

Pathways To Representation: Institutional Configurations and Third-Country Nationals Political Participation

A Comparative Study of Germany and Sweden

Interfaces for Democratic Participation: Deliberation, Mobilization and Contestation since the Onset of the Covid Pandemic
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Introduction

The political representation of immigrant populations has become a persistent concern in contemporary European democracies. While immigration has substantially transformed the demographic composition of many societies, institutional responses to these transformations remain highly diverse. Local political arenas are particularly instructive in this regard because municipalities constitute both the primary sites at which immigrants encounter administrative authority and the level of governance at which participatory innovations have most visibly develop. However, existing comparative research faces challenges in analyzing such developments systematically. Large-N approaches sometimes require significant simplification, while some qualitative studies advance broader explanatory claims than their empirical bases allow.

A central puzzle motivates this paper: why do some institutional and political environments generate stable pathways for non-citizens political representation, while others produce fragmented or inconsistent opportunities? This question resists straightforward answers, not least because representation itself is a multi-dimensional concept that cannot be reduced to electoral participation or formal access alone. What is required is an analytical framework that can capture the configurations of conditions (institutional, political, relational, and normative) within which representation is, or is not, meaningfully constructed.

Germany and Sweden provide a theoretically motivated comparative pairing. Both are established liberal democracies with significant immigrant populations with multilevel systems of governance. Both have experimented with advisory structures, consultative forums, and various forms of political inclusion at the local level. At the same time, the two countries differ significantly across several dimensions, including institutional design, integration philosophy, the scope of political rights extended to non-citizens, and patterns of state–civil society engagement. This combination of structural similarity and configurational contrast produces what may be termed a structured comparative pairing, one that enables interpretive, thematically organized comparison without assuming causality or projecting findings beyond the two cases under consideration.

Against this background, the paper asks: How do different modes of political participation at the local level characterize the representation of third-country nationals? To address this question, the paper develops a qualitative, theme-based comparison across eight empirically grounded themes. The analysis does not attempt to uncover causal mechanisms, nor does it claim the level of inferential generalization that bigger comparative designs may aspire to. Instead, it proceeds in a manner compatible with the interpretive, non-causal reasoning appropriate to small-N contexts in which case knowledge is deep but the grounds for broad

generalization remain limited. This perspective draws on the methodological tradition associated with configurational thinking, focusing on how conditions combine and co-constitute outcomes within specific cases, rather than estimating their independent effects across many.

The paper argues that political representation is not determined by the presence or absence of any single institutional arrangement, but by the degree to which the conditions that shape it operate in mutual reinforcement. Where institutional, discursive, and participatory dimensions align, representation acquires structural depth and durability; where they diverge, even formally elaborate systems fail to translate access into influence. Germany and Sweden provide the empirical evidence on which this argument is developed, as two cases that are sufficiently similar to allow structured comparison and sufficiently different to make the contrast analytically productive.

The analysis proceeds through five sections: 1) a conceptual framework introducing the eight analytical themes; 2) a methodological account of the interpretive and set-summarizing strategy; 3) the empirical analysis across the eight themes; 4) a cross-case synthesis and interpretive mechanism; and 5) a concluding discussion of the broader implications for scholarship on immigrant political representation in European democracies.

1. Conceptual Framework

1.1 Political Representation as a Multidimensional Concept

Political representation is not a unitary phenomenon. It includes the articulation of interests, the transmission of preferences, the symbolic framing of identity, and the substantive responsiveness of institutions. In the context of immigrant populations, representation becomes tightly linked with questions of belonging, legitimacy, and boundary formation. The relationship between immigrants and local political structures is therefore not reducible only to presence of advisory bodies or the extension of formal political rights. Instead, representation emerges from the interaction of institutional configurations, mobilization opportunities, social resources, discursive environments, and state practices.

1.2 Pitkin's Typology as Interpretive Architecture

To give this understanding of representation analytical structure, the study draws on Pitkin's fourfold typology (Pitkin, 1967). Formalistic representation refers to the institutional rules that govern authorization and accountability, such as electoral rights, legal mandates of advisory bodies, and procedural access. Descriptive representation refers to the extent to which political bodies reflect the social composition of the population they serve, which is particularly important when legitimacy is tied to shared experience or minority identity. Symbolic

representation focuses on how actors and institutions are perceived and whether they are recognized as legitimate. Substantive representation refers to the actual articulation and pursuit of constituent interests and the degree to which political claims are translated into action.

The typology does not organize the empirical analysis directly. Rather, it provides the interpretive logic that connects the thematic analysis to a coherent theoretical reading of representation. Formalistic representation contributes to the study of institutional openness, resources and capacity, and authority and influence (Themes 1, 3 and 7). Descriptive and symbolic representation inform the analysis of mobilization structures, identity and boundary-making (Themes 2, 5). Substantive representation provides the conceptual anchor for integration policy orientation, state–civil society relations and turnout (Themes 4, 6 and 8). Pitkin's categories therefore function as a background framework, ensuring that the analysis remains theoretically grounded while remaining open to empirical nuance.

1.3 Conditions Shaping Representation

The eight themes constructed for this analysis were derived inductively from existing scholarship on immigrant political participation, local governance, and integration policy, on the basis of their theoretical relevance to the understanding of representation established above and their consistent empirical visibility across both cases. Rather than functioning as independent variables or causal factors, they serve as structured interpretive entry points that enable systematic cross-case comparison while remaining sensitive to the heterogeneity of the empirical material.

These themes do not stand alone. They are explored in relation to one another, through textual evidence, empirical findings, and comparative reasoning; they allow patterns of alignment and divergence to emerge gradually across the analysis. Illustrative fuzzy-set scores are assigned at the end of each thematic subsection as structured summaries of qualitative judgement, supporting the reader in tracing patterns across themes and preparing the ground for the cross-case synthesis that follows. These scores do not generate the analysis, nor are they treated as measurements in any technical sense.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The methodological approach is interpretive and qualitative, with qualitative content analysis serving as the primary method for examining documentary evidence. It is designed to produce a structured and transparent comparison of political representation across two cases while avoiding inferential claims that would be inappropriate given the available empirical material. Each case was first analyzed independently through an inductive, case-sensitive

coding process, generating within-case codes grounded in the empirical material. These initial codes did not align perfectly across cases, reflecting the context-specific dynamics of each political environment. Through a process of conceptual consolidation, they were subsequently synthesized into eight unified analytical themes. This procedure ensures that the themes were not imposed a priori but emerged from grounded within-case analysis.

2.2 Set-Theoretic Language as Interpretive Tool

This paper does not employ formal QCA. The choice of set-theoretic language is motivated by the configurational character of the research question. The paper does not ask whether a single factor explains representation, but how several conditions combine to make representation more or less likely in different local contexts. Fuzzy-set language is therefore useful because it allows partial and uneven membership to be expressed without forcing the analysis into a purely binary or variable-centered format. Compared with a standard thematic comparison alone, the scores make the comparative judgments more transparent and easier to follow, while still preserving the qualitative interpretation on which they are based.

Fuzzy-set membership scores are assigned at the end of each thematic subsection as structured summaries of qualitative judgement. They follow explicit interpretive calibration anchors, and these anchors are qualitative ideal-type references rather than measurement rules, derived from a weighing of the empirical evidence within each theme rather than from calibration procedures. The truth table presented later functions as a communicative tool rather than a basis for minimization. It highlights alignment and divergence across the eight themes without implying causal relationships. For the illustrative synthesis, the outcome is treated as binary and coded as present or absent across the two cases rather than calibrated as a fuzzy-set membership score in its own right.

The eight themes are not measured variables in a formal sense, but the outcome of an inductive coding process carried out within each case. The scores assigned express qualitative judgments about the degree to which Germany and Sweden belong to the relevant sets. Set membership is suited to a comparison of this kind because it allows partial belonging to be expressed without suggesting a level of measurement precision that the evidence cannot support (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). This brings above all the clarity to the comparative task. Once each case is located in relation to explicit qualitative anchors, the reasoning behind score becomes visible rather than remaining implicit in the text, and the comparison across themes can be carried out within a single conceptual frame rather than across a series of separate descriptive passages.

The truth-table format that follows then serves to condense the comparison further, making the central argument of the paper visible in a compact way, namely that representation depends on the simultaneous alignment of conditions rather than on any single one in isolation. The sets summarize the qualitative analysis; they do not produce it.

2.3 Methodological Limitations

Within each thematic subsection, evidence from Germany and Sweden is brought into direct comparative dialogue, enabling cross-case interpretation at the conceptual level rather than a sequential description of each case in turn. The approach is not without limitations. Documentary evidence cannot fully capture intra-national variation, a constraint that is particularly relevant for the German case, where differences between municipalities are extensive and carry political significance. The reliance on existing scholarship also means that certain aspects of representation may be more thoroughly documented in one case than the other. Both limitations are addressed through conservative interpretation and a deliberate avoidance of claims that reach beyond what the empirical material can support.¹

3. Thematic Case Analysis

The analysis proceeds through eight themes derived inductively from the empirical material and consolidated on the basis of their theoretical relevance to representation. These themes provide the structure for the comparison that follows, allowing the discussion to move from within-case evidence to a cross-case synthesis of the conditions shaping political representation. Table 1 sets out the themes, the concepts they capture, and the summary scores. The full qualitative anchors underlying each score are provided in the appendix. The scores range from full non-membership (0) to full membership (1), with 0.50 marking the crossover point of maximum ambiguity at which the evidence supports no conclusion in either direction (Ragin, 2008).

Table 1. Overview of the eight analytical themes and illustrative fuzzy-set scores

	Theme	Concept in brief	Germany	Sweden
C1	Institutional Openness	Accessible, legitimate, functionally meaningful entry points for immigrant participation	0.50	0.80
C2	Mobilization Structures	The organizational environments through which immigrants articulate interests collectively and translate them into political engagement	0.60	0.70

¹ Claude and Grammarly were used solely for grammatical and stylistic purposes, neither tool involved in development or modification of substantive analytical content

C3	Resources & Capacity	The extent to which participation structures are adequately resourced to function as more than nominal arrangements	0.50	0.80
C4	Integration Policy Orientation	The normative environment within which immigrant political representation becomes possible or constrained	0.60	0.80
C5	Identity & Boundary-making	How legitimacy, belonging, and political voice are constructed in public discourse and institutional practice	0.50	0.70
C6	State-civil Society Relations	The relational architecture through which immigrant claims can circulate into local decision-making	0.60	0.80
C7	Authority & Influence	The extent to which immigrant participatory bodies can meaningfully shape municipal decision-making	0.40	0.70
C8	Turnout	The extent to which immigrants participate in local electoral processes and how this shapes the broader representational environment	0.30	0.70

3.1 Institutional Openness

Institutional openness refers to the extent to which political institutions provide accessible, legitimate, and functionally meaningful entry points for immigrant participation. Kersting (2018) documents that only four federal states, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, and Rhineland-Palatinate, have a legally binding framework for integration or foreigners' councils, with the establishment, mandate, and resources left to municipal discretion. The result is a combination of representational opportunities: some cities, such as Frankfurt and Mannheim, have more prominent and active councils, whereas others provide only symbolic or minimal venues for immigrant participation. Schiller's (2023) study of immigrant councils in two German cities demonstrates that these bodies usually have ambiguous objectives, ranging between community participation forums and advisory bodies with limited access to governmental decision-making. They are structurally embedded inside city administrations but are often excluded from committee work, occupying a position that municipal officials describe as politically relevant but institutionally irrelevant.

A further barrier to institutional openness is limited public visibility. Ziller et al. (2025), drawing on a ten-city survey, finds that only 41 percent of urban residents are aware of the existence of integration councils, with awareness lowest among non-EU citizens (TCNs), the very population these bodies are designed to represent. This finding highlights a structural

contradiction: institutions designed to include disenfranchised immigrants remain unknown to those they are intended to serve. The consequences are significant: low awareness undermines the democratic legitimacy of these bodies, depresses participation, and weakens their leverage in relation to municipal authorities.

The Swedish case presents a different picture. Pedroza (2019) shows that the enfranchisement of denizens in 1975, adopted unanimously by the Riksdag, was framed as a matter of civic equality rather than cultural adaptation. This reform established a stable and universally applicable gateway to political participation: non-citizens who have resided in Sweden for three years may vote and stand as candidates in local elections. Bäck and Soinen (1998) confirm that local voting rights pushed political parties to incorporate immigrants more systematically, recruiting candidates and establishing channels of communication that treat immigrant residents as full members of the political community. This pattern is consistent with Odmalm's broader argument, as reviewed by Yurdakul, 2007, that the institutional structure of electoral incorporation shapes the scope and form of migrant political engagement at the municipal level (Yurdakul, 2007).

Taken together, the evidence indicates that institutional openness functions as a partially favorable but inconsistent condition in Germany and as a systematically favorable condition in Sweden. In Germany, openness is structurally dense but operationally shallow: councils exist widely but vary considerably in mandate, visibility, and political integration. In Sweden, institutional openness is structurally simple but substantively deep, with electoral rights guaranteeing uniform access and creating clear incentives for political parties to engage immigrant residents. This divergence helps explain why representation in Sweden is more consistently channeled through mainstream political institutions, while in Germany it remains heavily dependent on local political will. In set-theoretic terms, Germany can therefore be understood as having partial membership in the set of institutionally open systems (0.50), while Sweden approaches near-full membership (0.80), reflecting its more consistent and institutionalized access structures.

3.2 Mobilization Structures

Mobilization structures refer to the organizational environments through which TCNs articulate interests collectively and translate them into political engagement. In Germany, these structures are characterized by density and internal diversity, but also by fragmentation in their linkages to formal political arenas. Research on migrant self-organizations highlights many associations differentiated along ethnic, religious, and national lines. Diehl and Urbahn (1998) show that Turkish associations only include groups focused on host-country issues, left-wing or nationalist positions related to the country of origin, and religious organizations such as

mosque associations. These organizations differ significantly in political ambition and capacity, resulting in uneven levels of mobilization across municipalities. The landscape is further complicated by the involvement of umbrella organizations and origin-country actors, which shape agendas and strategies in ways that do not always align with the priorities of local political institutions (Heitmeyer, Müller, & Schröder, 1997, as cited in BAMF, 2005). Mobilization in Germany is therefore often vibrant but highly segmented.

Integration councils sometimes function as focal points between these diverse associations and municipal institutions. Schiller (2023) demonstrates that councils can act as what she terms 'schools of democracy', providing space in which TCNs develop procedural knowledge, organizational routines, and skills relevant to political participation. However, her study also reveals that participation in council committees is frequently inconsistent, undermining the capacity of these bodies to channel mobilization effectively, and that the mobilizing function of integration councils depends heavily on local institutional design: where councils are systematically embedded in committee structures, they become more effective intermediaries; where they are not, their influence remains symbolically charged but politically marginal.

In Sweden, mobilization follows a different logic, oriented more closely around political parties than around ethnic or cultural associations. Bäck and Soininen (1998) argue that the extension of local voting rights to non-citizens created direct incentives for parties to recruit immigrant candidates and establish relationships with immigrant communities. Party branches became central intermediaries, providing immigrants with structured pathways to representation that do not depend on specialized advisory bodies. Soininen and Qvist (2021) adds on this, showing that in countries with an open political opportunity structure, such as Sweden, party organizations became the primary institutional vehicles for immigrant political integration. Swedish mobilization is thus not primarily identity-based but rather rooted in political and civic organizations that form part of established democratic routines.

These contrasting environments produce significantly different representational outcomes. Germany's dense associational field creates multiple mobilization channels but simultaneously fragments political voice, reducing the coherence with which TCNs interests reach formal political institutions. Sweden's mobilization structures, based on electoral participation and party integration, facilitate more streamlined and politically consequential forms of engagement. Mobilization therefore operates as a moderately favorable yet inconsistent condition in Germany, and as a consistently favorable condition in Sweden. In set-theoretic terms, Germany has partial but uneven membership (0.60) in the set of systems with effective mobilization structures, while Sweden demonstrates more consistent and institutionally embedded membership (0.70).

3.3 Resources and Capacity

Resources and capacity are crucial conditions shaping whether immigrant participation structures can function as more than nominal arrangements. Across the German case, the evidence consistently shows that the resourcing of integration councils and migrant organizations is uneven, contingent, and frequently insufficient for lasting political engagement.

Research on advisory councils already identified significant disparities in municipal support, documenting instances in which councils operate without dedicated staff or financial resources, relying instead on voluntary labor to carry out what are, in organizational terms, demanding mandates. These findings are supported by Kersting (2018), who shows that resource allocation differs systematically across municipalities in ways that reflect local fiscal capacity, administrative priorities, and the degree of political commitment to representational investment. In financially constrained Länder, minimal administrative support creates structural barriers that limit councils to symbolic consultation rather than substantive advisory roles.

More recent research reveals the long-term consequences of these disparities. Schiller (2023) demonstrates that insufficient administrative and logistical support directly constrains councils' ability to participate in municipal committees and working groups. Council members encounter difficulties attending meetings due to scheduling conflicts, the absence of compensation, and inadequate preparation time, obstacles that are structurally less demanding for better-resourced actors within city administrations. These conditions produce an asymmetry in political capacity: although integration councils have formal recognition, their capacity for substantive policy contribution is compromised by the lack of stable institutional support.

The broader organizational context around migrant associations has similar tendencies. Research on migrant self-organizations, such as Diehl and Urbahn (1998), as well as assessments collected in BAMF (2005), reveal persisting inequalities in the resource base of ethnic associations. While certain groups, notably religious organizations and larger umbrella associations, maintain relatively stable financial and institutional foundations, others operate under precarious conditions, lacking the administrative infrastructure necessary for consistent political engagement. This heterogeneity means that political capacity is distributed unevenly across migrant communities, limiting the conditions for broad-based mobilization and coherent political articulation.

The Swedish case presents a structurally different picture. Swedish municipalities provide more uniform and institutionalized support to immigrant-oriented civil-society organizations, embedded within a broader national framework. Karan (2008) shows that the political opportunity structure available to Swedish civil-society organizations is shaped by a corporatist

logic, in which state funding and formal registration requirements channel collective action toward civic inclusion rather than ethnic lines. Bäck and Soininen (1998) confirm that the extension of local voting rights to non-citizens generated direct incentives for political parties to recruit immigrant candidates and establish structured channels of engagement with immigrant communities, normalizing party-based intermediation as the primary pathway to municipal participation. Because participation is framed as an aspect of civic equality rather than a discretionary integration measure, the resourcing of participatory structures tends to be embedded within broader welfare-state mechanisms rather than determined by local political will.

The comparative pattern that emerges across the two cases is one of fragmentation versus institutionalization. In Germany, resource allocation is uneven and heavily contingent on municipal priorities, functioning in configurational terms as a constraining condition that limits the operational effectiveness of otherwise formally recognized bodies. In Sweden, resources are more systematically embedded in institutional routines, ensuring consistent organizational capacity across municipalities and enabling immigrant actors to develop durable participatory infrastructures. This divergence is consequential: it helps explain why formal institutional provisions in Germany do not reliably translate into substantive representational outcomes, whereas Sweden's more resource-secure environment supports more coherent and sustained engagement. In set-theoretic terms, Germany has only partial membership in the set of resource-secure institutional environments (0.50), whereas Sweden approaches near-full membership (0.80), reflecting its more consistently institutionalized resource base.

3.4 State-Civil Society Relations

State-civil society relations shape the relational architecture through which TCNs claims can circulate into local decision-making. In Germany, these relations vary significantly by municipality, reflecting differences in political culture, administrative capacity, and the institutional status of immigrant councils. Kersting (2018) highlights that municipalities differ in their willingness to collaborate with migrant organizations: some cities integrate councils into participatory governance structures, while others engage only symbolically. This variation is closely tied to the discretionary nature of integration policy within Germany's federal system. Where local administrations treat migrant participation as integral to urban governance, cooperation tends to be routine and mutually reinforcing; otherwise, it remains episodic and lacks institutional depth.

Schiller's (2023) comparative study of immigrant councils in Mannheim and Frankfurt provides an empirically grounded account of these dynamics. Her findings reveal that councils' participation in committee work depend heavily on the relational agency of individual

municipal officials rather than on institutional arrangements. In Mannheim, administrative actors deliberately established working groups to strengthen relations between council members and municipal committees. Yet even under these relatively favorable conditions, Schiller finds that immigrant councils face persistent challenges: their ambiguous authority and limited control over decision-making processes lead officials to treat them inconsistently, at times as genuine partners, sometimes as peripheral advisory bodies. This relational ambiguity reflects a broader institutional reluctance toward TCNs participation that is not resolved by formal recognition alone.

Earlier research supports this pattern. Hunger & Candan (2009) showed that advisory councils can influence municipal migration policy, but that their impact is mediated by local political agendas and administrative openness. Municipalities with politically engaged officials and established consultation routines tend to integrate migrant voices more substantively; others maintain formal structures without meaningful engagement. Studies of municipal integration concepts similarly document wide variation in civil-society cooperation across German cities, shaped by local priorities and the density of existing networks.

In Sweden, state–civil society relations are more standardized and consistently institutionalized. Nilsson et al. (2024) documents the systematic involvement of civil-society organizations in municipal processes, noting that Swedish local governments treat these actors as legitimate governance partners rather than as supplementary consultees. Political parties serve as key intermediaries, linking civil society to formal decision-making and ensuring that immigrant interests reach municipal authorities through stable rather than contingent channels. Bäck and Soininen (1998) similarly emphasize that party structures provide sustained pathways for mobilization and articulation, normalizing immigrant engagement as part of established political routines.

These patterns of institutionalized cooperation are grounded in Sweden's civic integration model, which frames political participation as a dimension of equal membership rather than a concession to minority demands. As a result, the relational distance between state and civil society is consistently small, and immigrant actors have predictable rather than discretionary channels for articulation and influence.

The comparative pattern is one of contingency versus institutionalization. In Germany, state–civil society relations remain inconsistent and dependent on local political will, functioning as a partially favorable but uncertain condition for representation. In Sweden, these relations are systematically favorable, embedded in municipal routines and underpinned by a civic conception of political equality. In set theory terms, Germany scores (0.60), reflecting membership above the crossover point but with substantial internal variation, while Sweden's

scores (0.80), indicating consistent and well-institutionalized cooperation between state and civil-society actors.

3.5 Identity and Boundary-Making

Identity and boundary-making processes shape TCNs political representation by influencing how legitimacy, belonging, and political voice are constructed in public discourse and institutional practice. In Germany, research shows that discursive boundaries between citizens and non-citizens have long been embedded in national debates on membership. Diehl and Blohm (2001), in their analysis of ethnic identification, demonstrate that immigrants frequently negotiate dual identities within a discursive environment that continues to frame Germanness partly through descent. This boundary-shaping dynamic carries direct implications for political representation: immigrants may experience political structures as distant or exclusionary, while political gatekeepers may implicitly question the representational legitimacy of immigrant actors.

These dynamics are visible in local political structures. Klopp's (1998) study of Frankfurt shows that even in municipalities with relatively advanced institutional frameworks, question of who legitimately belongs in political processes remains contested. His analysis of administrative behavior and public discourse demonstrates that foreign residents continue to be positioned as external to the political community unless they naturalize, and that even politically active immigrants encounter discursive boundaries that weaken the legitimacy of their participation. Historical patterns in migration policy, including restrictive naturalization rules and judicial decisions limiting local voting rights for non-EU citizens, have reinforced these symbolic divides (Heisler, 2007).

Boundary-making is also visible at the civil-society level. Studies of migrant organizations including Diehl and Urbahn (1998) show that political mobilization is frequently shaped by identity-based cleavages along ideological, religious, and national-origin lines. These cleavages reproduce a segmented understanding of immigrant identity that municipal actors sometimes read as evidence of limited collective legitimacy. As a result, integration councils risk being perceived as representing discrete communities rather than broader political interests, which constrains their influence in institutional settings.

Swedish identity discourses are based on a different foundation. Ericsson (2020) shows that the enfranchisement of denizens was framed explicitly within a broader egalitarian vision of civic equality rather than as a concession to minority demands. Pedroza (2019, p. 176) shows that Sweden's adoption of non-citizen voting rights was grounded in residence-based inclusion, where long-term settlement and everyday participation were considered as sufficient grounds for local political membership. Rather than debating the constitutional "people" (Volksbegriff)

as in the German case (p. 120), Swedish policymakers framed enfranchisement as a natural extension of social membership, grounded in principles of equality, civic integration, and the democratic legitimacy of including all lawful long-term residents in local decision-making. Their justification was based on the concept that belonging is constituted through lived ties and ongoing participation, making denizen enfranchisement a logical democratic reform rather than a constitutional reinterpretation.

Swedish political discourse also rarely makes essentialist distinctions between the national majority and immigrant minorities in discussions of local governance. Odmalm (2005) notes that immigrants are frequently addressed as members of the political community, shaping party strategies and municipal outreach practices accordingly. Even when debates over segregation or multiculturalism arise, the underlying civic framework tends to maintain political recognition rather than producing exclusion.

The comparative pattern is one of symbolic constraint versus discursive inclusion. In Germany, identity and boundary-making function as a constraining condition: symbolic boundaries and historically embedded discourses continue to influence institutional expectations and determine the political legitimacy of immigrant actors. In Sweden, these processes work as supportive condition: discursive inclusion aligns with institutional openness, reducing symbolic distance between immigrant populations and political authorities and reinforcing rather than undermining participatory structures. In set theory terms, Germany scores (0.50), indicating that boundary-making processes more consistently constrain than enable representation; Sweden's score of (0.70) reflects meaningful but not unconditional discursive inclusion.

3.6 Integration Policy Orientation

Integration policy orientation shapes the normative environment within which immigrant political representation becomes possible or constrained. In Germany, integration policy shows significant subnational variation, reflecting the federal distribution of powers. Gesemann and Roth (2016) documents significant differences in municipal integration concepts: some cities adopt comprehensive frameworks that link socioeconomic integration with participatory governance, while others prioritize administrative efficiency or labor market activation. This difference increases at the Länder level, where Kersting (2018) shows that only a subset of states provides institutionalized structures for migrant councils and that, even where such frameworks exist, the degree of political commitment differs significantly. The result is a policy landscape that is neither uniform nor consistently oriented toward inclusive political participation.

Historical legacies further complicate this picture. Schönwälder (2013) demonstrates that despite reforms liberalizing citizenship law, older patterns of restrictive naturalization and legal differentiation continue to influence integration trajectories at the municipal level. This is particularly visible in cities with high proportions of long-term foreign residents who remain disenfranchised, a condition that shapes how integration policies conceptualize political participation itself. Kersting (2018) similarly highlights that although many municipalities have adopted formal integration concepts, the link between these documents and meaningful political inclusion is frequently weak: advisory boards are substituted for electoral participation as a compensatory mechanism rather than treated as a complement to it.

Further local research reveals additional differences between policy intention and practice. Klopp (1998) shows that in Frankfurt, despite the presence of a dedicated Office of Multicultural Affairs, integration policies consistently fall short of granting substantive political rights, instead treating political participation as an outcome of socio-cultural integration rather than as a constitutive pathway toward it. This reflects a broader national pattern in which integration policy emphasizes social cohesion and intercultural dialogue while leaving political opportunity structures for non-citizens largely unchanged.

In Sweden, integration policy has been tied directly and consistently to political inclusion. Bäck and Soininen (1998) documents that the decision to enfranchise non-citizens at the local level was inseparable from Sweden's broader commitment to equality and civic membership, and that political parties internalized this orientation, normalizing immigrant political participation as an integral rather than supplementary dimension of integration policy. Odmalm (2005) adds that Swedish municipalities operationalize integration through civic participation programmes, multilingual voter information, and institutionalized civil-society partnerships, indicating that integration is conceptualized not merely as social incorporation but as active political membership.

This alignment between integration policy and political inclusion is structurally embedded in the Swedish case. Whereas German policy orientation differs between municipal discretion and fragmented Länder-level support, Swedish policy offers a stable and uniform framework grounded in civic equality. Integration policy orientation therefore functions as a partially favorable yet inconsistent condition in Germany, where normative commitments vary considerably across levels of governance, and as a strongly favorable condition in Sweden, where the link between integration and political membership is institutionally secured. In set theory terms, Germany's score of (0.60) reflects majority membership in the set of inclusively oriented policy environments, but with sufficient internal variation to prevent consistent

alignment; Sweden's score of (0.80) reflects a policy orientation that is both stable and structurally embedded.

3.7 Authority and Influence

Authority and influence describe the extent to which immigrant participatory bodies and immigrant actors can shape municipal decision-making. In Germany, research shows that formal authority is limited and unevenly institutionalized. Boos-Niederberger's analysis (as cited in Klopp, 1998) of *Ausländerbeiräte* revealed that these bodies hold only consultative status, lacking binding rights or veto powers. Schiller (2023) confirms that this institutional constraint persists: immigrant councils remain structurally embedded in city administrations yet exercise little direct control over decisions. Their capacity to influence policy outcomes depends heavily on informal relationships, the willingness of municipal leaders to act on their recommendations, and their own organizational continuity. Schiller's interviews with municipal officials document that these bodies are widely acknowledged to occupy an ambiguous role, positioned between symbolic consultation and partial advisory function.

These limitations create a measurable gap between representational aspiration and political influence. Ziller et al. (2025) note that because TCNs cannot vote in municipal elections, integration councils constitute the only institutional channel through which their preferences can be formally expressed. Yet precisely because these bodies lack substantive authority, a representational paradox arises: the population most excluded from electoral participation is directed toward bodies that are structurally ill-equipped to influence policy. Kersting (2018) emphasizes this point, noting that although some municipalities incorporate council representatives into committee structures, such arrangements remain discretionary and frequently symbolic. Integration councils rarely possess agenda-setting power, and their proposals can be set aside without procedural justification.

Several consequences follow from this institutional configuration. First, integration councils must rely on persuasion rather than institutional leverage to influence any policy effect. Second, their influence varies considerably across municipalities, determined more by local political will and administrative culture than by formal institutional design. Third, the lack of meaningful authority discourages participation: immigrants who perceive these bodies as ineffective are less likely to engage, reinforcing the patterns of low electoral turnout documented in Frankfurt and Mannheim (Schiller, 2023). Taken together, these dynamics confirm that limited authority functions as a consistently constraining condition in Germany.

In Sweden, immigrant influence operates through a fundamentally different mechanism. Rather than flowing through specialized participatory bodies, influence is exercised via electoral channels. Non-citizens who have resided in Sweden for three years may vote and stand

as candidates in municipal elections, integrating them directly into mainstream representative processes. Odmalm (2005) shows that political parties respond strategically to this expanded electorate by recruiting immigrant candidates and incorporating immigrant concerns into their policy agendas. Influence is thus exercised through mainstream representative institutions rather than through consultative arrangements that depend on the goodwill of administrative actors.

Pedroza (2019) places this within Sweden's broader civic framework: enfranchisement was designed to ensure that long-term residents, regardless of nationality, could participate meaningfully in shaping local governance. Because political parties depend on immigrant votes, they face structural incentives to remain responsive to immigrant concerns, a form of influence that consultative bodies alone cannot generate. Empirically, this has produced patterns of immigrant representation within party structures, local councils, and civic organizations that are institutionally anchored and electorally significant rather than contingent on informal relations.

Authority and influence therefore operate as a weak and inconsistent condition in Germany, where formal limitations and discretionary municipal practices constrain the capacity of participatory bodies to affect outcomes. In Sweden, they function as a strongly favorable condition, as electoral incorporation ensures that immigrant residents shape decision-making through mainstream political structures rather than through advisory bodies of uncertain standing. In set theory terms, Germany scores (0.40), placing it below the crossover point, indicating a context in which authority is more consistently absent than present; Sweden's score of (0.70) indicates substantial and institutionally grounded influence, though with residual variation across local settings.

3.8 Turnout

Turnout reflects the extent to which immigrants, particularly TCNs participate in local electoral processes, and how these participation levels influence the broader representational environment. The available evidence confirms and strengthens earlier patterns: turnout remains structurally low in Germany's integration-council elections and consistently moderate to high in Sweden's municipal elections among enfranchised non-citizens.

Guasti and Geissel (2021) show that turnout in Germany's integration-council elections remains in the single digits. Frankfurt's *Kommunale Ausländervertretung* (KAV) election recorded 6.0% turnout in 2021, down from 6.2% in 2015 and 7.9% in 1997. Comparable figures from Cologne, Dortmund, and Düsseldorf indicate similarly low participation. No major German city exceeded 10–12% turnout among TCNs in the most recent electoral cycle.

Scholars attribute this pattern to a cumulative interaction of structural conditions rather than to any single factor. TCNs are excluded from municipal elections, which positions integration councils as secondary or symbolic bodies in the eyes of potential participants. Institutional visibility remains limited: Ziller et al. (2025) finds that only 41% of urban residents are aware of integration councils, with awareness lowest precisely among TCNs. Because integration councils do not issue binding decisions, their political salience is weak, reducing the motivational basis for electoral participation. Mobilization is uneven across migrant communities, with organizations possessing stronger internal networks dominating participation while others remain structurally underrepresented. Resource investment in outreach is inconsistent, frequently dependent on voluntary initiative rather than sustained municipal support. These conditions are not independent but mutually reinforcing. Low salience produces low turnout; low turnout weakens the perceived legitimacy of integration councils; weakened legitimacy reduces incentives for parties and administrations to invest in mobilization, which in turn sustains low salience. This feedback dynamic means that turnout in Germany is not only an empirical symptom of disengagement but a structural feature of the participatory environment.

Sweden presents a structurally different pattern. Drawing on the long-term turnout series reported by Soininen and Qvist (2021), participation among non-citizens entitled to vote in municipal elections has fluctuated over time but remains high by comparative European standards. When local voting rights were first introduced in 1976, turnout among non-citizens reached 60%, after which it declined steadily across the following decades to a low of 34.4% in 2014, before recovering modestly to 39% in 2018 (Soininen and Qvist, 2021). This long-term trend shows variation but no structural collapse, and participation continues to remain below the turnout levels of Swedish citizens but comparatively strong in cross-national perspective.

Table 2. Voter turnout in Swedish municipal elections. Total population and non-citizens entitled to vote 1976–2018.

Municipal election	1976	1979	1982	1985	1988	1991	1994	1998	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
Total population	90,4	89,0	89,6	87,8	84,0	84,3	84,4	78,6	77,9	79,4	81,6	82,8	84,0
Non-citizens*	60,0	53,0	52,0	48,0	43,0	41,0	40,0	34,5	34,2	36,7	35,8	34,4	39,0

Source: Soininen and Qvist (2021).

Several interconnected conditions contribute to this level of participation. Electoral inclusion at the municipal level means that non-citizens vote for bodies with genuine political authority rather than advisory functions, creating a substantive incentive to participate. Political parties promote, mobilize, and recruit immigrant residents as both voters and candidates, embedding immigrant participation in mainstream electoral competition. A residence-based

conception of civic membership reduces the psychological distance between immigrant residents and political institutions. Institutionalized state–civil society cooperation supports stable mobilization structures that do not depend on localized initiative or voluntary effort.

Turnout functions as a structurally constraining condition in Germany, where low institutional salience, limited authority, and weak visibility combine to suppress participation and reinforce a cycle of disengagement. In Sweden, it functions as a structurally supportive condition, where electoral incorporation, party mobilization, and civic equality norms ensures consistent and meaningful participation. In set theory terms, Germany scores (0.30), reflecting both persistently low turnout and the negative feedback dynamics it generates; Sweden's score of (0.70) reflects consistently high inclusion and participation levels, with only minor recent variation.

4. Configurational Synthesis

4.1 Calibration and Scoring

Fuzzy-set membership scores were assigned by comparing each case to three qualitative anchors: fully in (0.95), the crossover point of maximum ambiguity (0.50), and fully out (0.05). These anchors were derived from the theoretical literature on immigrant political participation and local governance, ensuring that calibration is theory-driven. Intermediate scores reflect each case's position relative to the crossover: values above (0.50) indicate more membership than non-membership, with higher scores reflecting greater consistency and structural embeddedness; values below (0.50) indicate the opposite. A score of exactly (0.50) indicates that the evidence does not support a conclusion in either direction.

4.2 Truth Table

For the illustrative truth table, fuzzy scores are dichotomized at the crossover point of (0.50). They are dichotomized because the truth table requires crisp memberships (Ragin, 2009), and the crossover rule allows the fuzzy scores to be translated into a present/absent distinction for the purpose of the illustrative table, while preserving the graded qualitative judgement in the thematic analysis itself. Cases scoring above (0.50) are coded 1 (more in than out of the set); cases scoring at or below (0.50) are coded 0 (more out than in of the set).

One aspect of this translation requires explicit comment. Three of Germany's scores, those for institutional openness (C1), resources and capacity (C3), and identity and boundary-making (C5), fall exactly on the 0.50 crossover. This is the point of maximum ambiguity in set-theoretic terms, and in a computed QCA such cases would ordinarily not be assigned to a truth-table row (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). In this present paper, however, the table is used as a communicative tool rather than as a basis for logical minimization, and the three borderline

scores are therefore kept as part of the comparative interpretation. Their significance lies in the fact that they mark precisely those conditions in which the German case remains indeterminate, rather than clearly in or clearly out of the set.

Table 3. Illustrative truth table for the Germany–Sweden comparison

	C1 Institutional Openness	C2 Mobilization Structures	C3 Resources & Capacity	C4 Integration Policy Orientation	C5 Identity & Boundary- Making	C6 State– Civil Society Relations	C7 Authority & Influence	C8 Turnout	Outcome
Germany	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0
Sweden	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

4.3 Cross-Case Synthesis

The table reveals one analytically significant finding: Germany and Sweden share three conditions coded 1, namely mobilization structures (C2), integration policy orientation (C4), and state–civil society relations (C6), however, only Sweden achieves the outcome. This divergence is significant because it shows that partial alignment is not enough when the remaining conditions pull in different directions. In Germany, the three favorable conditions are offset by weaker institutional openness, resources and capacity, authority and influence, and turnout, whereas in Sweden the same favorable conditions are embedded in a broader configuration in which the remaining conditions also support representation.

Germany's four conditions coded (0) do not reflect uniform absence. Rather, the compounding absence of institutional openness (C1), resources and capacity (C3), inclusive identity conditions (C5), and most critically authority and influence (C7) and turnout (C8), prevents the three favorable conditions from translating into meaningful representation. Formally elaborate participatory structures exist, but without the authority to convert presence into influence and without the participatory engagement that would maintain their legitimacy, they remain operationally shallow. The outcome follows accordingly.

Sweden's configuration tells the opposite story. All eight conditions are coded 1, and crucially they are mutually reinforcing: electoral enfranchisement generates party-driven mobilization, which is maintained by institutionalized resources and a civic integration policy, within a discursive environment that reduces symbolic distance and supports consistent turnout. No single condition accounts for the outcome; it is the alignment of the full configuration that produces representational depth.

The comparison ultimately confirms the paper's central argument: representation strengthens when institutional, discursive, and participatory conditions work in the same direction; it weakens when they pull against each other or produce contradictory incentives. Sweden provides a consistent pathway from access to influence: rights generate mobilization,

mobilization generates engagement, and engagement legitimizes and deepens institutional openness. Germany provides partial pathways interrupted by institutional fragmentation, inconsistent municipal practices, and discursive boundaries that limit recognition. The configurational contrast between the two cases confirms that the presence of favorable conditions is insufficient on its own; what determines representational depth is whether those conditions are simultaneously present and mutually reinforcing.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine how different modes of political participation at the local level characterize the representation of third-country nationals, taking Germany and Sweden as a structured comparative pairing. Drawing on Pitkin's typology of representation as interpretive architecture, as well as on configurational thought as its methodological orientation, the analysis argued that political representation is not determined by the presence or absence of any single institutional arrangement, but by the degree to which the conditions shaping it operate in mutual reinforcement. The eight-theme comparative analysis and the set-theoretic synthesis presented in Section 4 confirm this argument empirically.

Sweden's representational environment is coherent: electoral incorporation, established party mobilization, institutionalized civil-society cooperation, discursive inclusion, and consistent resource provision all reinforce one another, resulting in stable and self-sustaining pathways from access to influence. All eight conditions are present and mutually aligned, and the outcome reflects this configurational depth: meaningful political representation across all four Pitkin dimensions is achieved consistently and structurally. Germany, by contrast, has a fragmented environment in which favorable conditions exist but rarely align. Strong mobilization may coincide with limited institutional authority; formal openness may be undermined by resource deficits; and supportive state–civil society relations may be constrained by discursive boundaries that contest the political legitimacy of immigrant actors. Three conditions: authority and influence, turnout, and institutional openness, fall below the crossover threshold and function as blocking conditions, preventing the partially favourable configuration from producing the outcome.

These findings directly address the scholarly debate that motivated the paper. Existing research has documented both the formal development of immigrant participatory structures across European municipalities and the persistent gap between formal access and substantive influence. The configurational analysis developed here helps explain why this gap persists: it is not a product of institutional absence but of institutional misalignment. Where Pitkin's formalistic dimension (legal access) is present without the substantive dimension (genuine

influence over decisions), representation remains symbolic rather than effective. Germany represents this precisely: integration councils provide formal recognition but lack the authority, resources, and discursive legitimacy to convert access into political voice. Sweden represents the alternative, a configuration in which formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive dimensions are simultaneously present and co-constitutive.

Three broader implications follow. First, political rights matter not only as formal entitlements but as structuring forces that shape how municipalities, parties, and civil-society actors engage with immigrant communities. Sweden's enfranchisement of non-citizens generated incentives that resonates across the entire representational environment. Second, the German case demonstrates that institutional proliferation does not automatically produce influence or legitimacy unless supported by adequate resources, clear political authority, and consistent outreach. Formal elaboration without configurational alignment produces access without substance. Third, discursive frameworks play a fundamental rather than contextual role: civic conceptions of membership facilitate representational inclusion, while boundary-laden discourses constrain the legitimacy of immigrant actors even within otherwise supportive institutional arrangements.

The interpretive and configurational design adopted here has its own limitations. With two cases, formal assessment of necessity and sufficiency is not possible, and the findings cannot be generalized beyond the comparative pairing. Intra-national variation, particularly across German municipalities, is only partially captured through the national-level scores. These constraints follow necessarily from the research design and have been addressed through conservative interpretation throughout. They also point toward productive directions for further research: larger-N configurational studies that incorporate municipal-level variation, and analyses that extend the comparison to additional European democracies with different integration models.

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Appendix: Fuzzy-Set Calibration Table

The following table presents the qualitative anchors underlying the illustrative fuzzy-set scores assigned at the close of each thematic subsection. Scores are included for illustrative purposes and reflect interpretive judgement rather than formal measurement

Theme	Concept	Germany	Score	Sweden	Score	Outcome
Institutional Openness	The extent to which political institutions provide accessible, legitimate, and functionally meaningful entry points for immigrant participation	Structurally dense but operationally shallow; councils exist widely but vary considerably in mandate, visibility, and political integration	0.50	Structurally simple but substantively deep; electoral rights guarantee uniform access and create clear incentives for parties to engage immigrant residents	0.80	Partially present in Germany; consistently present in Sweden
Mobilisation Structures	The organisational environments through which immigrants articulate interests collectively and translate them into political engagement	Vibrant but highly segmented; dense associational field fragments political voice across ethnic, religious, and national lines	0.60	Consistently party-based; mobilisation is rooted in political and civic organisations that form part of established democratic routines	0.70	Moderately present in both cases but through structurally different logics
Resources and Capacity	The extent to which immigrant participation structures are adequately resourced to function as more than nominal arrangements	Uneven and heavily contingent on municipal priorities; structural barriers limit councils to symbolic consultation	0.50	More systematically embedded in institutional routines; consistent organisational capacity across municipalities	0.80	Absent in Germany; consistently present in Sweden

State–Civil Society Relations	The relational architecture through which immigrant claims can circulate into local decision-making	Inconsistent and dependent on local political will; cooperation is episodic and lacks institutional depth	0.60	Standardised and consistently institutionalised; civil-society actors treated as legitimate governance partners	0.80	Partially present in Germany; consistently present in Sweden
Identity and Boundary-Making	How legitimacy, belonging, and political voice are constructed in public discourse and institutional practice	Constraining; symbolic boundaries and historically embedded discourses continue to shape institutional expectations and political legitimacy	0.50	Supportive; discursive inclusion aligns with institutional openness, reducing symbolic distance between immigrants and political authorities	0.70	Absent in Germany; present in Sweden
Integration Policy Orientation	The normative environment within which immigrant political representation becomes possible or constrained	Partially favourable but inconsistent; normative commitments vary considerably across levels of governance	0.60	Strongly favourable; the link between integration and political membership is institutionally secured and structurally embedded	0.80	Partially present in Germany; consistently present in Sweden
Authority and Influence	The extent to which immigrant participatory bodies can meaningfully shape municipal decision-making	Weak and inconsistent; formal limitations and discretionary practices constrain capacity to affect outcomes	0.40	Strongly favourable; electoral incorporation ensures influence through mainstream political structures	0.70	Absent in Germany; present in Sweden
Turnout	The extent to which immigrants participate in local electoral processes and how this shapes the broader representational environment	Structurally constrained; persistently low turnout and negative feedback dynamics limiting representational salience	0.30	Consistently high inclusion and participation among enfranchised non-citizens, with only minor recent variation	0.70	Absent in Germany; present in Sweden