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The Participation Paradox: Immigrants' Civic and Political Engagement and Majority Attitudes in Slovenia

Abstract

This article examines the participation paradox in Slovenia through three dimensions: the legal-political framework, immigrants' civic and political participation, and majority attitudes. While civic rights are guaranteed to all residents, political rights remain stratified by citizenship and residence status, with full participation tied to naturalization. Survey results (N = 1,303) show that immigrants without Slovenian citizenship report lower civic membership and political participation than Slovenian citizens, even when eligible, while naturalized immigrants display higher engagement. Majority respondents accept immigrants' civic involvement but oppose their electoral rights. The participation paradox thus stems from institutional restrictions, behavioural differences, and public scepticism.

Keywords

participation paradox, immigrants, civic participation, political participation, citizenship, majority attitudes, Slovenia

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1. Introduction

Integration is a multidimensional process that extends beyond the economic and social spheres to encompass cultural, civic, and political dimensions. While economic integration concerns access to the labour market and social protection, and cultural integration involves language acquisition and social interaction, civic and political integration address migrants' opportunities to participate in civic life, exercise rights, and influence decision-making. These dimensions are interconnected: without civic and political voice, economic and social integration may remain incomplete, and without basic social security, civic and political participation is often hindered.

A central concept in this debate is the participation paradox (cf. Klarenbeek & Weide 2020). Immigrants are increasingly expected to demonstrate active citizenship and integration through participation in public life, yet at the same time, their opportunities for full political inclusion remain restricted. States often encourage civic involvement while limiting access to core political rights such as voting, candidacy, or party membership. This tension creates a paradox in which expectations of participation exceed the rights and opportunities available to immigrants. This paradox reflects broader tensions in theories of democratic inclusion: while scholars argue for the gradual extension of rights (Dahl 1989; Carens 2013; Bauböck 2005), citizenship remains the crucial threshold for full participation in most democracies (Earnest 2008). However, inclusion depends not only on legal frameworks but also on institutional infrastructures that provide bridges into political life (Bloemraad 2006) and on majority attitudes shaped by intergroup contact and perceived threat (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Verkuyten 2018). These structural, institutional, and societal dimensions jointly constitute the participation paradox.

Slovenia provides a particularly relevant case for examining this paradox. As a relatively new immigration country, its migration history was shaped predominantly by flows from the successor states of the former Yugoslavia. More recently, however, it has been increasingly influenced by intra-EU mobility and arrivals from other regions. While culturally and linguistically proximate groups from the Western Balkans might be expected to integrate more easily, and EU citizens benefit from specific supranational rights, the restrictive legal framework ties full political rights strictly to naturalization. The result is a stratified system of inclusion in which differences between EU and non-EU immigrants become particularly salient, producing structural imbalances and raising questions about the scope and depth of immigrant participation.

This article explores the participation paradox in Slovenia across three interrelated dimensions. First, it examines the legal and institutional opportunities for immigrant participation, focusing on the hierarchy of voting and candidacy rights, party membership, and consultative bodies. Second, it analyses the actual patterns of immigrant civic and political participation, highlighting the gap between formal opportunities and real engagement. Third, it investigates the attitudes of the majority population toward immigrant participation, showing how public perceptions reinforce or mitigate institutional and behavioural barriers.

The article addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the legal and institutional opportunities for immigrant civic and political participation?
2. What are the actual patterns of immigrant civic and political participation?
3. What are the attitudes of the majority population toward immigrant civic and political participation?

By answering these questions, the article aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the participation paradox and its implications for immigrant integration and democratic inclusion in Slovenia.

2. Theoretical Framework

To better understand the participation paradox in Slovenia, it is necessary to situate the analysis within broader theoretical approaches to immigrant political incorporation and majority–minority relations.

The concept of the participation paradox (Klarenbeek & Weide 2020) highlights the tension between the encouragement of immigrant integration and the simultaneous fear of immigrants' political influence. Migrants are expected to demonstrate civic engagement and loyalty to the host society, yet legal frameworks and political discourse often restrict their access to meaningful participation. This paradox provides a central lens for analysing immigrant incorporation in Slovenia.

Theories of democratic inclusion and stratification further illuminate these dynamics. Rather than treating political incorporation as binary, this literature conceives of democracy as a layered process in which different status groups enjoy differentiated access to rights (Dahl 1989; Earnest 2008). The long-term exclusion of resident non-citizens is viewed as problematic for democratic legitimacy (Carens 2013), while proposals for “expansive citizenship” argue for loosening the tight coup-

ling between national membership and political rights (Bauböck 2005). Taken together, these perspectives support viewing the Slovenian regime as a stratified system in which citizenship remains the crucial threshold for full inclusion.

Complementing these approaches, Bloemraad (2006) emphasizes the link between citizenship and the incorporation of immigrants into institutions and political processes, introducing the concept of institutional completeness to describe how inclusive institutions can foster immigrants' engagement and belonging. Her work highlights how organizational infrastructures such as political parties, trade unions, and community organizations provide crucial bridges into political life; where such infrastructures are weak or inaccessible, participation is likely to remain low even when formal rights exist. This perspective is particularly useful for examining how legal and political institutions in Slovenia condition immigrants' capacity to participate.

At the societal level, theories of intergroup relations help explain the attitudes of the majority populations. Intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006) suggests that meaningful contact between groups can reduce prejudice under certain conditions (e.g., equal status, cooperation, institutional support). However, when these conditions are absent, contact may reinforce stereotypes and tensions (Durrheim & Dixon 2005).

The threatened majority or threatened dominance theory (Verkuyten 2018) emphasizes how demographic change and the perception of cultural or political threat can provoke resistance among majority populations. Even relatively small immigrant groups can trigger anxieties about the erosion of majority dominance, which in turn shapes public attitudes toward their political participation. By contrast, Kende and colleagues (2024) find that greater political engagement of immigrants can correlate with more positive majority attitudes and a reduced sense of threat. This suggests the possibility of a positive spiral, whereby active immigrant participation gradually improves intergroup relations, though only under certain conditions (e.g., access to local elections and civil society organizations). From a normative perspective, these perceptions raise questions about how far majority claims to maintain dominance can legitimately constrain the democratic voice of long-term residents, a tension that our data illuminate but cannot fully resolve.

Finally, research on public opinion and political opportunity structures (Just & Anderson 2014; OSCE/ODIHR 2017) demonstrates how institutional frameworks and discourse shape both the opportunities for immigrant political involvement and the public's willingness to accept

it. Restrictive opportunity structures often go hand in hand with more negative public attitudes, producing feedback loops that reinforce exclusion.

In short, these theoretical perspectives illuminate the structural, behavioural, and symbolic dimensions of immigrant participation and majority responses. They provide the foundation for our analysis of the Slovenian legal and institutional context, the actual participation of immigrants, and the attitudes of the majority population, all of which jointly constitute the participation paradox.

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3. Legal-Political Framework in Slovenia

Immigrant participation is primarily structured by the legal and institutional framework that specifies the allocation of rights and the conditions under which they can be exercised. In Slovenia, immigrants formally have the same opportunities for civic participation as the majority population, yet significant differences emerge in the domain of political participation. The regulation of political rights creates a distinct hierarchy based on citizenship status and length of residence, reflecting broader theoretical accounts of democratic inclusion and stratification.

3.1 Hierarchy of Civic and Political Rights

To present the Slovenian framework more clearly, we distinguish between civic and political rights. Civic rights, a concept increasingly used in the literature on civic integration (Goodman 2014), refer to opportunities for engagement in civil society and community life, such as participation in associations, trade unions, and cultural or religious organizations. Immigrants in Slovenia, regardless of their citizenship status, are afforded the same formal conditions for civic participation as the majority population. The situation differs significantly in the domain of political rights, which include voting and candidacy in local, national, and European elections, party membership, and petition and referendum rights. Here, access is strictly stratified: third-country nationals (TCNs) with permanent residence may vote in local elections but cannot stand as candidates, while EU citizens with permanent or temporary residence may both vote and run for local office, with the important restriction that the office of mayor remains reserved for Slovenian citizens. However, the political rights of EU citizens in Slovenia expanded gradually through successive amendments to the Local Elections Act. These changes were initially driven by the harmonization of domestic legisla-

tion with EU requirements prior to Slovenia's accession to the Union, and later by the implementation of EU electoral provisions. In 2002, EU citizens with permanent residence were granted the right to vote in local elections (Local Elections Act-D). Three years later, the right of EU citizens to stand as candidates was introduced (Local Elections Act-E). Finally, in 2012 (Local Elections Act-I), these rights were extended to EU citizens with temporary residence, establishing the current framework of active and passive voting rights at the local level. Full political rights, particularly at the national level, remain strictly tied to Slovenian citizenship.

Similar hierarchies of political rights are found across Europe. While EU citizens' rights to vote and stand as candidates in local and European elections are mandated by EU law (TFEU 2016, Art. 20 and 22; Council Directive 94/80/EC, 1994), voting rights for TCNs remain entirely within national competence (Groenendijk 2014). Slovenia's decision to grant local voting rights to TCNs with permanent residence, introduced by the Local Elections Act in 2002 (Local Elections Act-D), thus reflects a national policy choice rather than an EU obligation. Comparable arrangements exist in a few other member states, such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Sweden, whereas most others continue to restrict local voting rights to their own nationals or EU residents (Delpero 2022).

The Slovenian legal framework thus establishes a clear hierarchy of rights based on citizenship status and length of residence. This hierarchy represents the structural basis of the participation paradox, as it creates a tiered system of inclusion in which full political participation can only be achieved through naturalization. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of key civic and political rights in Slovenia by citizenship and residence status.

As shown by Table 1, full political rights are accessible only to Slovenian citizens. EU citizens with permanent or temporary residence enjoy a comparatively broader set of local political rights than TCNs, as they may both vote and stand as candidates in local elections. Their rights nonetheless remain significantly narrower than those of Slovenian citizens. In particular, EU residents are excluded from participation in national referenda and national elections. TCNs with permanent residence have only the right to vote in local elections,¹ while immigrants from third countries with temporary residence remain largely excluded from political participation.

Table 1: Matrix of key civic and political rights by residence status in Slovenia

Status	Participation in societies	Trade unions	Referendum		Petition	Local elections		National elections		European elections		Party membership
			Local level	National level		Voting	Candidacy	Voting	Candidacy	Voting	Candidacy	
Slovenian citizens	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
EU citizens (permanent and temporary residence)	✓	✓	✓	X	X*	✓	✓**	X	X	✓	✓	✓
TCNs (permanent residence)	✓	✓	✓	X	X*	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X***
TCNs (temporary residence)	✓	✓	X	X	X*	X	X	X	X	X	X	X***

Sources: Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia (1991); Associations Act (2011); Referendum and People's Initiative Act (2007); Local Elections Act (2007); President of the Republic Election Act (1992; 2003); National Assembly Election Act (2006); National Council Act (2005); Election of Members of the European Parliament from the Republic of Slovenia Act (2004); Political Parties Act (2005).

* Any citizen of the EU and any natural or legal person residing or having its registered office in a Member State has the right to petition the European Parliament (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union 2012).

** Cannot serve as mayor.

*** Foreign citizens may become honorary members of a political party if the party's statute so provides.

Critical thresholds in the rights hierarchy appear at three points: first, in the shift from temporary to permanent residence for TCNs; second, in the gap between TCNs with permanent residence and EU citizens with residence in Slovenia, as the latter enjoy broader local political rights; and finally, at naturalization, which represents the most substantial leap, granting access to the full set of political rights.

The patterns highlighted in Table 1 reflect what Dahl (1989) described as the gradual extension of democratic inclusion, where access to participation expands step by step but remains stratified. Bauböck's (2005) idea of expansive citizenship (namely, decoupling rights from

strict territoriality and membership) is only partially reflected, since Slovenian law maintains strong distinctions between citizens, EU residents, and TCNs. Earnest's (2008) spectrum of rights is likewise evident in the Slovenian case, as political rights incrementally increase with status, culminating in naturalization as the decisive threshold for full participation.

Slovenia's requirement of ten years of residence for ordinary naturalization places it at the stricter end of the EU spectrum (Yavçan & Gorgerino 2025). Recent European developments, however, illustrate diverging trajectories: while some countries, such as Germany, have shortened residence requirements in order to expand access, others, like Portugal, have moved toward more restrictive rules (Federal Ministry of the Interior 2024; Goncalves 2025). These contrasting reforms demonstrate that access to nationality and political participation does not follow a uniform path but evolves unevenly across member states. Although Slovenia remains restrictive in terms of the naturalization pathway, its recognition of local voting rights for TCNs with permanent residence situates it above a number of EU countries that provide no such rights (Yilmaz & Wolffhardt 2024). Such stratified configurations of rights, with more generous local rights for EU citizens than for TCNs and strict citizenship requirements for national elections, are broadly consistent with patterns observed in other European countries, including long-standing immigration destinations such as the Netherlands (Yilmaz & Wolffhardt 2024).

3.2 Party Membership and Consultative Bodies

Beyond voting rights, other institutional arenas of participation are equally restrictive. The Political Parties Act stipulates that only citizens of Slovenia and other EU member states may establish or formally join political parties. TCNs may be admitted merely as honorary members if permitted by party statutes (Political Parties Act 2005). This exclusion from core political organizations reinforces the dependency of TCNs' political participation on naturalization.

At the same time, Slovenia has created consultative bodies intended to channel immigrant voices. The Council for the Integration of Foreigners was established in 2008 and later replaced by the Council for the Inclusion of Foreigners, which since 2015 has included three representatives of immigrant communities (from the former Yugoslavia excluding Croatia, from EU countries, and from third countries). In 2022 the Council was moved under the Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants, and a representative of an NGO was added. In

parallel, the Council of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for Issues of National Communities of the Former SFRY² in the Republic of Slovenia, established in 2011 under the Ministry of Culture, addresses cultural, linguistic, and media rights of Albanian, Bosniak, Montenegrin, Croatian, Macedonian, and Serbian communities. It is composed of representatives of the competent government ministries and one representative of each of the above-mentioned communities (Portal GOV.SI, n. d.). The adoption of the Act on the Implementation of Cultural Rights of Members of National Communities of the Nations of the Former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 2024 transformed this government council into a permanent consultative body under the Ministry of Culture. More recently, the Strategy for the Integration of Foreigners who are not Citizens of the European Union into the Cultural, Economic and Social Life of the Republic of Slovenia (Ministry of the Interior 2023) introduced yet another layer of consultative mechanisms for immigrants by providing for the establishment of municipal councils for foreigners at the local level.

Despite these institutional arrangements, most consultative bodies remain symbolic rather than effective, with limited activity and little actual influence on policymaking (Mirovni inštitut 2020; Solano & Hudleston 2020). This resonates with Bloemraad's (2006) emphasis on institutional completeness, showing that the mere existence of institutions is insufficient if they lack power and functionality.

4. Data and Methodology

This study draws on an original survey (Medvešek et al. 2024) conducted among adult residents of Slovenia (18+) using the Central Population Register as the sampling frame. We employed systematic random sampling to select a probability sample of $n = 2,500$ individuals. Because immigrants are typically underrepresented in general population surveys, we supplemented the core sample with an onomastic boost sample: an additional $n = 7,000$ adults were randomly drawn from the register and screened via an onomastic procedure (lists of first and last names common in the main countries of origin, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia) to identify likely foreign-born residents (Reichel & Morales 2017; Prandner & Weichbold 2019). This yielded an onomastic subsample of $n = 1,682$. We adopted this approach because, even for research purposes, the register cannot be queried by country of birth or citizenship.

Table 2: Sample representativeness: comparison with Eurostat population data for adults (18+)

	Survey on Immigrant Integration through Civil Society and Political Participation (born in Slovenia, 2022/2023)		Survey on Immigrant Integration through Civil Society and Political Participation (foreign-born, 2022/2023)		Eurostat (born in Slovenia, 2021)		Eurostat (foreign-born population, 2021)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender								
Male	399	40.9	156	47.7	706,117	48.3	161,132	59.0
Female	577	59.1	171	52.3	755,694	51.7	111,824	41.0
Total	976	100	327	100	1,461,811	100	272,956	100
Age								
18–30	165	16.9	57	17.4	235,382	16.1	43,334	15.9
31–45	255	26.1	97	29.7	376,664	25.7	75,799	27.8
46–60	293	30.1	88	26.9	375,894	25.7	76,834	28.1
61 and more	263	27.0	85	26.0	473,871	32.4	76,989	28.2
Total	976	100	327	100	1,461,811	100	272,956	100
Education								
Primary	65	6.7	39	11.9	–	10.8	–	21.9
Secondary	490	50.2	181	55.4	–	53.2	–	57.9
Tertiary	398	40.8	99	30.3	–	36.1	–	20.2
No answer	23	2.4	8	2.4	–	–	–	–
Total	976	100	327	100	–	100	–	100
Citizenship								
Slovenian	946	96.7	155	47.4	–	–	–	–
Foreign	6	0.6	155	47.4	–	–	–	–
No answer	24	2.5	17	5.2	–	–	–	–
Total	976	100	327	100	–	–	–	–

Sources: Eurostat (2023a; 2023b); Medvešek et al. (2023).

Fieldwork ran from October 2022 to January 2023, producing 1,303 valid interviews: 976 respondents born in Slovenia and 327 immigrants. Sample composition and key sociodemographic distributions compared to Eurostat population benchmarks are reported in Table 2. A comparison with Eurostat population structure data indicates that, in the probability subsample (excluding the onomastic boost), immigrants account for approximately 13% immigrants, close to the national estimate of 15%, and that its demographic profile broadly aligns with population benchmarks, with the familiar small bias toward higher education levels typical of surveys (Eurostat 2023a; 2023b; Medvešek et al. 2023). Structural deviations in the combined dataset (probability + onomastic) reflect the deliberate oversample of immigrants.

5. Patterns of Immigrant Participation in Slovenia

While the legal framework defines formal opportunities, actual participation depends on whether immigrants make use of these rights and whether structural and symbolic barriers restrict their engagement. Examining civic and political participation thus reveals the extent to which legal opportunities translate into practice.

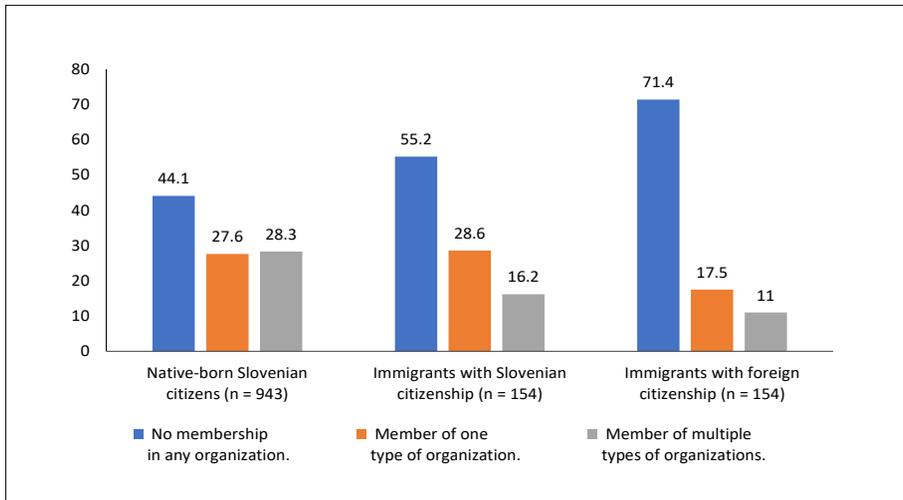
5.1 Civic Participation

We measured civic engagement across a wide range of organizations, focusing on two dimensions: membership (formal affiliation) and active participation (involvement in organizational activities). Activity is analysed in two ways: (a) overall activity (which may occur with or without formal membership) and (b) activity among members only. The organizations included trade unions, professional associations, charitable and humanitarian groups, environmental organizations, animal-rights and peace organizations, sports and recreation clubs, educational, art, music and cultural associations, volunteer fire brigades, faith-related organizations, and other organizations.

To disentangle immigrant status from citizenship and minimize confounding, we employ an immigrant–citizenship typology distinguishing (a) native-born Slovenian citizens, (b) immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, and (c) immigrants with foreign citizenship. We report findings at two levels: first, overall patterns across all respondents (Charts 1 and 2), and second, a two-stage analysis that separates entry into organizations from activation within them (Charts 3 and 4).

The intensity of organizational membership, categorized into three levels (no membership, single membership, multiple memberships), varies significantly by immigrant–citizenship status. A chi-square test of independence revealed statistically significant differences, $\chi^2(4) = 48.10$, $p < .001$, with a Cramér's V of 0.139 indicating a small association. Immigrants with foreign citizenship are more likely to report no membership compared to naturalized immigrants and native-born Slovenian citizens, reflecting lower engagement in civil society organizations. This pattern underscores the influence of citizenship status on the extent of organizational involvement, with foreign citizens exhibiting the least intensive participation.

Chart 1: Membership in civil society organizations by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,251 (in %)



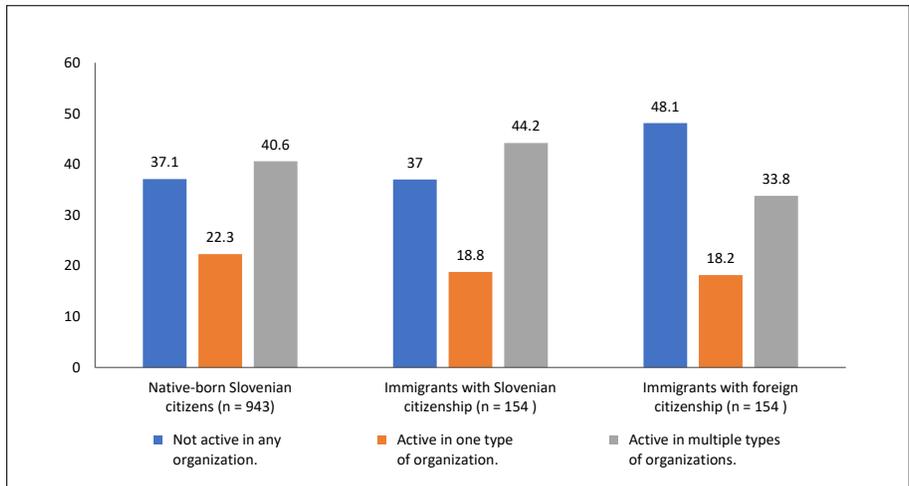
Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

The analysis of activity intensity, categorized into three levels (not active in any organization, active in one type of organization, active in multiple types of organizations), shows no statistically significant differences between groups by immigrant–citizenship status ($\chi^2(4) = 7.99$, $p = .092$; Cramer's V = 0.057) (see Chart 2). Given the very small association, the observed group differences are unlikely to be of practical importance.

However, these aggregates mix members and non-members and cannot address whether immigrant members are less active than native members. Using a two-stage approach that (a) first examines entry (any membership) and then (b) assesses activity among members only, we find a clear entry gap but no activation gap. Membership differs sub-

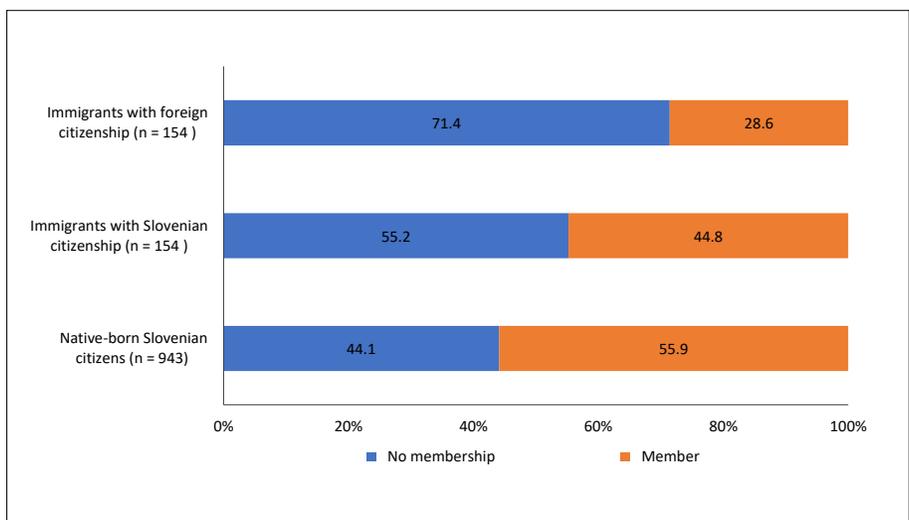
stantially across immigrant–citizenship groups ($\chi^2(2) = 42.364, p < .001$, Cramér’s $V = 0.184$): only 28.6% of immigrants with foreign citizenship report any membership, compared with 44.8% among naturalized immigrants and 55.9% among native-born citizens.

Chart 2: Activity in civil society organizations by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,251 (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

Chart 3: Membership (Yes/No) in civil society organizations by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,251 (in %)

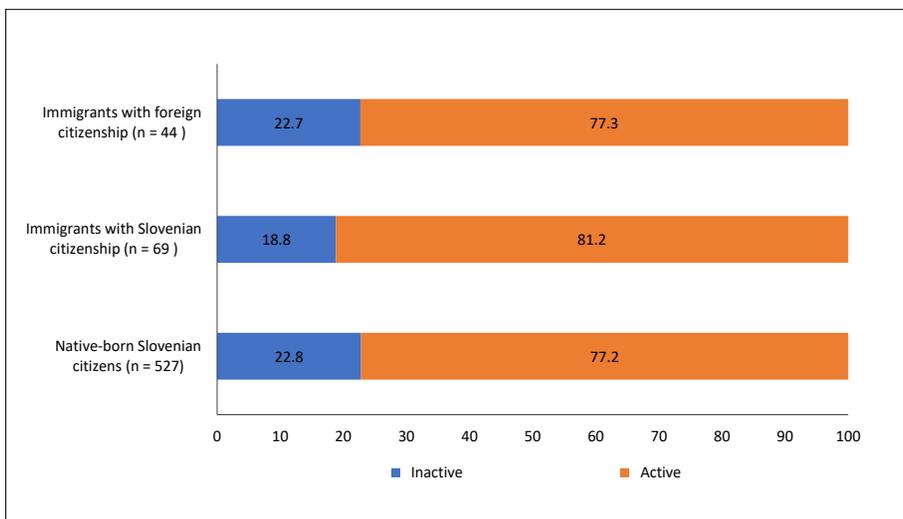


Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

By contrast, when we focus only on those who are members, levels of activity are broadly similar across groups (Chart 4). Among members, 81.2% of naturalized immigrants, 77.3% of immigrants with foreign citizenship, and 77.2% of native-born citizens report being active in their organizations, with no statistically significant differences ($\chi^2(2) = 0.547$, $p = .761$, Cramér's $V = 0.029$).

These results indicate that the main barrier for immigrants lies at the point of entry into civil society organizations, rather than in their level of activity once membership is achieved. In other words, immigrants are less likely to become members, but once inside, they participate just as actively as natives. Several mechanisms may underlie this entry gap. From an institutional-completeness perspective (Bloemraad 2006), limited outreach by parties, unions, and associations towards immigrant communities, combined with a lack of bridging organizations, can leave immigrants outside core civic networks. Qualitative research in other contexts also points to perceived discrimination, uncertainty about fitting in, and limited information about opportunities as factors that reduce the likelihood of joining organizations, even where formal access is open (Just & Anderson 2014). Our data do not allow us to identify these mechanisms directly, but the pattern is consistent with a situation in which immigrants face barriers to entry rather than a lack of willingness to engage once they are included.

Chart 4: Activity in civil society organizations among members by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 640 (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

5.2 Electoral Participation

Electoral turnout constitutes a key indicator of political participation, yet it is strongly shaped by structural factors, particularly voting eligibility and citizenship status. The aim of this analysis is twofold: first, to examine how estimated turnout levels change when restricting the analysis to eligible voters; and second, to identify differences across three status groups – immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, immigrants with foreign citizenship, and Slovenia-born citizens.

The analysis relies on survey data covering participation in local, national, and European elections. Eligibility to vote is treated as an analytic proxy, defined as respondents aged 18+ at the time of each election who did not self-report “I have no voting right,” and therefore indicating perceived formal access to electoral participation. This allows a closer assessment of participation within the population that reports formal access to elections. Other legal conditions (e.g., citizenship/EU status, electoral-roll registration) were not coded and therefore do not define eligibility here; they are used only for stratification by citizenship status. All measures are based on self-reports.³

Electoral participation is measured using two complementary indices:

1. Overall self-reported electoral participation: A binary indicator coded 1 if the respondent reported voting in at least one of the three elections (local, national, or European), and 0 otherwise, regardless of eligibility (responses indicating “I have no voting right” are coded as 0). If all three election items are missing, the indicator is coded as missing.
2. Self-reported electoral participation among eligibles: The same indicator, calculated only for those eligible (18+ at the time of the elections; respondents answering “I have no voting right” are excluded). Ineligible respondents are coded as missing values.

This distinction enables a comparison of self-reported electoral participation patterns within the eligible population and disentangles the effects of institutional restrictions from behavioural differences. European elections were included in the analysis as a critical test case of dual exclusion: institutional (asymmetric eligibility, especially for TCNs) and behavioural (lower perceived salience, weaker local mobilization). This approach allows us to differentiate between legally conditioned restrictions on access and actual behavioural differences in participation among eligibles, thereby avoiding inflated differences.

Overall self-reported electoral participation captures the aggregate, rights-dependent level of participation, while self-reported electoral

participation among eligibles identifies behavioural differences among those formally entitled to vote. This comparison separates institutional exclusion (ineligibility) from actual voting behaviour among eligibles.

In this analysis, eligibility is understood as meeting the legal conditions for participation in a specific election. This is not necessarily identical to citizenship, as eligibility is determined by electoral law and administrative rules (age, permanent residence, registration on the electoral roll, and depending on the type of election, EU/non-EU citizenship). For example, foreign citizens with permanent residence may also be eligible to vote in local elections, whereas elections at the national level are restricted to Slovenian citizens. Turnout gaps in European elections thus stem from two distinct sources: eligibility rules that exclude more foreign citizens (institutional), and behavioural/mobilizational differences among those eligible (e.g., information, language, networks). If turnout gaps persist even after restricting the analysis to eligibles, this reinforces the conclusion regarding the participation paradox: differences are not merely artefacts of legal barriers, but reflect structural behavioural and mobilizational factors among those with formal voting rights. These may include weaker party outreach, lower levels of political efficacy, language barriers, informational gaps about electoral rules, and concerns about the consequences of visible political engagement for one's treatment by authorities (Bloemraad 2006; Just & Anderson 2014).

Given these eligibility gaps, we next examine turnout among self-reported eligibles. Of the 1,303 respondents, eligibility data were available for 1,300 (3 missing). Of these, 1,241 reported being eligible for at least one election (95.5%), and 59 were ineligible (4.5%). Of the self-reported eligible respondents, 1,199 fall into one of the three immigrant–citizenship status groups, while 42 have missing status. Self-reported eligibility varies sharply by immigrant–citizenship status: among immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, 99.4% reported eligibility (154 out of 155); among immigrants with foreign citizenship, 69.0% reported eligibility (107 out of 155); and among Slovenia-born citizens, 99.4% reported eligibility (938 out of 944). The association between status of citizenship and self-reported eligibility is strong and statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 297.998$, $p < .001$; Cramér's $V = 0.487$).⁴

Patterns are similar in the full sample, but they become clearer once we restrict the analysis to eligibles. Overall self-reported electoral participation was 85.4%. Among respondents eligible for at least one election, self-reported electoral participation was 88.8%, which is an increase of 3.4 percentage points relative to the overall measure (see Table 3). By immigrant–citizenship status, the shift is minimal for Slove-

nia-born citizens, from 94.0% to 94.3%, and for immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, from 88.3% to 88.3%, but sizable for immigrants with foreign citizenship, from 29.4% to 42.1%, underscoring the compositional impact of ineligibility in this group.

Without the eligibility filter, the association between citizenship status and participation is very strong: $\chi^2(2) = 440.063$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.593$. Among eligibles, the association remains strong: $\chi^2(2) = 266.379$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.471$, showing that the participation gap persists even when restricting to eligible respondents.

Table 3: Overall self-reported electoral participation and self-reported electoral participation among eligibles by status of citizenship

Status of citizenship	Overall self-reported electoral participation (%)	Voted / total (overall)	Self-reported electoral participation among eligibles (%)	Voted / total (eligibles)
Slovenia-born citizens	94.0	886 / 943	94.3	885 / 938
Immigrants with Slovenian citizenship	88.3	136 / 154	88.3	136 / 154
Immigrants with foreign citizenship	29.4	45 / 153	42.1	45 / 107
Total	85.4	1,067 / 1,250	88.8	1,066 / 1,199

Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

Note: Overall = self-reported electoral participation in at least one of three elections (local, national, European); ineligible respondents coded as non-voters. Eligibles = same indicator restricted to respondents eligible for at least one election (18+ at election time; those reporting "no voting right" excluded). Missing answers are excluded from denominators. Totals exclude cases with missing citizenship status. For national elections, only Slovenian citizens are legally eligible. The immigrant foreign citizen subgroup includes 11 self-reports; we show the value for completeness but do not use this cell for substantive interpretation or between-group comparisons.

We next disaggregate turnout by election type among self-reported eligibles.

Local elections: Self-reported electoral participation among eligibles was 86.6% (1,025 out of 1,183). By status: Slovenia-born citizens 91.7% (855 out of 932), immigrants with Slovenian citizenship 87.2% (129 out of 148), immigrants with foreign citizenship 39.8% (41 out of 103). Differences are significant ($\chi^2(2) = 216.200$, $p < .001$; Cramér's $V = 0.427$).

National elections: Self-reported electoral participation was 88.8% (1,012 out of 1,140). By status: Slovenia-born citizens 93.9% (868 out

of 924), immigrants with Slovenian citizenship 88.1% (133 out of 151), immigrants with foreign citizenship 16.9% (11 out of 65).⁵ Differences are significant ($\chi^2(2) = 361.472$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.563$). Accordingly, we retain the value for completeness but do not use this subgroup estimate for interpretation or between-group comparisons. Omnibus tests are reported as customary, while the narrative focuses on citizen subgroups due to eligibility restrictions.

European elections: Self-reported electoral participation was 66.5% (756 out of 1,136). By status: Slovenia-born citizens 71.1% (648 out of 912), immigrants with Slovenian citizenship 65.1% (97 out of 149), immigrants with foreign citizenship 14.7% (11 out of 75). Differences are significant ($\chi^2(2) = 99.138$, $p < .001$, Cramér's $V = 0.295$).

Participation gaps are substantial across election types, but their interpretation differs by institutional context. Immigrants with foreign citizenship are more often ineligible overall, and among self-reported eligibles they report markedly lower electoral participation than Slovenia-born citizens and immigrants with Slovenian citizenship. For national elections, where citizenship is a legal requirement, we retain the foreign citizen cell for completeness but do not use it for substantive interpretation or between-group comparisons.

In European elections, where some foreign residents (EU citizens) can be legally eligible, the low self-reported participation among eligibles, especially among immigrants with foreign citizenship, indicates that the participation gap is not solely explained by formal eligibility and persists among those who perceive themselves as able to vote. Local elections show a similar pattern: despite plausible legal access for foreign residents, sizeable gaps remain among self-reported eligibles.

These patterns are consistent with influences beyond formal eligibility, such as information access, administrative or registration frictions, language barriers, or weaker mobilization ties, although the data do not identify the mechanisms directly. The second-order nature of European elections may make such inequalities in information and networks more visible among eligible voters.

In interpreting these patterns, it is also important to consider transnational electoral ties. Some immigrants who are eligible to vote in Slovenia may prioritise voting in their country of origin, especially in national elections, or may perceive host-country elections as less salient. While our data do not capture voting behaviour in origin-country elections, this possibility provides an additional lens for understanding why electoral participation among eligible foreign citizens remains low despite the formal extension of certain rights.

For robustness, we repeated the key comparisons excluding European elections. Excluding European elections yields similar results: overall 85.2% (valid N = 1,250), eligibles 89.3% (valid N = 1,191); gaps by status remain large (overall $\chi^2(2) = 454.053$, Cramér's V = 0.603; eligibles $\chi^2(2) = 271.588$, Cramér's V = 0.478).

Results indicate a twofold constraint among immigrants with foreign citizenship: higher rates of ineligibility reduce overall turnout, and a large participation gap persists among eligibles. These patterns are statistically robust across local, national, and European elections, and remain when European elections are excluded. Because eligibility and turnout are self-reported and the foreign-citizen subsample is smaller, we emphasize between-group contrasts rather than absolute levels. Reliance on perceived (self-reported) eligibility implies that some foreign-citizen respondents consider themselves eligible for national elections due to informational or interpretive reasons (e.g., misperceptions of rules or confusion across election types). This is substantively relevant for understanding informational and administrative barriers to participation. The data do not allow us to identify the mechanisms that shape participation beyond formal eligibility.

5.3 Non-electoral Political Participation

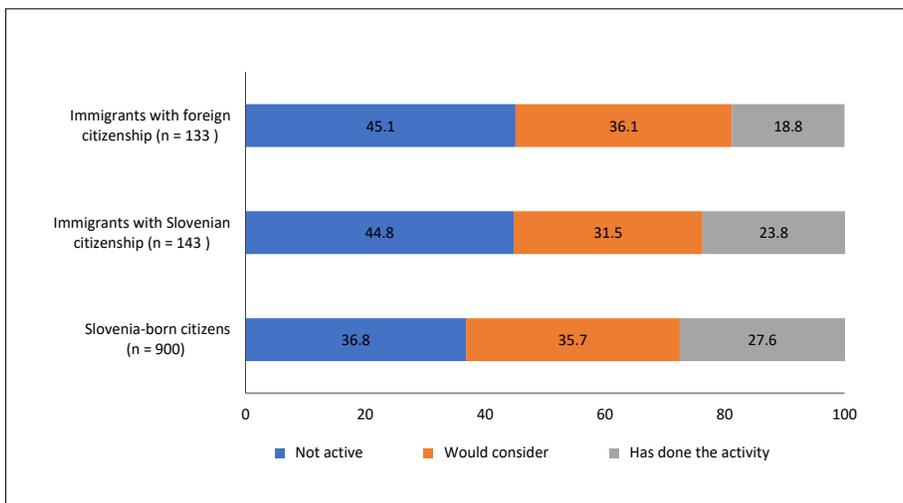
Beyond elections, eligibility is no longer applied. We estimate two complementary indices of political participation – institutional and individual political participation – for the full sample (with “don't know” coded as missing).

Institutional political participation: We measure engagement through formal political channels and organizations using items: attendance at political meetings/rallies, contacting politicians, financial contributions to political activities, and media appearances to express political views, on a 0–2 scale: 2 = has done the activity (in the last 12 months or earlier); 1 = would consider doing it; 0 = no and would never do it. “Don't know” responses are coded as missing. Party membership/engagement is then aligned to the same 0–2 scheme: 2 = both members (active or inactive) and non-members who nevertheless participate, while 0 denotes no membership/participation (the “would consider” level may not apply to this item and can be absent in the data). From these five recoded items, we construct a three-category institutional indicator defined as the maximum across items ($2 > 1 > 0$). We require at least three valid item responses for a non-missing classification. Categories are interpreted as 0 = not active, 1 = would consider (no past action), and 2 = has done (past or last 12 months).

Individual political participation: To capture engagement outside formal channels, we use five items: signing petitions, boycotts/buycotts for political reasons, participation in demonstrations, online political action/expression, and other individual political actions (e.g., persuading others about political issues). Each item is recoded to a 0–2 scale: 2 = has done the activity (in the last 12 months or earlier); 1 = would consider doing it; 0 = no and would never do it. “Don’t know” responses are coded as missing. For analysis, we construct a three-category individual indicator as the maximum across the five recoded items ($2 > 1 > 0$), requiring at least three valid item responses for a non-missing classification. Categories are interpreted as 0 = not active, 1 = would consider (no past action), and 2 = has done (past or last 12 months).

In the domain of institutional political participation, the association across immigrant–citizenship groups is not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 8.023, p = .091, \text{Cramér's } V = 0.058$). Descriptively, the share classified as “has done the activity” is highest among Slovenia-born citizens (27.6%), lower among immigrants with Slovenian citizenship (23.8%), and lowest among immigrants with foreign citizenship (18.8%); conversely, “not active” is more common in the two immigrant groups ($\approx 45\%$) than among Slovenia-born citizens (36.8%) (Chart 5). Differences are small and not significant, but the pattern aligns with weaker institutional engagement among immigrants, especially those with foreign citizenship.

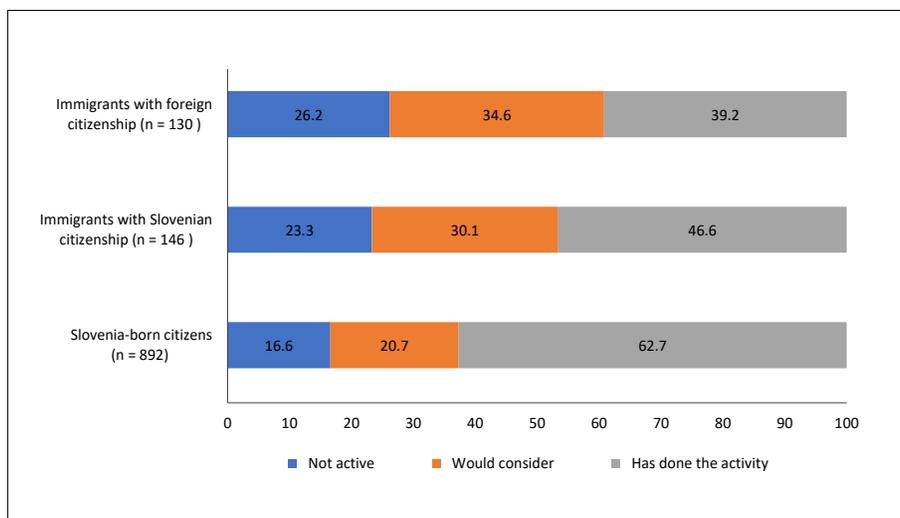
Chart 5: Institutional political participation by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,176 (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

On a three-level indicator of individual participation, distributions differ significantly across immigrant–citizenship groups ($\chi^2(4) = 34.688$, $p < .001$; Cramér’s $V = 0.122$). Immigrants with foreign citizenship are more likely to report no individual participation and less likely to report having done such activities than Slovenia-born citizens, with immigrants holding Slovenian citizenship in between. Descriptively, “has done the activity” is 62.7% among Slovenia-born citizens, 46.6% among immigrants with Slovenian citizenship, and 39.2% among immigrants with foreign citizenship; “not active” is 16.6%, 23.3%, and 26.2%, respectively (Chart 6). Overall effect sizes are small-to-modest, but the pattern is clear.

Chart 6: Individual political participation by immigrant–citizenship status, N valid = 1,168, (in %)



Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

The descriptive pattern is consistent: immigrants with foreign citizenship report lower participation than Slovenia-born citizens, with immigrants holding Slovenian citizenship generally in between. The strength of evidence differs by domain: for the institutional indicator, group differences are not statistically significant; for the individual indicator, they are statistically significant. Gaps are most visible at the active level, while differences in the “would consider” category are smaller. Because measures are self-reported and subgroup sizes differ, we emphasize between-group contrasts rather than absolute levels. Overall, the participation gradient by immigrant–citizenship status persists descriptively in both domains and is statistically supported for individual participation.

6. Majority Attitudes Toward Immigrant Participation

56 Immigrant participation does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped not only by legal frameworks and immigrants' own engagement but also by the perceptions and acceptance of the majority population. Public attitudes toward immigrants thus represent a crucial factor in understanding both the scope and the limits of integration.

In our research, the majority population's attitudes toward immigrant civic and political participation were assessed through questions on various immigrant rights that the majority population would approve or disapprove of. These questions included whether immigrants without Slovenian citizenship but permanently residing in Slovenia should have equal voting or candidacy rights, be allowed to establish state co-funded civil society organizations, participate in state co-funded majority organizations, join political parties, or organize protests. Responses were recorded as "Yes", "No", or "I don't know".

Table 4: Support for immigrant rights among respondents born in Slovenia (N = 610)

"Yes"	Support (%)
Same right to vote as the majority population (permanent residents)	17.1
Same right to stand as candidates in elections as the majority population (permanent residents)	12.8
Possibility to establish their own civil society organizations co-funded by the state	23.4
Possibility to participate in majority organizations (e.g., trade unions) co-funded by the state	34.9
Possibility to join existing political parties	29.5
Possibility to claim their rights through organizing protests	29.8

Source: Medvešek et al. (2024).

The results show a clear hierarchy of support for different types of political and civic rights for immigrants without Slovenian citizenship. The lowest levels of support are observed for electoral rights: approximately 17% support equal voting rights and 13% support equal candidacy rights (Table 4). Higher levels of support are found for rights related to participation through civil society channels: 23% support the establishment of immigrant-led civil society organizations, 35% support partici-

pation in majority organizations, and around 30% support joining political parties or organizing protests. Cochran's Q ($Q = 251.7$, $df = 5$; $p < .001$) rejects the hypothesis of equal proportions, confirming a systematic hierarchy of support: the majority is more willing to legitimize expression and organization, but less so direct political influence through voting and candidacy.

This pattern reveals an important paradox of political participation: the majority population is relatively more accepting of immigrants' social presence (organization, party membership, protests) than of their institutional political power (voting, candidacy).

These findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives discussed earlier. Intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Durheim & Dixon 2005) highlights that positive and equal-status contact is crucial to reducing prejudice. The pattern observed here may suggest that such contact remains limited in Slovenia, which could help explain why majority respondents accept immigrants' presence in civic life but remain resistant to their institutional political influence. From the perspective of threatened majority theories (Verkuyten 2018; Kende et al. 2024), the particularly low support for electoral rights may reflect a perception that expanding immigrants' political rights could undermine the dominant position of the majority population. In addition, as Just and Anderson (2014) argue, public opinion is shaped by political opportunity structures: Slovenia's restrictive institutional framework may both mirror and reinforce sceptical public attitudes, thereby sustaining the participation paradox.

7. Conclusion

This article has explored the participation paradox in Slovenia through three interrelated dimensions: the legal-political framework, the actual patterns of civic and political participation of immigrants, and the attitudes of the majority population. The analysis has shown that while Slovenia guarantees formally equal civic rights to all residents, political rights remain strongly stratified by citizenship and residence status. Full participation is tied to naturalization, positioning citizenship as the decisive threshold for democratic inclusion.

Survey findings confirm that this legal hierarchy translates into unequal outcomes: immigrants, and particularly foreign citizens, show significantly lower levels of membership in civil society organizations and markedly lower voter turnout compared to Slovenian citizens. Even among eligible foreign citizens, participation lags behind, pointing not

only to institutional exclusion but also to behavioural and symbolic barriers. At the same time, naturalized immigrants display higher levels of political engagement than immigrants with foreign citizenship, yet generally remain below Slovenia-born citizens, underlining the centrality of citizenship for effective participation.

Majority attitudes further reinforce the paradox. While there is some acceptance of immigrants' civic involvement, support for their political rights, especially voting and candidacy, remains very limited. This hierarchy of support reflects both intergroup contact theory, which highlights the persistence of prejudice under conditions of low-quality contact, and threatened-dominance theory, which interprets restrictive attitudes as a response to perceived challenges to majority status.

These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of the participation paradox but also underscore the limitations of survey-based research in capturing its full complexity. Reliance on self-reported participation measures, the challenges of onomastic sampling, and the relatively small immigrant subsample constrain the generalizability of results. Moreover, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to link institutional barriers, individual characteristics, and participation outcomes in a causal way.

The policy implications of this research are therefore more nuanced than often suggested in the integration literature. While institutional reforms such as shortening naturalization periods or expanding local voting rights may have theoretical appeal, they face substantial practical obstacles. The results indicate that changes in legal status, particularly naturalization, are associated with significant increases in electoral participation (including among self-reported eligibles), yet other barriers clearly persist. Moreover, implementing such reforms in the face of strong public opposition could backfire by heightening intergroup tensions and reinforcing negative stereotypes about immigrant political influence.

More broadly, our findings raise questions about the democratic status of long-term residents who remain excluded from core political rights. The coexistence of high expectations for integration and persistent resistance to extending electoral rights effectively normalizes a tiered system of voice, in which immigrants are accepted as workers and neighbours but not fully recognized as political co-owners of the polity. Majority opposition to immigrant voting rights reflects perceived threats to political dominance, yet majority preferences alone cannot be the sole arbiter of whose interests deserve representation in a democratic system. If having a say over collectively binding decisions is un-

derstood as a basic dimension of democratic equality, then the participation paradox points to a deeper tension between current citizenship regimes and the ideal of inclusive democracy.

Against this backdrop, a more realistic approach may lie in incremental measures that simultaneously build public support and address the most pressing barriers to participation. These could include strengthening consultative mechanisms, enhancing civic education programs for both immigrants and the majority population, and fostering positive intergroup contact through local-level initiatives. Such measures, while less dramatic than comprehensive legal reform, may prove more sustainable and effective in the long term.

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Notes

- ¹ An exception for them and for EU citizens applies to the election of members of the National Council (*Državni svet*), where foreign citizens may vote under the same conditions as Slovenian citizens if they pursue the relevant professional activity or are employed in Slovenia.
- ² This is an abbreviation for the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.
- ³ This operationalization captures perceived (self-reported) access to voting rights rather than legally verified eligibility. Respondents' understanding of their electoral rights may diverge from formal legal status, particularly for national elections that require Slovenian citizenship. In our data, some foreign-citizen respondents did not report lacking voting rights for national elections. This may reflect misperceptions of eligibility rules, confusion between election levels, or survey response error. We prioritize respondents' own perception of access, as subjective barriers (e.g., lack of information, confusion about eligibility) are substantively relevant to participation.
- ⁴ The foreign-citizen subgroup's self-reported eligibility for national elections (e.g., N = 65 among self-reported eligibles) arises from this operationalization: these respondents did not indicate "no voting right".
- ⁵ Notably, 65 foreign-citizen respondents did not report lacking voting rights for national elections. This is consistent with our use of perceived eligibility and cautions against substantive interpretation of that non-citizen cell.

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Participacijski paradoks: civilnodružbena in politična vključenost priseljencev ter stališča večinskega prebivalstva v Sloveniji

Izvleček

Članek obravnava participacijski paradoks v Sloveniji skozi tri dimenzije: pravno-politični okvir, civilnodružbeno in politično participacijo priseljencev ter odnos večine. Čeprav so civilne pravice zagotovljene vsem prebivalcem, politične pravice ostajajo stratificirane glede na državljanstvo in status prebivanja, polna participacija pa vezana na naturalizacijo. Anketni podatki (N = 1.303) kažejo, da imajo priseljenci brez slovenskega državljanstva nižje stopnje članstva v civilnodružbenih organizacijah in manj politično participirajo kot državljani, tudi kadar imajo volilno pravico, medtem ko naturalizirani izkazujejo večjo angažiranost. Večinsko prebivalstvo sprejema civilnodružbeno vključenost, a nasprotuje volilnim pravicam priseljencev. Participacijski paradoks oblikujejo institucionalne omejitve, vedenjske razlike in skepticizem večine.

Ključne besede

participacijski paradoks, priseljenci, civilnodružbena participacija, politična participacija, državljanstvo, stališča večine, Slovenija