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# Polish Migrants in Ireland and Their Political (Dis)engagement in Transnational Space

Justyna Salamońska\*, Magdalena Lesińska\*, Weronika Kloc-Nowak\*

*Ireland has become one of the main destination countries for Polish migrants after Poland's EU accession in 2004. While much of the literature on Polish migration to Ireland post-2004 focuses on its labour-market element, in this paper we analyse the political participation of Polish migrants. We utilise data from a survey conducted by the Centre of Migration Research (University of Warsaw) with Polish migrants in Ireland which documents low levels of political engagement as measured by voting turnout in Polish presidential and parliamentary elections as well as the Irish local elections and elections to the European Parliament. A lack of knowledge about political participation rights or how to engage in voting is one explanation for the low levels of voting, especially in Irish local and European parliamentary elections. Another explanation may be the attitude that migrants have towards the political system and how they can influence it. Polish migrants predominantly report that they have no or little influence on politics in Poland and have relatively less trust in the authorities and politicians there (compared to Ireland). The key individual-level characteristic affecting Polish migrant respondents' electoral participation in Ireland is their (lack of) voting habit formed before migration.*

*Keywords: political participation; Polish migrants; Ireland; transnationalism*

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## Introduction

Ireland, since the enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004, has seen mass migration flows from Poland. The earlier economic boom in the country saw some inflow of Polish migrants but the numbers rose considerably after 2004 – even when the recession hit in 2008, Polish migration remained a permanent feature of Irish society. Nearly two decades after EU enlargement in 2004, we take a closer look at Polish migrants in Ireland to obtain data that will enable us to better understand their political engagement (or lack of it). We ask:

- To what extent are Polish migrants politically engaged and what is the focus of their political engagement (the country of origin, of destination or the EU, overlapping)?
- What are the main reasons for the political apathy of these Polish migrants, who are not active in the political sphere?
- Which individual characteristics are related to voting behaviour?

The literature on Polish migration to Ireland points primarily to the labour-market nature of this migration, with a plethora of family, educational and ‘just because’ motives present as well (Krings, Moriarty, Wickham, Bobek and Salamońska 2013; Luthra, Platt and Salamońska 2018). Polish migrants have mainly remained active on the Irish labour market, although they often earn less than native Irish workers and occupy positions well below their levels of qualification (Barrett and Duffy 2008; Barrett, McGuinness and O’Brien 2011). McGinnity, Privalko, Fahey, Enright and O’Brien (2020) found that, among EEA nationals in Ireland, Poles had one of the lowest probabilities of obtaining a highly skilled job. However, existing research reports low levels of discrimination against Poles in Ireland (Kingston, McGinnity and O’Connell 2015; McGinnity and Gijssberts 2016). While we are quite familiar with the labour element of this migration, Fanning, Kloc-Nowak and Lesińska (2020) point out that the political participation of Polish migrants has received less attention within scholarly research. We would like to fill this niche and explore the extent to which Polish migrants who are resident in Ireland engage politically, both in the destination country (see also Fanning and O’Boyle 2010; Fanning *et al.* 2020) and in Poland / the EU, by examining several dimensions of this engagement and the territorial levels of migrant participation.

Poles residing in Ireland have had several opportunities to vote in recent years. As far as voting in the country of origin is concerned, they are entitled to vote in Polish parliamentary and presidential elections. As residents in Ireland, they are also eligible to vote in Irish local elections. Additionally, as EU citizens, they can vote in European parliamentary elections. Apart from their voting behaviour, we are also interested more generally in the extent to which migrants declare any interest at all in politics and how they assess the political systems in the origin and destination countries, as these opinions may shed light on how they relate to politics more generally.

Thus our research on the political participation of Poles in Ireland draws on the work of Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) as we apply a transnational lens in order to understand how migrants can simultaneously engage in the political systems of both their country of origin and that of destination. Depending on the relevant context of reference – the origin or the destination country – migrants may relate to and participate politically in their communities in different ways, with voting just one of the examples, as well as, *inter alia*, involvement in political parties, trade unions or civic participation (Doomernik, Kraler and Reichel 2010).

In the next section, we present a literature review which draws on existing studies on migrant political participation, highlighting the specific context of Ireland as the country of destination. We offer an overview of Polish migration to Ireland and the numbers involved and describe the main characteristics

of this migration. Next, we turn to data from the Centre of Migration Research (CMR) survey of Polish migrants in Ireland with regards to the latter's political participation. Analysis of these data paints a picture of limited political engagement by Polish migrants; we therefore also explore the reasons for this.

## Literature review

### *Migrants and political participation in transnational space*

Taking into account the dynamics of contemporary population movements in Europe and worldwide and the constantly growing number of migrants, the participation of migrants in political and public life is an important and current research topic. Analysing the participation process is crucial for understanding the broader socio-political processes in which migrants participate – i.e. their integration into the host society and the relationship between the state of residence and the country of origin.

In post-war Europe migrants have long been considered as passive individuals – short-term visitors engaged only in the workplace and receivers of social services and benefits – not as potential residents or future citizens (the guestworker system is the best example of such an approach). This situation was a result of the lack of legal opportunities (when foreigners did not have any political rights in the country of residence) and the widespread belief by the authorities that migrants are a temporary phenomenon. This perception has changed, together with migrants' settlement processes and the emergence of subsequent generations (Doomernik and Bruquetas-Callejo 2016; Martiniello 2006). The scope of rights related to long-term residence has expanded and the activities of migrants in the political and public sphere of the country of residence have also changed. Concepts such as denizenship, introduced by Thomas Hammar (1990), membership without citizenship and non-citizen members (Bauböck 1994) refer to the situation of migrants who are entitled to a certain catalogue of political rights based not on citizenship but on *ius domicili* (residence) in a given country.

In practice, migrants engage in more than one political community, maintaining a sense of belonging and undertaking activities in both the country of origin and the country of their current settlement. Therefore, within the literature on political participation, the concepts of transnationalism and transnational community – referring to the complex forms of belonging and activity of individuals and groups in this era of mass migration processes – have gained vast popularity (Bauböck and Faist 2010; Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1992; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Political transnationalism, a concept which applies to political activities taking place in transnational space, has also gained in popularity. While Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) described transnational political practices as actions taken by migrants concerning their country of origin, other authors postulate a broader interpretative framework and define political transnationalism as any political activity undertaken by persons residing abroad which is aimed at gaining political influence in the country either of residence or of origin (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008). Koopmans, Statham, Giugni and Passy (2005: 109) note that transnational migrants are able...

*...to establish ties that transcend national borders and, by crossing and re-crossing them physically, electronically and financially, they increasingly produce a transnational social, cultural, political and economic world (...). [they] do not leave their origins and pasts behind; they take them with them; and*

*by maintaining their networks, they begin to act as conduits between the two and more nations where they have connections.*

Yet maintaining civic ties and political activity in transnational space requires appropriate legal channels of participation, which are necessary for undertaking cross-border political actions (Chaudhary and Moss 2019).

In the literature there are many attempts to classify political participation. Authors distinguish between conventional and unconventional, state and non-state and low- and high-cost activities (related to the amount of time and resources an individual is forced to devote to a given form of participation) (de Rooij 2012; Zapata-Barrero, Gabrielli, Sanchez-Montijano and Jaulin 2013). Doomernik *et al.* (2010: 6) set out five dimensions of participation: voting behaviour; party membership, standing for elections and holding a political office; non-electoral political participation; involvement in trade unions and other interest groups; and civic participation (which is understood as membership in civil society and labelled as 'indirect political participation'). Among the different types of activism, voting in the elections is recognised as the conventional and most direct channel of political participation offering individuals the opportunity to influence the decision-making process. It is also considered to be a 'low-cost' type of political activity, as it does not require as much time, initiative and resources as, for example, involvement in a political party or demonstrating. Therefore, the assumption that voting should be the most common political activity performed by migrants seems justified. Victoria Finn (2020: 736) analysing migrant voting paths, proposed three types of active migrant voter (depending on the country in which they participate in the elections): immigrant, emigrant and dual transnational. While the first two categories occur when the migrant votes in only the country of settlement or of origin respectively, the dual transnational voter participates in elections in both countries. Interesting questions remain, however, about the relationship between migrant engagement in the country of origin and that in the host country (Tsuda 2012). When migrants perceive themselves to be discriminated against or marginalised in the country of residence, they may remain attached to the country of origin, be exclusively involved in homeland politics and be completely disinterested in political issues in the country of residence. This attitude, however, may change: together with time spent abroad, social mobility and integration, migrants could become more and more engaged in public and political life in the country where they actually live (Bevelander and Pendakur 2011). Some case studies confirm that it is a 'zero-sum relationship' when increased engagement in one country leads to decreased involvement in the other (Peltoniemi 2018).

Marco Martiniello (2006) distinguished several dimensions in the process of migrants' integration in the host community, pointing out that the participatory dimension (which includes the processes of mobilisation, participation and representation) is the highest element of this process. The other dimensions mentioned by Martiniello are the legal (the scope of rights granted by the state of residence) and identity dimensions (identification with the state and society of residence) and the adaptation of norms and values characteristic of a specific host community. Political engagement is also recognised by state governments as a major driver of integration. According to a recent Fundamental Rights Agency survey, most EU member states do not limit the access of migrants to membership of political parties and almost half give legally foreign residents both voting and election rights at the local level (FRA 2017). However, practice shows that granting electoral rights to migrants at the local level does not automatically translate into their mass participation in elections. The available data on the turnout of migrants, although very fragmented, indicates that its level is low (and far lower than the majority population) (Diehl and Blohm 2001; Doomernik *et al.* 2010; Fennema and Tillie 1999; Ruedin 2018). Huddleston (2009), Jones-Correa

(2001) and Togeby (1999) point to two groups of factors – institutional and individual – that may negatively affect the low turnout among migrants. Existing legal and institutional conditions for voting certainly have an important impact. It is obvious that the more restrictive the rules of participation in elections, the less likely migrants are to vote (Bauböck 2007: 2403–2407). Empirical studies support the claim that pre-election registration has a negative effect on voter turnout (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2006; Geys 2006).

The integration policy of the host state, which should result, *inter alia*, in greater knowledge of the political and voting system and the scope of rights applicable to migrants, also plays an important role (Diehl and Blohm 2001; Koopmans *et al.* 2005; Statham 1999). Some authors highlight a third group which may influence migrants' engagement – local-level factors such as local integration policies and the configuration of power within local authorities (Morales and Giugni 2011). Individual migrant characteristics are also related to voting behaviour or the abstention from voting. Young age, low level of education, unemployment and a lack of language proficiency all potentially decrease migrants' readiness to vote, while being employed, married and older increase it (for a more detailed overview, see Voicu and Comşa 2014). Research by Scuzzarello (2015) additionally suggests how political apathy may also be related to a limited – or lack of – knowledge of the political system in the country of residence (including information on political parties and candidates), a lack of knowledge about their own political rights and, more generally, a sheer lack of interest in politics. Along the idea of electoral turnout as a habit (Aldrich, Montgomery and Wood 2011), participation in voting after immigration has been analysed as being dependent on migrants' previous experience as voters. This is often analysed based on the comparison of the voting behaviour of newcomers from democratic and authoritarian countries of origin (Ferwerda, Finseraas and Bergh 2020; Wass, Blais, Morin-Chassé and Weide 2015) or from countries with different voting turnout levels (Voicu and Comşa 2014). This perspective links the individuals' behaviour with a macro level – that of the sending-state political culture.

### *Contextualising transnational political participation*

Polish citizens living in Ireland have the right to vote in parliamentary and presidential elections in Poland (in external electoral districts established abroad) and, as EU citizens, are eligible to vote in elections to the European Parliament. However, they have to choose either to vote for candidates standing in Poland or to participate in the election in Ireland and vote for candidates standing in that country. The choice of the second option requires earlier registration on the Irish electoral register. Such electoral registration is also necessary if they wish to exercise their right to vote as residents in Ireland, in local elections in the country. It is worth underlining, however, that the enfranchisement of foreign nationals has a long tradition in Ireland, where they have had the right to vote in local elections since 1963. The belief in the importance of the political inclusion of migrants is reflected in the eligibility voting rules for foreign nationals in Ireland, which are among the most liberal in Europe (see the MIPEX index: <https://www.mipex.eu/>). According to current regulations, all adults who are permanent residents of any nationality on a date when an electoral register comes into effect are eligible to both vote and stand in local elections. The only practical obstacle to becoming a voter seems to be a duty of personal registration on the electoral register in the district where they currently reside before the elections, which is not standard procedure in the Polish electoral system. This inclusive and active approach to the political engagement of foreigners is also reflected in the information and support campaigns aimed at providing an understanding of the political and party system, raising awareness of migrants' rights and information on the need to register and how to vote on election day. Actions of this kind have regularly been

arranged by a number of institutions – such as Dublin City Council, the Immigrant Council of Ireland or Forum Polonia – and supported by public funds (O’Boyle, Fanning and Di Bucchianico 2016; Sheridan 2019). The data speak for themselves: the number of migrant-origin candidates in local elections has been increasing steadily: from 6 in the 2004 elections to 56 in 2019 (Lima 2020), even if the respective number of candidates with Polish origin decreased (Pszczółkowska and Lesińska 2021). This increase in the number of migrant-origin candidates in local elections is obviously connected to the dynamic surge in immigration to Ireland, especially after the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007; however, the impact of this inclusive legal and political opportunity structure existing in Ireland should not be neglected. The official data regarding the electoral participation of Polish migrants in Ireland are limited to elections in Poland and there are no available data on how many Poles residing in Ireland voted in local elections there or for Irish candidates in the European Parliament.

### *Migration from Poland to Ireland – from newcomers to settlers*

Until the end of the twentieth century, only a small group of Poles lived in Ireland, among whom were post-World War II diaspora members who were offered places at Irish universities. In 1979, this group established the oldest Polish organisation in the country, the Irish–Polish Society.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Poles began to move to the Republic of Ireland in increasing numbers, using work permits. The census of April 2002 already showed 2,137 residents who had been born in Poland (CSO 2003). Between 2003 and 2014, Poles dominated among the registered immigrants – citizens of post-communist countries. The largest number of newly arrived Polish citizens was recorded in the Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) system in 2006, when 93,364 identification numbers were issued to them – some two-thirds of those assigned to newcomers from the new EU member states. As a result of the economic crisis, this number fell and stabilised for seven years at between 8,000 and 9,000 newly registered Poles per year (CSO 2020: Table FNA10). After the post-crisis wave of emigration and decline in the number of arrivals, the number of Poles in Ireland stabilised.

The 2016 population census in the Republic of Ireland recorded 115,161 people born in Poland. Interestingly, compared to the 2011 census, the size of this group did not really change as it was 115,193 people in 2011 (CSO 2017c: Table E7053). The population with Polish citizenship, including those born in the Republic of Ireland and having dual Polish and Irish citizenship, amounted to 131,788 people in 2016. Dual citizens recorded in the population census were mostly (6,530) persons born in Ireland (CSO 2017c: Table E7047). In addition, the scale of Poles naturalising in Ireland had been increasing: by 2019, 8,180 Polish citizens acquired an Irish passport (Eurostat 2021a). The number of people with exclusively Polish citizenship remained stable between the censuses: 122,585 in 2011 and 122,515 in 2016. They remain the most numerous group of foreign nationals in Ireland, exceeding by 19 per cent the second nationality – British citizens (CSO 2017a).

In 2016, more than half of Poles in Ireland aged 15+ were married or in a partnership, while the second most-numerous category (39 per cent) were single. The most common Polish households were those formed by couples (married and cohabiting) with children (46 per cent – an increase of 10 percentage points compared to 2011), followed by childless couples (14 per cent – a decrease of 5 percentage points) (CSO 2017c: Table E7024). These data indicate a progressive process of family formation and the appearance of offspring, which may be contributing to their permanent settlement and their higher interest in the quality of local infrastructure and services.

Poles in Ireland are relatively well educated, with 23 per cent of people having a university degree and 28 per cent having technical and vocational diplomas, according to the 2016 Irish census (CSO

2017a). The share of people of working age with tertiary education among Polish migrants was slightly below the figure for Poland (25.2 per cent) and much lower than among the population of Ireland (39.5 per cent) in 2016 (Eurostat 2021b). Due to the mainly economic nature of migration and the young age of the migrants, the labour-force participation rate among Poles is much higher (85 per cent) than among the general population of Ireland (61 per cent). Yet, the pattern of labour-market integration is highly gendered. Polish men have a lower unemployment rate than Irish men but, for Polish women, the unemployment rate (16 per cent) is higher than for native Irish women – and, indeed, all women on the Irish labour market (CSO 2017b: Table E7009). It is worth noting that the unemployment rate of Poles (13 per cent) is lower than that of all foreigners (15 per cent) in Ireland (CSO 2017a).

Already, in 2006, Poles could be found in every Irish municipality (CSO 2008: 28); they were also quite evenly dispersed according to the last census, in 2016, in which they constituted 2.6 per cent of the population of Ireland. With such a widespread population, Polish immigrants emerged, alongside the longer-established nationals from African countries, as a potentially important group of voters. Irish politicians noticed that Polish migrants were not politically indifferent – as proved by the approximately 22,000 who voted in the Polish general election of 2007; they were estimated to be around one third of the Polish population in Ireland (Fanning and O’Boyle 2010). In the period leading up to the 2009 local elections, the main political parties targeted Poles, publishing information materials in Polish, employing Poles as integration officers and recruiting Polish candidates. According to Fanning, Howard and O’Boyle (2010), parties were competing for immigrant candidates in areas with a high share of non-native population. Their high hopes regarding the Polish candidates and voters failed – not one of the Polish candidates was elected. The subsequent 2014 and 2019 local elections also brought no seat on the council for any of the Polish candidates. Hence the largest immigrant group in Ireland remains under-represented and *de facto* invisible in Irish politics – in contrast to other, less numerous, ethnic groups.

### Data and methods of analysis

This paper is based on data from a survey (CMR 2018) carried out within the research project entitled ‘Between Poland and Ireland. Political and Public Participation of Polish Migrants in Transnational Space’ (funded by the National Science Centre, No. 2015/18/M/HS5/00385). The survey covered issues such as Poles’ migration history, economic and family situation, socio-political activity and opinions on the quality of life in Poland and Ireland. An external market-research company implemented the fieldwork between June and October 2018. In total, 503 questionnaires were collected via computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI). The interviews were carried out in the Polish language and their timing and location were recorded and controlled. Guidelines for recruitment capped the number of interviews per interviewer and per address to limit snowballing, ensure the diversity of the sample and limit interviewer bias. As Polish migrants in Ireland are free to settle and move without residence registration, it was impossible to obtain a base for random sampling. Instead, the sample was stratified by region and age, based on the Polish immigrant population structure in the 2016 Irish Population Census (CSO 2017c: Table E7003). In addition, we applied percentage quotas for gender, economic activity and employment sector, following the sampling criteria established for the biennial surveys of Polish migrants commissioned by the National Bank of Poland (Chmielewska, Dobroczyk and Strzelecki 2018; Hołda, Saczuk, Strzelecki and Wyszynski 2011). Regionally specific quotas and interviewer restrictions gave the researchers considerable control over the fieldwork and seemed more independent from our research topics (including diasporic associational and political activity) than the potential alternatives such as a web-based survey with online recruitment via diaspora networks (cf. Nowosielski and Nowak



2020). Bearing in mind the impossibility of random sampling, we chose the best solution available, with the limitation that the data and results are not statistically representative for the Polish migrant population in Ireland.

The achieved survey sample included more economically active Poles than the statistics for the overall population of Poles in Ireland would suggest. The quota for the economically active in the survey sample was set at 75 per cent but the percentage achieved of those in employment was 95.8 per cent, in comparison to the Irish 2016 census in which 78 per cent of Poles in a corresponding age group (aged 25–64) were employed. The direction of the potential impact of this bias on our results in the analysed topic is difficult to determine. On the one hand, working people may be more inclined to abstain from voting due to working on a voting day or preferring to engage in leisure rather than voting in their free time. On the other hand, migrants in employment, displaying a degree of integration in the economic dimension, can also be more integrated politically compared to the underrepresented economically excluded ones.

The target group were Polish citizens resident in Ireland who arrived in the country between 1 January 2000 and 1 January 2014 (a period referring to their current stay in the country). Therefore, according to the criterion of the length of stay, we recruited both post-accession migrants (who arrived after the 2004 EU enlargement) and those who moved to Ireland in the period preceding Poland's EU accession, at the time of the economic boom in Ireland. Political and social integration take time; hence the researchers chose to focus on more-established Polish migrants in Ireland and to exclude the most recent arrivals. The sample included respondents who had the opportunity to vote in Ireland in local elections (at the time of the survey, the most recent local elections were held in 2014). Respondents had to have migrated to Ireland as adults.

The following analyses are based on the whole survey sample of 503 respondents. In this paper, we offer tabular, graphical and statistical summaries of information from the survey, along with multivariate logistic regression analyses. We present an overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample and a picture of their political engagement, based on several variables measuring attitudes and behaviour. The logistic regression models take as dependent variables voting in Polish parliamentary, Irish local and European Parliament elections. Among the independent variables there are voting in Polish elections pre-migration (having voted at least once versus not having voted at all); interest in politics (binary variable referring to at least some interest in Polish, Irish local or European/world politics respectively versus not really and not at all interested); trust (in the Polish parliament, Irish local authorities, European Parliament respectively). For voting in Polish and Irish local elections, we included an independent variable about their belief that the political systems in Poland and in Ireland respectively allow people to have an influence on politics (categories included some-to-full influence and don't know; no influence was the reference category; there was no variable on influence on the political system in the European Union, so the model on voting in the European Parliament elections omitted this variable). We further control for age, gender, having a third-level education, length of residence in Ireland, plans for the future (distinguishing between plans to out-migrate, undefined plans versus plans to stay in Ireland), knowledge of the English language (very good versus all others) and size of the place of residence in Ireland. We wanted to test a set of hypotheses. First, we expected that people who voted before migrating would be more likely to vote in the destination country. We also hypothesised that an interest in politics would influence positively voting in elections. Further, we expected that trust in political systems would increase the likelihood that they would vote.

## The political participation of Poles resident in Ireland

### *The socio-demographic picture*

Let us focus first on a short overview of the sample before we turn to the analysis of political participation. The CMR sample respondents were relatively young (two-thirds were aged 39 and under), with an almost even distribution of males and females (49 and 51 per cent respectively). Because of the topic of the study, we were looking at more-established migrants. At the time of the study, just over half (54 per cent) of the respondents had been resident in Ireland for between four and seven years (only migrants resident in Ireland for at least four years were part of the sample). One fifth of the sample had been in Ireland for 12 years or more. The most numerous group had had a secondary vocational education (27 per cent). One quarter had received a vocational education and almost a fifth tertiary education. Only a minority continued their education in Ireland. The Polish migrants were fairly proficient in English, with 94 per cent declaring that they spoke English well or very well, even if the majority (80 per cent) mostly used Polish at home. The majority were married (53 per cent) and a further 18 per cent declared that they were in civil partnerships. In terms of geographical spread, around 60 per cent lived in Ireland in towns of up to 50,000 inhabitants, while Dublin attracted a considerable 15 per cent.

The most often it was the higher wages and ease of finding employment that made these migrants move to Ireland (rather than choose a different destination country). Indeed, for a large majority, migration to Ireland was linked to activity on the labour market: 94 per cent of the respondents declared work as their labour-market status. The economic situation of migrants in the destination country compared very favourably to that which they had left in Poland. While the majority (60 per cent) declared that they had difficulty in paying bills before migrating, at the time of the survey in Ireland it was only 8 per cent. Nine out of 10 admitted that, with migration, their economic situation had improved. Furthermore, 36 per cent reported having a house or apartment in Poland and 19 per cent in Ireland; however, possessing a property did not equate with plans to reside in the place where the property was based. Around 37 per cent of Poles in Ireland had no plans for the future. Almost 29 per cent of respondents wanted to stay in Ireland permanently and a further 29 per cent declared that they planned to stay for a limited period, ranging from 1 month to 20 years (the average declared length of stay was around 28.5 months, with the median equal to 12 months).

### *Migrants' interest in politics and their voting behaviour*

As the overview of the sample in the previous section argues, Polish migrants to Ireland were predominantly driven by labour-market motivations and remain active economically on the Irish labour market. We were interested to see whether they were also strongly engaged in local political life in Ireland and to explore the transnational dimension of their political engagement. In our study of Polish migrant political engagement we refer, where possible, to three levels of a geographical scale – regional, national (concerning the countries of both origin and destination) and supranational, which is the EU level. This approach allows us to situate the political engagement transnationally, in relation to migration reference points such as the country of origin, the country of destination and, more broadly, the EU. In relation to political engagement, we examine migrants' interest in politics and how they followed political developments within their social networks and via the media and voting.

So are economic migrants at all interested in politics? Based on the CMR survey, we were able to explore how our respondents assessed their interest in political events and to understand the local/regional, country and EU/global levels of this interest. We found that Polish migrants have a similar level of interest in politics, irrespective of the context, be that Poland, Ireland or the EU and the world (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Declared interest in political events at the local/regional, country and EU/global level (N=503)**



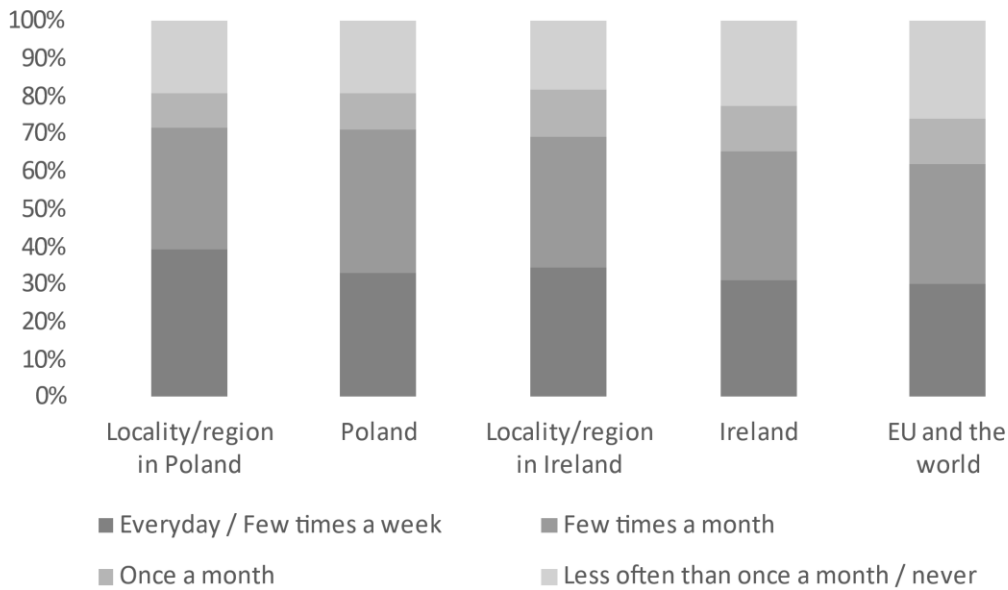
Source: CMR (2018).

When we dig deeper into this interest in politics, we see that it was also an experience shared on social networks, as respondents interested in politics at least to some extent also declared that they discussed political matters with family and/or friends and followed the media to learn about politics (see Figures 2 and 3). The respondents more often engaged in discussions about politics in Poland (at both the local and the national level, as declared by over 71 per cent of respondents) and about political developments in the local communities in which they lived in Ireland (69 per cent); less often they declared discussing EU/world developments, which was the case for around 62 per cent of interviewed migrants. The Polish migrants often followed media coverage about political events but, again, it was events in Poland (at the local and national levels) and locally in Ireland that they followed the most (around 80 per cent). Media consumption about Ireland was declared by 73 per cent, while the EU and world events in the media were followed by around 70 per cent of respondents.

There seems to be a fair interest in politics among Polish migrants but the key question is whether this interest translates into voting behaviour. The respondents in the CMR study were asked about their voting in Polish parliamentary/presidential elections, local elections in Ireland and elections to the European Parliament. For all the elections listed, only a minority reported casting a vote, although the percentages differed across the elections. One third of respondents voted in the Polish elections but only close to half of this group voted in all parliamentary/presidential elections in Poland while being resident in Ireland. The share of voters in European parliamentary and Irish local elections was close at just below 25 per cent. Again, less than half of them voted in all the elections while resident in Ireland. Among

those who voted at least in one of the elections to the European Parliament, 44 per cent voted for candidates on the Polish lists only. A further 22 per cent voted for the candidates on both the Irish and the Polish lists (this applied only if a person participated in at least two European elections during their time in Ireland, as it is not possible to vote on both lists in any given election).

**Figure 2. Declared frequency of discussions with family or friends about political events at a local/regional, country and EU/global level (N=461)**



Source: CMR (2018).

**Figure 3. Declared frequency of media consumption about political events at the local/regional, country and EU/global level (N=461)**



Source: CMR (2018).

Taking into account migrants' possible engagement in Polish general elections, Irish local elections and European-level elections, we found that having voted (or not) in elections before migration divided migrants into two distinct groups who behaved differently once in Ireland. Those who had not voted in Poland were also passive after migration. Those who *had* voted in Poland were more prone to participate in elections in Ireland – regardless of whether they concerned the Polish national authorities, the Irish local authorities or the European Parliament; this reflects the notion of voter turnout as habitual behaviour (see Aldrich *et al.* 2011). Just over half of the respondents (51 per cent) declared that, before their emigration, they had participated at least once in elections in Poland (Table 1). People who had never voted in Poland before emigrating to Ireland usually also remained passive after migration. Those who had voted at least once in Poland took part in the elections of Polish state authorities while abroad a little more often than they ignored them.

**Table 1. The participation in Polish general elections of migrants in Ireland depending on earlier voting in Poland**

	Voting in elections post-migration							
	Polish elections		Irish local elections		European Parliament elections		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Voting in elections pre-migration	149	57.98	114	44.36	117	45.53	257	100
Not voting in elections pre-migration	17	6.91	9	3.66	8	3.25	246	100

Source: CMR (2018).

When we uncover the social composition of the voter group we find that, of those who voted in Polish, Irish local or European elections, the percentage with tertiary education and working in white-collar or skilled service jobs is higher than the sample average. Voters in Polish elections more often resided in a city of 50,000+ inhabitants or the capital than the sample average. Irish local elections, as well as European ones, more often attract voters from towns of up to 250,000 inhabitants.

**Table 2. Voting in elections while being resident in Ireland**

	Polish elections	Irish local elections	European Parliament elections
	%	%	%
Voted	33.00	24.45	24.85
Did not vote	67.00	75.55	75.15
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: CMR (2018).

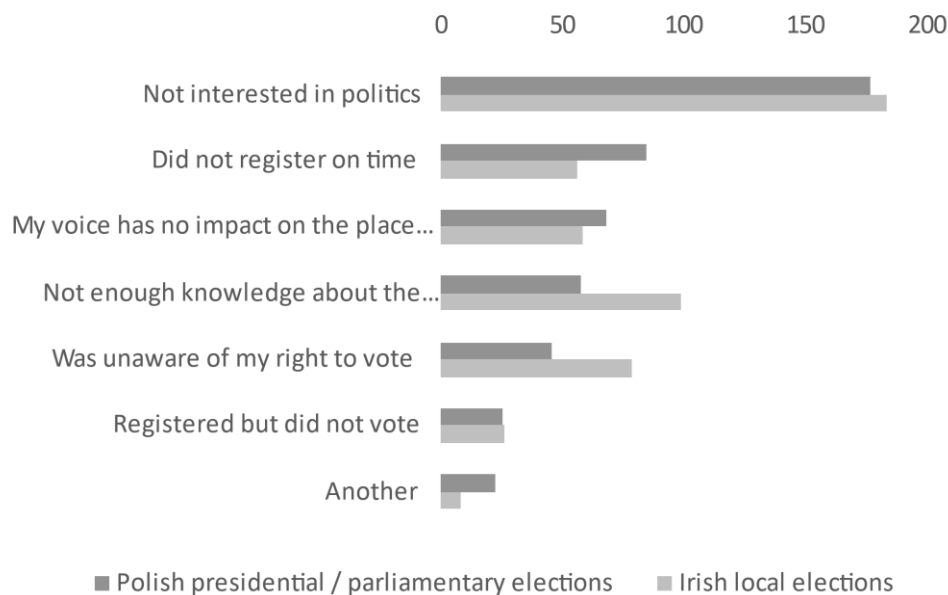
### *Exploring political disengagement, assessments of political systems and their institutions*

The majority of the CMR sample declared political disengagement to be measured by not voting in elections, with the percentages ranging from 67 per cent for Polish parliamentary and presidential elections to 75 per cent for local elections in Ireland and to the European Parliament. Because the majority of respondents did not vote, we now compare the reasons they gave for not taking part in the elections – reasons declared by respondents who missed at least one opportunity to vote while living abroad.

While it is clear that the majority did not vote in the elections, there are differences in the reported reasons why they did not (Figure 4) – they could choose up to two reasons explaining why they did not participate in (some) elections. For both the Irish and the Polish elections, many reported a lack of interest in politics. This finding to some extent contradicts the results reported in the previous sections about the declared interest in politics. It seems that, for some respondents who declared an interest in politics, it was not great enough to take part in or be related to the act of voting. Asked about the Polish elections, respondents claimed that they did not register on time and they did not think that their voice mattered for the place where they lived. Others also reported that they did not have enough knowledge about the elections and the candidates.

As for the Irish local elections, it seems that what accounted more for the respondents' lack of participation (apart from the absence of an interest in politics) was their lack of knowledge about the Irish context, including the elections, the candidates or the right to vote itself in the elections in Ireland. A smaller group (than in the case of the Polish elections) thought that their voice did not matter. Others simply did not register in time to take part.

**Figure 4. Reasons for not voting in the Polish presidential/parliamentary elections (N=425) and Irish local elections (N=443)**



In a bid to contextualise the political disengagement of Polish migrants across the whole spectrum of origin and destination countries and the EU, we turn to the attitudes of these migrants as they assess whether the political system allows people to influence politics. A considerable number of respondents did not know (or refused to answer the question) whether the political system allowed them to have any influence on politics in Poland and Ireland (12 and 17 per cent respectively). A higher share of respondents could not (or did not) answer the question on the Irish political system than could/did an analogous share of respondents about the Polish one, maybe because they were less familiar with and/or had no opinion on it. In both cases, those who did not answer this question tended not to vote.

When we exclude the 'don't know' answers (see Table 3), a majority of respondents claimed that they had no influence at all or only to a slight degree on the Polish political system. However, when they were

asked about their assessment of the Irish political system, the majority reported that it allowed people to have an influence (to some extent, a lot or a great deal).

**Table 3. Political system in the country allows people to have an influence on politics**

Influence on politics/country	Poland		Ireland	
	N	%	N	%
Not at all	87	19.68	36	8.61
Very little	157	35.52	124	29.67
Some	173	39.14	200	47.85
A lot	22	4.98	46	11.00
A great deal	3	0.68	12	2.87
Total	442	100.00	418	100.00

Source: CMR (2018).

Additionally, according to the CMR survey, there is a marked difference between the trust declared in the authorities and politicians in the countries of origin and destination and the European Parliament. In general, respondents displayed more trust in institutions and politicians in Ireland, with a top score for the local authorities. The European Parliament scored less than the Irish institutions but still above Polish local authorities, parliament and politicians, which came last in the level of trust reported (Table 4).

**Table 4. Trust in the authorities and in politicians**

Trust in...	Mean score	N
Local authorities in Ireland	5.25	465
Irish parliament	5.14	463
Irish politicians	5.13	465
European Parliament	4.84	468
Local authorities in Poland	4.48	469
Polish parliament	4.35	472
Polish politicians	4.19	471

Source: CMR (2018).

#### *Learning about the voting patterns of Polish migrants – regression analyses*

To learn more about how the various individual characteristics relate to migrant voting behaviour we now turn to our multivariate analysis results. A set of binary logistic regression analyses, with voting in Polish, Irish local and European Parliament elections as dependent variables, points to how migrants have brought with them the baggage of voting behaviour from Poland, which largely impacts on their voting behaviour when resident in Ireland, in all election types. This independent variable has a statistically significant effect consistently across the three models (see Table 5). The interest in politics is another predictor of voting behaviour but only in the case of Polish and Irish local elections. Migrants expressing an interest in political events in Poland and locally in Ireland are more likely to vote in Polish and Irish local elections respectively, controlling for other variables. Similarly, trust in politics is statistically significant in favour of Irish local voting. People who declare not having plans for the future are less likely to participate in Irish local elections but this does not concern Polish elections. Older migrants

are more likely to be voters in Polish and Irish local elections, controlling for other variables in the model. The place of residence in Ireland mattered for voting in Polish elections, with people resident in Dublin being more likely to vote compared to the inhabitants of small towns and villages. This may be related to the accessibility in case of in-person voting as the voting booths were based in Dublin and larger cities across Ireland. However, in 2011 and 2015 it was also possible to cast a vote by post. Contrary to some previous studies (Doomernik *et al.* 2010; Koopmans *et al.* 2005), in our analysis the length of stay is not statistically significant but this may be linked to the fact that the survey sample included only people with at least four years of residence in Ireland.

**Table 5. Binary logistic regression models with dependent variables voting in 1) Polish; 2) Irish local; 3) European Parliament elections (reference: not voting in respective elections)**

	Voting in Polish elections		Voting in Irish local elections		Voting in European Parliament elections	
	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.
Voted pre-migration	17.984 ***	6.027	19.591 ***	8.892	38.986 ***	19.309
Not interested in politics	0.417 **	0.124	0.374 **	0.141	1.081	0.330
Trust in political institutions	1.073	0.058	1.295 **	0.100	0.951	0.058
Declaring at least some influence on politics (ref: no influence)	0.786	0.442	0.840	0.372		
Does not know if has influence on politics (ref: no influence)	0.963	0.583	0.108 **	0.091		
Wish to leave Ireland (ref: wish to stay)	1.050	0.321	0.611	0.203	1.139	0.349
Does not have future plans (ref: wish to stay)	0.577	0.200	0.181 ***	0.074	0.517	0.192
Knowing English less than very well	0.562 *	0.152	0.876	0.266	0.455 **	0.126
Age	1.041 *	0.019	1.062 **	0.024	1.013	0.021
Female (ref: male)	1.165	0.298	0.786	0.230	1.108	0.300
Third-level education	1.014	0.311	1.643	0.571	0.606	0.197
Residence length 4–5 years (ref: 10 years or more)	0.752	0.256	1.354	0.537	0.533	0.192
Residence length 6–9 years (ref: 10 years or more)	1.566	0.499	0.656	0.237	0.717	0.236
Residing in countryside (ref: Dublin)	0.237 *	0.159	0.477	0.387	0.508	0.376
Residing in town up to 50,000 inhabitants (ref: Dublin)	0.248 ***	0.099	0.938	0.457	0.975	0.432
Residing in city 51,000–250,000 inhabitants (ref: Dublin)	0.570	0.255	1.775	0.966	1.673	0.849
Constant	0.063 **	0.058	0.003 ***	0.004	0.040 **	0.043
N	467		460		463	
Pseudo R2	0.3335		0.3989		0.3217	

Notes: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001.

Source: CMR (2018).



The results of the regression analyses are, in general, consistent with the existing literature. The available research results indicate a relationship between electoral engagement and an interest in politics: migrants who are highly interested in politics are more likely to participate in elections in both countries – of settlement and of origin (Finn 2020; Peltoniemi 2018), which is also corroborated by our study. The importance of trust (social, in politics and institutions) is recognised as an important determinant of the political engagement of migrants in the country of residence (de Rooij 2012; Fenema and Tillie 1999); the case of Poles in Ireland also proved this connection in relation to the Irish local elections.

## Conclusions

This study has examined Polish migrants in Ireland and the extent to which they are politically engaged. We referred to the three possible levels of political engagement – origin country, destination country and the EU. The CMR survey results show clearly that the majority of migrants do not vote, irrespective of the type of election. Only a third of the migrants declared that they vote in Polish elections (presidential and parliamentary). Only a quarter voted in the Irish local elections and those to the European Parliament. However, those who voted while resident in Ireland had usually also done so prior to migrating. We also asked about the reasons behind their political disengagement and contextualised them through the attitudes that migrants have towards the political system in both the origin and the destination countries. A lack of knowledge of political participation rights or how to engage in voting is one explanation, especially with reference to Irish local elections. Another is the attitude that migrants take about the political system and the ways in which they can influence it. Polish migrants predominantly report that people have no or little influence on politics in Poland and have relatively less trust in the authorities and politicians there (compared to Ireland), which can discourage them from any engagement in the political sphere. Polish migrants may thus have brought with them to Ireland their attitude to the political system back in Poland and be unwilling or slow to change their views. This explanation complements earlier research on the political disengagement of Poles in Ireland, including that of Fanning, Howard and O’Boyle (2010), who hypothesised that the factors impeding the political participation of Poles were the relatively recent presence of Polish migration in Ireland. In contrast to the refugees and immigrants of African descent, Poles seemed to be less motivated to political activism due to their lack of experience of racism and the secure legal status of EU citizens. This is in line with the results of a study of Poles in Ireland who reported how they felt discriminated against much more rarely there than in, for example, Great Britain or Germany (McGinnity and Gijsberts 2016).

The regression results corroborated our hypothesis in relation to pre-migration voting and that it is positively related to voting in the destination country, irrespective of the election type. This was the only predictor which was statistically significant across all election types. Our survey data analysis examined voting behaviour in the country of origin and in the country of immigration on an individual level, which shed new light on the issue often analysed on the level of the country of origin’s political regime (Wass *et al.* 2015) or voting turnout (Voicu and Comşa 2014), treated as a proxy for migrants’ experience with democratic procedures prior to migration. The interest in politics was quite widespread among the respondents but regression analyses showed its effect only for voting in Polish and Irish local elections. Trust of political institutions was related only to voting in Irish local elections. As the Irish local authorities scored higher levels of trust among our respondents than any other political body, this might have motivated some voters to engage in elections specifically at the local level. Migrants who were undecided whether they wish to stay in Ireland or move were less likely to vote in Irish elections than those planning to stay in the country. A lack of clear plans for the future and a disengagement from

voting could both be symptoms of political apathy among intra-EU migrants who can migrate without barriers and keep their mobility options open without putting any legal effort into making their stay in the host country more permanent. Hence the overall voting rates among migrants remain low. The added value of our analyses is its focus on voting in the European Parliament elections, since many existing studies tend to examine political behaviour directed at origin and destination, while we offer a more comprehensive picture, including the European dimension of migrant political engagement.

When the recession hit Ireland in 2008, there were questions about the future of Polish labour migration to the country. It is clear now that many migrants stayed but, at the same time, continued their 'Polish migrant settlement without political integration' as Fanning *et al.* (2020) diagnosed it. The efforts of Irish political parties and Polish immigrant organisations to raise awareness and motivate Poles to vote had a limited effect. The Polish candidates in the local elections have been unsuccessful thus far and the scant participation of Polish voters partly contributed to these low figures.

While the data we analysed were collected in 2018, an interesting question to pursue in the more-recent context is to follow migrant political engagement in the light of the 2020 women's rights' protests in Poland. In this case, social media played a major role as a space in which Poles could protest (Muszel and Piotrowski 2020), and this could be a new and less institutionalised, more spontaneous avenue for research into the political participation of migrants too, at least those whose political interests are directed at the country of origin.

The political participation of Poles in Ireland may also be seen from a broader perspective. While 'new' EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe seem to be well aware of their free-movement right to live and work in other EU countries and make use of this *en masse*, they seem to be much less knowledgeable about and active in terms of their political rights when on the move in the EU. This, of course, points to the shortcomings of European integration processes as they occur in everyday life.


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