In Germany, the representation of immigrants and their descendents in parliaments and other positions of political influence is a relatively new phenomenon. The citizenship reform in 1999 and a surge of ethnic German immigration, the ensuing growth of an immigrant electorate, and a changed attitude to the immigrant presence in major political parties have contributed to a noticeable increase in the number of elected representatives of immigrant background.

To what degree are people with immigration backgrounds already represented on German city councils? Is there an observable trend towards a ‘more diverse democracy’? Who manages to become part of local political elites, and how do immigrants’ representatives view their own careers and the conditions under which they unfold? What are the obstacles? For the first time, these questions have been systematically researched regarding the major German cities, i.e. the 77 cities with at least 100,000 inhabitants. As Berlin, Bremen, and Hamburg are not only cities, but also regional states, they are not part of this study.

Here we present a brief summary of some major results, more detailed publications will be available in the autumn.

The study is based on three sources:
1. An evaluation of the lists of all candidates running for office, as well as of all council members elected for the period from 2001 until March 2011. For each city, we offer an analysis of two local elections.
2. A standardised questionnaire sent to all city councillors with immigration backgrounds; two-thirds of the addressees responded, i.e. 117 city council members.
3. About thirty interviews with city council members with immigration backgrounds were conducted in order to learn more about their motivations, career paths, and experiences.

The councillors considered are those who were either born outside Germany and came here as
The overall picture: an upward trend on a low level

The number of immigrants on German city councils is on the rise. City councils elected between 2001 and March 2006 had 114 members with an immigrant background; between September 2006 and March 2011, this number rose to over 190. The number of candidates has risen considerably, too – by about 50%. The reasons for this positive trend are threefold: On the one hand, the number of cities with migrants on their councils has risen. Today only 15 out of 77 councils of major cities (eight of them in West Germany) consist entirely of non-immigrant Germans; before that the number was 25. Further, there now are a number of cities with more than one councillor that has an immigration background. Finally, all parties have increased the number of councillors with immigration backgrounds. Still, all city councils are a long way from representing the diversity of city populations. Only 4% of the 4670 city council members are immigrants (1st and 2nd generation). As over a quarter of the population of major cities has an immigration background, this demographic group is still blatantly underrepresented in city politics. Not a single major city has a percentage of migrants on its council that corresponds to their numbers among the population. As our analysis only accounted for two electoral periods, and found the levels of immigrant representation to be highly variable across cities, the stableness of the upwards trend is uncertain.

Major differences between cities

There are major differences between cities. Frankfurt am Main is the leader among major German cities; here 15 council members have immigration backgrounds. Offenbach, Duisburg, Ludwigshafen, and Stuttgart do relatively well, too. There are twenty-one cities with four or more council members that have immigration backgrounds. However, it also has to be noted that some cities with a high percentage of immigrants, such as Mannheim, Heilbronn, Ingolstadt, and Hagen, have not a single council member with an immigration background. There is no readily available explanation for such differences. Neither the size of the city, nor the share of the immigrant population can explain them.

Noticeable differential between parties

The openness towards immigrants differs considerably between political parties, as does the degree to which immigrants are drawn towards certain parties. In the big cities, all major political parties have councillors with immigration backgrounds, yet there are vast differences
when it comes to numbers. While the Free Democrats (FDP) have seven such councillors, the Social Democrats (SPD) have 68. As measured by the total number of councillors, Die Linke has the highest percentage of immigrants (8%), followed by the Green Party (7%), and the SPD (5%), while only about 2% of the Christian Democrats’ (CDU/CSU) and the FDP’s city councillors have immigration backgrounds. As distinct from other European countries, access to political influence in Germany has not been primarily facilitated by social democratic organizations.

A number of immigrants with German citizenship, as well as EU citizens, have run for office as candidates for different independent voters’ groups. Currently there are 14 such councillors, representing a growing number of immigrants active outside of political parties; however, no trend has been observed for immigrants to run on purely immigrant lists.

*Councillors with immigration backgrounds: many women, many Germans of Turkish origin*

There is no such thing as the typical local politician with immigration background. Those active represent manifold biographies and a wealth of political experiences. It is remarkable that the percentage of women among councillors with immigration backgrounds is higher than among councillors without a migration background. Although, among immigrants, too, the percentage of women is below 50%, at 40% it still is higher than the average on German city councils, which is 33%. The commonplace idea that immigrant women are less well integrated than men is untrue. It is quite the opposite – female immigrants jump at the opportunity to take political responsibility.

Regarding the provenance of councillors, it is striking that 40% have a Turkish background. This runs counter to the prejudice that citizens of Turkish origin are especially unwilling to integrate. The high number of local councillors with Turkish backgrounds suggests that ethnic community structures (such as the availability of specific media) do play a part in creating a pool of activists available to stand for election. However, open ethnic mobilisation is rare in Germany.

Another major group are people from EU countries. There are some councillors with an African or Middle Eastern background, yet not a single council member has a Vietnamese or any other Southeast Asian background.

The right of EU citizens to vote and run for office in local elections has had an effect on integration: In our sample, there were 17 councillors in major German cities who are not German citizens.
The majority of councillors with immigration backgrounds immigrated themselves, about two thirds were born outside Germany. This roughly represents the share of the foreign born in the immigrant population. An especially high number came to Germany as family members or to go to university. Migrant workers, on the other hand, are less well represented in local politics, and those who came as refugees have rarely made it to the position of city councillor. Those who succeed in local politics are often highly educated. In our sample, 66% of councillors had a university degree. Many of them are “educational climbers,” over half of the parents have little or no formal education. Working on a city council is an honorary activity pursued by citizens who in their majority have a full-time job.

Political careers – manifold experiences
Some important developments in the 1990s created preconditions for the opening of local democracy to social diversity. The majority of councillors in our sample belong to those who naturalized during the 1990s, and by 2000, half of them had joined a German political party. Many of them have extensive experience in party political work, even in leading positions. Among the councillors in our sample, 62% had held an official position within their respective parties before becoming city councillor. However, over a third of those sampled were elected without having to earn their nomination for city councillor by years of party political groundwork.

Councillors with an immigration background bring numerous experiences to their job. Before being elected, many had been active on a foreigner’s advisory council – in all 35% of those sampled. Others had been active in a range of political initiatives, within the trade unions, or on citizens’ action groups. A small group has had political experience in their countries of origin. However, one out of six councillors sampled first entered politics by becoming a councillor.

Experiences and identifications as migrants
Almost two-thirds of councillors with immigration backgrounds are convinced of having achieved something for their fellow migrants, yet, overall, they do not perceive of themselves as being mainly spokespersons for this group. Many councillors say that their roots in a country other than Germany are important to them, two thirds, however, think of this as being of minor or no importance. About a quarter of those sampled do not perceive themselves as advocates for migrants’ interests. Nevertheless, those councillors who regard their foreign roots as less important are also active in targeting their campaigns towards migrants.
Many councillors with an immigrant background have had negative experiences – be it animosity because of their ethnic background or challenges as to their qualifications. Such negative experiences are widespread across party lines and independent of gender or ethnic background. They are not, however, perceived of as the dominant factor. Overwhelmingly those sampled think that other council members are respecting of them, and they regard their nomination as being a recognition of their expertise and popularity. Still, many notice that they are being pushed into the field of migration / integration politics – something imposed on them from the outside and regarded as questionable.

The need for change within parties and beyond

The majority of those sampled think their parties should do more to enable those with immigration backgrounds to equally participate in party politics. A majority reports that their respective parties have no activities aimed at winning members with immigration backgrounds. Further issues mentioned include the demand to make stronger efforts to win this group, openness towards newcomers, existing power structures, and targeted as well as verifiable measures to achieve a party leadership, parliamentary and council groups that represent social diversity.

The considerable difference between cities also points to the fact that the openness of political institutions is dependent on political culture, social dynamics and a city’s politics. The parties do play a key role; councillors are overwhelmingly nominated by political parties. And yet, the increased participation and involvement of all of a city’s inhabitants is an issue that goes beyond political parties – and one that does not solely depend on their activities. The breadth and vitality of social movements likely has a positive effect, as have networks between actors with immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds and the acceptance of several parties to embrace leaders with an immigrant background. The specific interactions of structural conditions, social formations (community structures) and politics that in all likelihood lead to different degrees of mobilization and of openness or closure towards immigrant politicians should be studied in more detail. Furthermore, systematic international comparative studies could help to isolate both the general and the specific mechanisms at work.