CHAPTER 5

Immigrant Associations and Political Participation: When Language Matters

The Catalan Case

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1 Introduction

The influx of immigrants into Catalonia over the last decade has entailed a major social, economic and demographic change, one that has had and will undoubtedly continue to have a significant role in shaping 21st century Catalonia. While it is true that there is a clear downward shift in the migratory cycle due to the current economic crisis, it is no less true that a large number of immigrants have chosen to make Catalonia their home.

In the last few years, the change in the migratory trend mentioned above has altered the type of immigration policies currently being adopted. Emphasis is now placed primarily on the different aspects of accommodation and integration, language and political participation being two of these aspects.

Language is not only a tool for communication of immigrants in day-to-day life but also a necessary element for their participation in public life. Language becomes even more relevant in the context of a territory with more than one official language, such as Catalonia, where immigrants can only choose to integrate through the medium of the majority language, Spanish, and bypass the minority one, Catalan.

Participation of immigrants in Catalonia has been considered a key aspect in their integration process. Generally speaking, integration is defined as the “process of becoming an accepted part of society.” In this process, the political participation of immigrants has been deemed an essential part of defending and acknowledging their rights and duties.

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The construction of an identity distinct from Spanish identity has led Catalan institutions to guide the integration of immigrants towards a common public culture. The primary goal is to reinforce Catalan identity, namely Catalan language and culture, in the process of integration of newcomers, a strategy often referred to as the Catalan Way of Integration (Via Catalana d’Integració). As stated in the 2001–2004 Immigration Plan, this concept involved a balance between respect for the increasing diversity derived from immigration in Catalonia and the need for a sense of belonging to the Catalan community, regardless of country of birth or origin. This has been one of the main distinct features of immigrant integration in Catalonia.

The goal of this paper is to explore how the Catalan language has been connected to the collective participation of immigrants in the Catalan political structures and to analyze the existing channels of political participation for immigrant associations contained in all Catalan Immigration Plans, that is, the main pieces of legislation approved by the Catalan government aimed at regulating immigration issues. These are the 1993–2000 Catalan Intergovernmental Immigration Plan, the 2001–2004 Interdepartmental Immigration Plan, the 2005–2008 Immigration and Citizenship Plan, the 2009–2012 Immigration and Citizenship Plan and the 2013–2016 Citizenship and Migrations Plan. Due to its heightened relevance in terms of Catalan immigration politics and policies, we also analyze the 2008 National Agreement on Immigration, a text approved by a wide parliamentary consensus involving the main stakeholders in immigrant issues, ranging from political parties and trade unions to immigrant associations and NGOs. An interview with the Director-General for Immigration, Mr. Xavier Bosch, also enabled us to have first-hand information on the elaboration process of the 2013–2016 Citizenship and Migrations Plan.

The results of our study are expected to contribute, from a public policy perspective, to the debate on the use of language, and most importantly which language, in officially bilingual contexts as a tool for immigrants’ claims in receiving societies.

Before proceeding with the analysis, in order to fully understand how the Catalan language has been connected to immigrant political participation, it is necessary to briefly present Catalan language policies and the competencies of the Catalan government in the matter of migration.

The Catalan language has always been placed at the core of the political agenda in Catalonia. The legal basis for all language issues is laid down in three different types of legislation: the Spanish Constitution (the cornerstone of