Becoming local: Immigrant candidates in Irish politics

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Abstract

This exploratory article re-examines the findings of a recent study of "new immigrant" candidates in Irish local politics. Drawing specifically on interviews with African political candidates, together with a selective analysis of several of their websites, the article explores the process of becoming local as it is articulated in interviews and signposted in website content. My ambitions here are decidedly limited. Rather than a fine-comb analysis of words and content, this article looks for clues and markers which may help to illuminate this complex process (and which may also suggest avenues of further inquiry). "Localism", understood here as the primacy of the local over other foci of allegiance, permeates the interview discourse of these political actors and largely frames their presentation of self online. While interviewees emphasise the important difference between standing for and being accepted as a local, they also suggest that becoming local is achievable in a way that changing one's ethnic group or escaping from racialisation is not. The article concludes with suggestions for further research, noting in particular the potential usefulness of theories of transnationalism and translocalism.

Keywords: Ireland; localism; immigrants; political participation; personal websites

Introduction

This exploratory article returns to the findings of a recent study of "new immigrant" candidates in Irish local politics.[1] The 2009 study by Fanning, O'Boyle and Shaw, which included interviews with 18 such candidates divided into two broad cohorts (African and East European candidates), investigated, *inter alia*, expressed motivations for political participation. The most common reason given by all candidates for entering politics was a desire to promote the needs of the locality in which they lived, followed by a desire to promote integration. Consequently, the study highlighted the importance of "localism" – understood as familial and associational relationships, encounters and networks within a tangible knowable space – as both an influence on an immigrant's decision to contest elections and as a factor in explaining responses to them (see Fanning and O'Boyle, 2010).

In this article I revisit the interview testimonies of the African candidates who participated in the original study, focusing my analysis on how *becoming local* is described directly or indirectly (via motivations for political participation). While their words highlight the important difference between *standing for* and being accepted *as a local*, they also suggest that becoming local is achievable in a way that changing one's ethnic

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[1] The term "new immigrant" was used to distinguish between recent immigrants and returned Irish citizen emigrants (and their children) as well longstanding ethnic minorities of immigrant origin, such as Ireland's small Jewish community.

group or escaping from racialisation is not. In this article I also attempt to extend our original analysis by examining the websites of several African candidates. In doing so, I draw on a more recent follow-up interview with one of the original African interviewees, which included much more focused questions on her web presence and on the relationship between offline and online identity. Here it is worth noting Kennedy's (2006: 861) suggestion that online identities are generally *continuous* with offline selves and therefore that the crucial research challenge is to go beyond internet identities, to examine the offline contexts of online selves. While my analysis of candidate websites is both limited and selective, it nevertheless offers support for Kennedy's suggestion and in so doing signals the usefulness of localism as a heuristic device. Though only touched upon here, I further suggest that future research in this area might make greater use of theories of transnationalism and translocalism, which is in other words to point out that the cultural imaginaries and communicative activities of these actors – as well as the forms of identity construction they engage in – are not limited to residence or nationality.[2] 'The local', as Kraidy and Murphy (2008: 339) point out, is 'something inherently dynamic and dialogical, but nevertheless an empirically accessible ''place'' where the elaboration of meaning can be witnessed as it is enacted and negotiated by contextually situated social agents.'

Immigrants in Irish politics

Dobbs (2009: 5) describes the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) as 'a critical case for understanding immigrant political integration' given that 'it has one of the most open electoral systems in the world for non-citizens'. The Irish Electoral Act of 1992 permits all ordinarily resident adults to both vote in and contest local elections, regardless of nationality or ethnic/cultural background. In 2004 a number of immigrant candidates emerged in Ireland. The two that were elected (both Africans) were former asylum seekers and neither were Irish citizens. In the more recent 2009 local government elections, 44 immigrant candidates contested, with four subsequently elected (only one of whom is African).[3] The next local elections in Ireland will occur in 2014, with an as yet uncertain number of immigrant candidates contesting (though it is likely that the current economic climate will negatively impact this).[4]

Despite a sizeable literature on socio-cultural and economic aspects of integration in Ireland, studies of immigrants in Irish political life remain comparatively few in number. The 2009 study by Fanning, O'Boyle

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[2] In recent times scholars have analysed the internet as a site of fluid and multiple forms of identity construction. For example, Titley and Kerr (2011: 201) suggest that the internet 'has transformed the experience of migration for many, and the possibilities of everyday communication and communicative synchronicity have heightened the feeling of multiple attachment to and implication in spatially distant localities and realities.'

[3] To date, immigrant candidates have fared poorly in Irish local elections when the barometer of success is limited to appointment or non-appointment, however, it bears noting that many have out-performed a significant number of indigenous rivals (see O'Regan, 2009).

[4] Recent figures released from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) indicate that two thirds of the million or so foreign nationals who registered to work in the Republic of Ireland between 2004 and 2009 left Ireland by 2010. See http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/0527/workforce.html

and Shaw, which is the most recent to date and which builds upon a number of successive studies by the lead author, distinguished between African candidates and East European candidates, using a variety of research hypotheses. For example, it was hypothesised that political participation by these groups would differ in some respects; that experiences of racism and discrimination would motivate Africans to participate while social atomisation and alienation would encourage East Europeans to become politically active (this hypothesis was borne out). Eighteen immigrant candidates were interviewed for the research: ten were African and eight were East European; 13 ran on behalf of political parties and five ran as independents. Interviews examined individual motivations for political participation, status factors (i.e. residency/citizenship) and how social capital interrelates with other forms of capital in shaping the political agency of immigrants, for which we introduced the term "socio-political capital" (Fanning and O'Boyle 2010: 418). In broad terms the research found that Africans in Ireland tend to be considerably more "networked" than East Europeans (and have generally been living in the country for longer), that a significant number of African community organisations have been established since the late 1990s, that Africans in Ireland are overwhelmingly religious and that church membership is a source of both "bridging" and "bonding" social capital (though chiefly the latter), and that African persons living in Ireland are much more likely to be living in families with children (ibid. 423). This tendency to be more strongly rooted in their local areas and to be engaged in community activities coincided with (and appears to have fostered) a more pronounced interest in political engagement by members of the African community in Ireland. Writing at the point in 2009 at which 36 of the eventual 44 immigrant candidates were confirmed, Dobbs (2009: 20) concluded that 19 per cent were Polish while 38.9 per cent were Nigerian – this despite the fact that Nigerians accounted for only 3.9 per cent of the immigrant population of Ireland at the time (versus 15% for Poles).

Localism and political participation

Various studies suggest that localism can play a decisive role in determining the electoral success of ethnic minority candidates (e.g. Bird 2005; Hickman, Crowley and Mai 2008). While the "local" is rather an imprecise term in the sense that who and what constitutes it is far from fixed,[5] it nevertheless continues to be associated with *Gemeinschaft* or 'the sphere of face-to-face contacts, family/kinship bonds, and obligations' (Fanning, Howard and O'Boyle 2010: 422). In the study employed here, localism was understood as familial and associational networks in a defined and knowable space. Importantly, we argued that given localism is constituted via actual relationships and encounters, that *becoming local* is achievable

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[5] The local (as described here) can be understood in at least two ways: as the political constituency, the electoral area or the "space" of formal political franchise, and as a "place" of lived experience and multiple histories, as a site 'of intersection and juxtaposition of new spatiotemporalities with older ones' (Amin 2002: 392).

in a way that changing one's ethnic group or escaping from racialisation is not (ibid. 423). Yet localism also cannot be wishfully imagined as a wholly positive force: while in one form it can provide grounds for wider acceptance and the means of positively recasting immigrant identity, in another form it can act as *the* most significant barrier to immigrant inclusion and integration.

A distinctive feature of Irish politics, and one that can prove exceedingly difficult for immigrants to contend with, is the dominance of dynastic political families that have represented areas for generations. Dobbs (2009) points out that as relative newcomers, immigrants often have poorly developed links with influential community groups and sporting associations in Ireland, such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Nevertheless, despite such potential barriers, Africans in Ireland tend to be extremely active in community affairs and all of the African candidates interviewed recounted instances of solidarity at the local level (Fanning, Howard and O'Boyle 2010: 426). While their reasons for becoming involved in Irish politics were multiple and varied, an interest in promoting the needs of their immediate local area emerged as the strongest motivating factor amongst the African candidates interviewed. In explaining this, interviewees highlighted the need for improved facilities and amenities in their areas and drew attention to a host of local problems, such as poor infrastructure, limited public transport and anti-social behaviour. While such problems are hardly confined to areas with large immigrant cohorts, interviewees suggested that such problems tend to compound the social isolation experienced by immigrants. Frequently, interviewees drew directly on the experiences of their children. As put by one African candidate: "My motivation is basically [...] my community has no facilities. When I came here my daughter wasn't able to meet friends or even play with neighbours." Such sentiments also informed their understandings of themselves as political actors. A number of African candidates depicted their engagement with Irish politics as a form of community activism, frequently self-identifying as "community activists" rather than politicians. As put by one: "If you view politics as going to Dublin and being very loud then no. I prefer to work with small communities, just to be a voice for a few people." As similarly put by another candidate (for a different political party): "To be honest I am not that interested in politics, about parties and things like that." Such responses suggested an opposition – or at least a tension – between "professional" politics and political activities at the local or grassroots level. Likewise, while all of the African candidates considered the active promotion of naturalisation vital for successful integration, they also insisted that integration must take root at the local level. Indeed, the emphasis on locality was used as a means of commenting on and criticising generic and decontextualised (or delocalised) notions of integration ("integration from above"). As put by one interviewee:

> "I believe so much in grassroots. The issue of integration will come ... like I keep telling
> immigrants and Irish people too. I tell them we have to cultivate good neighbourliness. If you live

> in a place you need to be friends with your neighbours. They will get to know you. Your
> neighbours will eventually stand up and say "I know him"."

In prioritising the local as the key site of integration, [6] the interview testimonies of African political
candidates implied that locality barriers were permeable in a way that "race" or ethnicity were not. The
above comments also signal the importance of relationship building and – from the point of view of political
aspirants – of maintaining direct contacts with voters i.e. "personal campaigning" (Maarek, 2011: 227).
Groupness or "neighbourliness" (as the above interviewee puts it) is here constructed as the foundation of
trust and acceptance and as the essential antecedent to "knowing" a person. [7] As put by another candidate:
"People [in the town] see me for who I am. Whatever else they have in the back of their mind is their
business." Comments such as these often led to a discussion of Barack Obama (who was also mentioned in
the context of new media). [8] On such occasions the testimonies of interviewees suggested an admiration for
Obama's ability to appeal to "community" both in its narrow and universal senses. As put by another
African candidate:

> "Obama ... got the basics right and he started from the very beginning. The community saw him
> as someone who is with them, for them and they in turn felt a sense of security with him. He
> appealed to everyone, every class and category. Irrespective of what colour you are you have the
> same needs inside. We all want to be loved, to have shelter, to have a job, clothes on your back."

This tendency to espouse a universal humanism, alongside their unique experiences as immigrants to
Ireland, helps to explain why a high proportion of Africans who contested the 2009 Irish local elections did
so as independents, rather than as members of political parties. Four of the ten African candidates
interviewed ran as independents compared to only one from the East European group. (This sole individual
in the latter group decided to run as an independent only because he was unable to secure the backing of
a political party). The decision to contest an election as an independent or as a party member is clearly of
central importance for any political candidate. Not only is such a decision strongly symbolic, insofar as it
signals to the electorate ideological autonomy or ideological alignment (e.g. with Republican Party, Greens

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[6] Christine Lohmeier makes the point, for which I am grateful, that this prioritisation (or perhaps essentialisation) of the local neglects its more dynamic qualities. For Lohmeier, the most interesting question is how individuals integrate into something dynamic; "integrating" means changing it simultaneously (in personal correspondence).

[7] Conversely, as Calhoun (1998: 380) points out, 'where there is no directly interpersonal dimension to our relationships, we are especially prone to treat people as wholly subsumed under certain categories of identity – whether gender, or race, or occupation.'

[8] A number of media commentators and academics have described US President Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign as a critical juncture in the use of new media in political campaigning (e.g. Graber 2010), leading some to describe him as the new "Communicator-in-chief" (Hendricks and Denton, 2010). Claire Miller of *The New York Times* (November 7, 2008) has compared Obama's use of social media to John F. Kennedy's use of television – an historical reading that borders on technological determinism: 'One of the many ways that the election of Barack Obama as president has echoed that of John F. Kennedy is his use of a new medium that will forever change politics. For Mr. Kennedy, it was television. For Mr. Obama, it is the Internet'. The subject of Barack Obama's incorporation of new media into his presidential campaign arose during interviews with African political candidates in the 2009 Irish local government elections and on such occasions the American President was praised as a gifted communicator and as a forward-thinking and media savvy politician. Nevertheless, interviewees could hardly be described as "techno optimists" and they remained wary of what Inkinen (nd) describes as the 'rhetoric of the electronic sublime'. One African independent commented: "The internet is great, media is good but it depends ... they put you up and they bring you down". Here the interviewee acknowledges that media (both new and old) are essentially Janus-faced. While Obama's incorporation of social media may have proven a resounding success, here it is acknowledged that a presidential campaign can also be irreparably damaged by a mere "140 characters" (Kucinich 2011).

etc.) but it also has direct material consequences; for example, independents are required to fund their own campaigns. However it is noteworthy that even amongst Africans contesting the 2009 election as party members there was a tendency to view Irish political parties as somewhat interchangeable (see Fanning and O'Boyle, 2010). Overall therefore, an attraction to the distinctive ideology of a particular party emerged as a rather weak motivational factor in the research. In essence, African political candidates 'overwhelmingly did not identify with any political ideology *per se* but tended to extol Christian humanist values' (ibid. 424). Again Barack Obama was considered inspirational in this respect. As put by one interviewee:

> "[Obama] beat every odd to emerge. He didn't want anything to do with race. He believed himself as a human being and that is the way we have to see ourselves and I have really had that in my mind. We didn't choose our colour. So what I appreciate is the way he regards people and the way he sees himself. He sees his constituency to be the whole world!"

In the above passage Obama is applauded for his dedication and self-belief and for his unwillingness to be usurped by race. Interviewees also argued that Obama was equally unafraid to signpost his difference. Following suit, several interviewees drew attention to the range of identities they inhabit and perform. One commented, for example; "Yes I'm a migrant, but I'm also a woman. I'm also a mum who has got children who are in school like everybody else".[9] What is important here is that these identities/roles are coexistent and co-constitutive. As put by the same interviewee: "I cannot divide myself." The interview testimonies of African candidates also refute any suggestion that identities can be deconstructed and reconstructed at will. For example, an independent candidate argued forcefully that the majority Irish society still tends to view immigrants in terms of their colour and immigrant status:

> "Yes I am representing everybody but the fact remains that I am an immigrant, it's my identity. Even if I say I'm not an immigrant I am seen as one. I look like an immigrant, when people open their eyes they see me as an immigrant. So you can't avoid that. That one is the reality ... When someone looks at me that's the first thing they see. So you can't say you're not an immigrant candidate.[10] Your identity is immigrant ... But it depends on the people you meet. Some will say that they will vote for me before I say anything. Others will say they are voting for their own."

Here the interviewee insists that regardless of whether one takes issue with reductive terms like "immigrant candidate", these still have purchase, especially within kinship-based systems where they feed into distinctions between friend and stranger. In this vein Calhoun (1998: 391) argues that most understandings of strangers are 'based not on ideas of the nature of their relationship to one, but on categorical identities:

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[9] This calls to mind Eriksen's (2002: 31) suggestion that individuals have multiple statuses and identities and therefore that 'it is an empirical question when and how ethnic identities become the most relevant ones.'
[10] While the term "immigrant candidate" was employed in the research, it provoked mixed reactions from interviewees. For example, one African member of a political party objected to the term as an exclusionary label, which she felt undermined her claims as a local person.

they are Blacks, Whites, rich, poor, Baptists, Jews etc.' In other words, under certain conditions the category appears to dominate and subsume the individual. In the above passage the interviewee places particular emphasis on visible difference and the (sometimes all-consuming) labelling that goes with it. His remarks suggest that racialisation remains an everyday reality for Africans in Ireland (see also Ejorh 2011). Indeed, it is possible to infer from this that blackness is "knowable" in a way that whiteness is not (see Husband 2005: 466). As a political aspirant, his closing words ("their own") evoke the core challenge facing the immigrant candidate; to be accepted as *a local* representative (Fanning, Howard and O'Boyle, 2010: 431).

Canvassing and cultivating localness

If campaign budgets in the Irish context are miniscule compared to countries like the United States, electoral campaigning in Ireland nevertheless shares many (if not most) of the characteristics of contemporary American political communication. In addition to opinion polls, televised debates, talk show interviews etc. one can observe the "personalisation" of campaigns, the "simplification" of campaign themes, and the integration of new media (Maarek 2011: 17). At the same time, local government elections in Ireland and those in the United States as described by Maarek (2011) are also markedly different; for one thing some electoral areas in Ireland contain less than 7,000 people. Consequently, terms such as "conservative", "parochial" and "clientelist" are repeatedly used to describe politics in Ireland (Carty, 1981: 10), with local elections commonly depicted in the media as instances of tribal warfare (see O'Regan, 2009). As noted above, membership of local networks, interest groups and sporting associations (especially the GAA) tend to play a crucial role in determining the success of candidates in local elections in Ireland (Weeks and Quinlivan, 2009). In addition to their potentially weak ties with such collectives, immigrant candidates also face a number of distinct challenges in demonstrating their suitability for local office: firstly, they must demonstrate professional political competence; secondly, they must demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the relevant and decisive issues facing voters in a particular locale (which may have extensive histories); and finally, they must convince voters that they possess sufficient understanding of the culture of a particular place, including its history and identity, its social fabric and its modes of relating.

If the second challenge is relatively easily overcome through research, the first can involve considerable time and effort, especially for those without prior experience in politics. While most of the African candidates interviewed tended to view themselves more as community activists than aspiring "politicians" (as noted above), they clearly wished to be taken seriously in their bid for local office, particularly in a context in which non-white politicians remain "hyper-visible" and "non-normative" (see Hübinette and

Tigervall 2009: 341). However, of the challenges listed above, the last is arguably the most significant, and equally the most difficult for immigrants to overcome. Here candidates must convince voters that they not only understand the tacit laws of community in a particular place but more fundamentally, that they *are locals* in the fullest possible sense.

Apart from conventional methods of campaigning (such as giving public talks and interviews, distributing leaflets and putting up posters), face-to-face canvassing remains by far 'the most important aspect of Irish local political campaigns' (Dobbs 2009: 16). The importance of this form of canvassing was something of a surprise for some African candidates, who had not encountered it in their countries of origin. One interviewee commented: "I mean the walking around ... politics in my country is very corrupt. You hardly see politicians on the campaign trail. But here from the person standing as a candidate in the local council right up to Leinster House (parliament) they go out campaigning and knocking on doors." At times this highly personalised form of campaigning presented distinct problems for African candidates, some of whom recounted instances of hostility and, in rare cases, violent threats. As such, the importance of the household doorstep (and indeed physical space) in local politics cannot be overstated. As a microcosm of neighbourhood, constituency and in turn society at large, the household doorstep can be viewed as *the* crucial site of communication and appraisal in local elections, at which "identity" (however vague a concept) is palpably "real":

> [While] academics may have a duty to contemplate whether identity retains validity conceptually and theoretically, those involved in identity politics on the ground – those experiencing hostility because of their 'different' identities, for example – may not feel that they share this duty (or indeed luxury). Therefore, what is important is to take these conceptual steps without losing sight of identity as embodied experience, of the real struggles of real people whose identities are fiercely contested or defended – in other words, without losing sight of identity-as practice (Kennedy 2006: 873).

While unaccustomed to door-to-door canvassing due mainly to prior political socialisation, most African interviewees recalled their experiences positively and some claimed to have enlisted (predominantly white) Irish neighbours to assist them. Symbolically, the candidate's connection to such persons helped license their localness. Other relationships also proved useful. For example, one independent candidate recounted an occasion in which an initially frosty reception at a doorstep gave way to a warm welcome when the homeowner's child recognised the candidate's voice and ran out to greet her. These and other instances further suggest the relative openness of the local in comparison to other categories of belonging: 'What mattered, they implied, was being associated with the locality, and belonging in such a sense was open to them' (Fanning, Howard and O'Boyle, 2010: 434)

During the 2009 Irish local government elections a number of African candidates established websites (and in some cases also blogs, Facebook and other social media profiles).[11] In the remainder of this article I briefly examine some of these websites with a view to extending (albeit tentatively) the above analysis and to suggest lines of further inquiry. In doing so, I draw insights from a number of scholars who have investigated the relationship between online and offline identity. Localism frames the content of candidate websites, however, websites are also used to signpost multiple forms of attachment and to enact identities foreclosed by visible difference.

The websites of African political candidates in Ireland

Shapiro and Shapiro (1997: 7) suggest that when one encounters a personal webpage, one 'has no way of knowing if the content and presentation of the content matches up to the person whose web page is being viewed.' For political actors in the public domain this point is perhaps less relevant, though clearly these too are engaged in impression management. For political candidates the presentation of self (both offline and online) involves a great deal of careful and calculated (though not always conscious) foregrounding and backgrounding of personal details. In contrast to the unpredictability of face-to-face encounters, the presentation of self online permits closer management and to some extent constitutes a 'freer form of self-presentation' (Schau and Gilly 2003: 389). Yet such potential freedoms (e.g. the possibility of "updating" one's profile) remain curtailed by offline realities. Experiences of racism, for example, offer particularly harsh reminders of the folly of thinking that one can 'escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness' (Miller and Slater 2000: 5). Websites also present distinct communicational challenges for political candidates: they must be accessible, navigable and informative, and they must – given the logic of branding that now pervades the entirety of the social universe – communicate an instantly intelligible and "coherent" political identity to viewers. If citizens typically want increased dialogue and direct contact with candidates in local elections, they tend to also want 'simple cues that allow them to size up candidates with minimal effort' (Lipsitz et al. 2005: 337).

All of the African candidates who had websites had professional "profile" shots of themselves on their home pages (always in business attire) and their websites typically contained multiple pages, including such things as career history, local issues and political mission statements. However one can read more than professional political aims in such content; the websites of African political candidates can also be approached as discursive spaces which reveal a multiplicity of motivations, identities and affiliations (much like the interview testimonies of these individuals). Leaving aside the important point that some African

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[11] The websites analysed here are still accessible, however, it appears that some have been inactive since the local elections of 2009.

candidates contested the 2009 Irish local elections as independents and some as party members – meaning the latter were bound by the principle of coherence between local and national campaigns (see Maarek 2011) – those with websites gave broadly similar reasons for developing them. Apart from mere self-promotion, websites were created for a variety of reasons e.g. to display technological competence, to fill in biographical and background details, to showcase achievements, and to increase visibility. On the latter point one party candidate commented:

> "I already have a website and the idea behind that was just to be able to show myself to a wider audience and with the new order of the world you can't really reach everybody through leaflets but people will search about you, they see your name … so having a website gives them somewhere to go to and they can see what you're doing and you can update it gradually …"

The above passage suggests a global orientation, however, localism is more strongly apparent in the content of these websites. For example, localism permeates the website of Green Party candidate Tendai Madondo, who is originally from Zimbabwe and who now lives in Tallaght (the largest county town in South Dublin). On her homepage it states: "Tendai once worked for Tallaght Partnership as a consultant on the migrant workers project then subsequently worked for Tallaght hospital before joining Cairde as a Development Officer. She established a women's group in collaboration with Tallaght Intercultural Action where she continues to be an active member. She is also a member of Tallazens" (http://www.tendaimadondo.com). As well as a clear interest in "green" issues, Madondo's expressed political goals centre on the welfare of children in the community, as evident in the following newsletter (available on her website).[12]

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[12] The colouring of this newsletter mirrors the green, white and gold of the Irish flag, insinuating cultural proximity.

Image 1: Newsletter for Green Party candidate Tendai Madondo

In this newsletter the word "local" (which features seven times) is interspersed with the first-person singular "I" and the possessive form "our", semantically linking persons and place ("our area"). Likewise, localness is cultivated through affiliative identity, or connections made to other persons and groups (Schau and Gilly 2003). Shapiro and Shapiro (1997: 8), borrowing from Goffman (1959), describe such linked individuals/groups as a "performance team" and suggest that 'by presenting information about the traits,

actions, and accomplishments of our associates, we enhance our own public image.' In the case of African political candidates in Ireland this "we" dimension is communicated in numerous ways, but primarily through the inclusion of website links (mostly to Irish organisations and non-immigrant candidates) and via photos which locate the candidate in a variety of social settings e.g. canvassing at a doorstep (often with a white person greeting the candidate); meeting representatives of the local police (typically white); shaking hands with the party leader (always white) etc. (See Images 2, 3 and 4 below).

Image 2: Independent candidate Ignatius Okafor and his wife and child with Finian McGrath, TD (Member of Parliament) (http://iggyokafor.blogspot.com)

Image 3: Fianna Fáil candidate Idowu Olafinihan and his wife with former Minister of Finance Brian Lenihan, who died of pancreatic cancer on June 10, 2011 (http://idowuolafimihan.com/)

Image 4: Fine Gael candidates Benedicta Attoh and Adeola Ogunsina with party leader and now Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of Ireland Enda Kenny (http://www.metroeireann.com)

In a study of the home pages of websites of Members of Congress in the United States, Gulati (2004: 25) suggests that the images and symbols included 'are meant, at the very least, to be consistent with the impression of themselves that they are trying to make with a constituent during a face-to-face meeting.' For African candidates in the Irish local elections, however, websites arguably serve not merely to reinforce face-face impressions or to fill in knowledge gaps (as they would for anybody) but equally function to counter "ethnic absolutism" (see Gilroy 2000), or the reduction of the Other to a single, unchanging identity. The contents of their websites reflect the multiple discourses (both positive and negative) from which they draw self-understandings. The Green Party candidate Tendai Madondo, for example, has an extensive website with numerous sections that outline her professional experience, her stance against racism, her community and activist work, her immigrant history and family background, her work on behalf of the Green Party etc. Likewise, the website of independent candidate Frances Soney-Ituen reveals her professional expertise and academic qualifications, her extensive community work and efforts on behalf of women's rights, her various interests (including the Gaelic language) and her deep religious beliefs (http://www.frances4service.com). While on the one hand such content suggests that African candidates are really 'not so different' (Gulati 2004: 30), on the other hand it challenges the reductive power of categorical identities. More specifically in the context of Ireland, it challenges the hegemonic WHISC (white, Irish, settled, Catholic) discourse of Irishness (see Mac Éinrí, 2007). Importantly, candidates' 'multiple true selves' (Schau and Gilly 2003: 386) as revealed (to some extent) in these websites are not presented as separate to local commitments and affiliations but rather as intertwined and embedded within these. If in a narrow sense these websites are mere tools for candidacy, on a more fundamental level they chart the process of becoming local, revealing the multiple pathways and negotiations through which identification with a particular place develops.

For the enquiring resident, the websites of political candidates offer information and clarification. For the candidates themselves, however, their role is much more complex as they function as vehicles for a more considered presentation of self and as such cannot be dismissed as mere promotional devices or "self advertisements" (Chandler, 1998). While Druckery's (1996: 12) suggestion that computer mediated environments 'collapse the border between material and immaterial, the real and the possible' appears greatly exaggerated from the perspective of African political candidates in Ireland – for whom offline difficulties and contradictions are never resolved online – the role of such websites as technologies of self affirmation and social validation (though hardly emancipation) cannot be ignored. Permeating their web content (and interview discourse) is the fundamental assertion that similarity and difference are not oppositional but co-constitutive elements in the familiar domain of everyday life (see Brah 2004: 35). The varied experiences and multiple interests and attachments of these individuals undermine a narrowly

"scalar" understanding of politics, emphasising instead 'multiple spatialities of involvement' (Amin 2002: 397). At the same time, the material examined here reaffirms that face-to-face relationships and intimate geographical contexts remain key features of people's social identities and political consciousness. While it remains a site of ambivalence and contestation, the local is also a site of belonging and becoming (cf. Bailey 2011).

Conclusion

In this short exploratory article I returned to the findings of a 2009 study of "new immigrant" candidates in Irish politics by Fanning, O'Boyle and Shaw, which is the most recent of a conspicuously small pool of studies focusing on immigrant participation in Irish political life. Consequently, the reasons for immigrant participation (or abstention) from Irish politics as well as explanations for their success (or failure) as candidates in local elections remain poorly understood. In revisiting the interview testimonies of the African candidates who participated in the original study, and in examining several of their websites, this article focused on the process of *becoming local*.

If there is much about immigrant identity and belonging that the above analysis perforce excludes (notably gender), this article nevertheless highlights the complex of motivations (ranging from the expressive to the instrumental) that informs the political consciousness and self understandings of African candidates in Ireland. In particular, it highlights the ways in which localism – understood here as the social relations and forms of solidarity associated with a tangible knowable space – permeates their interview discourse and website content. Local politics, as opposed to national, international or global politics, is inherently face-to-face. Becoming local (including being perceived as such) therefore requires considerable time and immersion. Clearly this can present particular problems for newcomers, especially for those who are linguistically, culturally, religiously and perhaps above all *visibly* different from the majority society. For the latter, their alienness is sometimes collapsed and crystallised in a non-white body (cf. Hübinette and Tigervall 2009). Nevertheless, the interview testimonies of the African political candidates examined here (as well as the content of their websites) suggest that joining the local is achievable in a way that joining another ethnic group or escaping from racialisation is not. Their words and websites also counter the "fixity" that is sometimes ascribed to immigrant identities. Just as websites are continually revised and updated, identity composition is likewise a continuous process; 'both are constantly 'under construction'' (Kennedy 2006: 869).

Though unexamined here, future research might compare the websites of independents and party members, and those of immigrant and non-immigrant candidates. If, and to what extent, candidates use

social media might also be investigated. Such internet-based applications are increasingly important as sites of public engagement and self presentation, of dialogue, interactivity and affiliative identity, and therefore may help us to understand the complex interstices of place, politics and identity. While this article highlights some of the ways in which immigrant candidates utilize the internet to bridge gaps when trying to connect to majority voters, future research might explore more broadly how new media provide new opportunities for societal inclusion. What is of course also missing here is the kind of Geertzian "thick description" of the specific localities these actors inhabit, which would enable one not just to compare different locales but also to explore how these are simultaneously spaces in which 'global forces become recognisable in form and practice' (Kraidy and Murphy, 2008: 339).

Funding

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