of the Council's reform pathway.

Disclosure statement

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Appendix

List of interview respondents (Interviews conducted by the authors).

Acronym	Role	Scale
Respondent 1 (interviewed three times)	Member of the Cabinet (Municipality of Parma)	Local
Respondent 2	Regional civil servant (Region Emilia-Romagna)	Regional
Respondent 3	Civil servant (Parma) (interviewed August 2023 and May 2024)	Local
Respondent 4	External expert (researcher)	National
Respondent 5	External Expert (researcher)	Regional
Respondent 6	Former City councillor with a migration background (Parma)	Local
Respondent 7	Former participant of the Local Immigrant Council, City councillor (Parma)	Local
Respondent 8	Former Deputy Councillor (Parma)	Local
Respondent 9	Former participant of the Provincial Immigrant Council and current City councillor (Bologna)	Local

List of interviews respondents (Interviews conducted within a project funded by AMIF 2014-2020, Region Emilia-Romagna)

Acronym	Role	Scale
Respondent 10	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 11	Policy maker	Local
Respondent 12	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 13	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 14	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 15	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 16	Policy maker (cabinet member 2014-2019)	Local
Respondent 17	Policy maker (cabinet member)	Local
Respondent 18	Policy maker	Local
Respondent 19	Former participant of the Local Immigrant Council	Local
Respondent 20	Former participant of the Provincial Immigrant Council and current City councillor	Local
Respondent 21	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 22	Former president of the local immigrant council	Local
Respondent 23	Former member of the local immigrant council	Local
Respondent 24	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 25	Stakeholder, services for migrants	Local
Respondent 26	Civil servant	Local
Respondent 27	Member of immigrant community association	Local