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Matteo Bonotti  
Chiara De Lazzari  
Narelle Miragliotta

# Diasporas, Voting and Linguistic Justice

A Study of Second- and Third-Generation  
Italo-Australians

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A Study of Second- and Third-Generation  
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*To Carlo, Sarina, Ferruccio, Luigi, Giovanni,  
and Marta,  
and all Italians who call Australia home*

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Voting Rights, Language Competence and Political Participation



This book explores the intersection of voting rights, language competence and political participation among second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters. Our interest in this topic was prompted by the estimated 200 million emigrants (and their descendants) from almost 150 countries who have been granted voting rights by their country of origin (Wellman et al., 2023, pp. 898, 910).<sup>1</sup> These voters are mostly temporary and permanent non-residents who have made their homes elsewhere. Many of them can be assumed to possess the language proficiency to participate in elections in the dominant language of the sending country. However, with a growing number of states granting citizenship to the descendants of first generations—Italy being among them—the assumption that subsequent generations possess adequate levels of language competence can no longer be taken for granted. This raises important questions about the obligations entailed upon sending states towards subsequent generations that they have freely chosen to enfranchise. For sending states, this obligation is often conceived narrowly as the conferral of a legal right to vote. However, full and meaningful enfranchisement also requires certain substantive conditions, of which language proficiency is a minimum requirement.

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Parts of this chapter draw on material first developed in Bonotti, M. and De Lazzari, C. (2024). 'Linguistic Justice for Non-Resident Citizens: Protecting Language Interests Away from Home', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 26(3): 904–921, Copyright © 2023 (Matteo Bonotti and Chiara De Lazzari). DOI: 10.1177/136914812311724. Passages from this article are reprinted with permission from SAGE.

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<sup>1</sup>In this book, we adopt the definition of 'country of origin' provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM): '[i]n the migration context, a country of nationality or of former habitual residence of a person or group of persons who have migrated abroad, irrespective of whether they migrate regularly or irregularly' (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Based on this definition, we refer to 'country of origin' with regard to both first and subsequent generations of migrants, even if members of the latter were not born and/or did not reside in that country. Some non-resident citizens are, of course, also citizens of the country in which they reside.

The phenomenon of non-resident voters has its loose roots in the formation of transnational communities or diasporas arising from mass migration, especially in the post-World War II (WWII) period. These transnational communities are defined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as ‘[m]igrants or descendants of migrants, whose identity and sense of belonging have been shaped by their migration experience and background’ (International Organization for Migration, 2019, p. 49). The growing presence of these transnational communities has led to the creation of institutions and programs by sending states to help non-resident citizens maintain their connections with their countries of origin (Gamlen, 2014). And with immigrants now able to maintain closer ties with their home countries at relatively low cost due to advancements in communication and travel (Jang, 2023), demand on and for such institutions has grown.

Among countries that have established diaspora institutions, Italy has implemented one of the most developed transnational networks to foster connections with non-resident citizens. Due to the long emigration history that Italy experienced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its extensive transnational community includes more than six million Italians officially registered with the Registry of Italians Residing Abroad (*Anagrafe degli Italiani Residenti all'Estero* - AIRE) (Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo, 2024). However, it is estimated that the Italian community abroad is much larger because not all non-resident Italians are registered with AIRE and not all those of Italian descent take up Italian citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

Migration is not the only reason for the growth of Italy’s transnational community. The presence of Italian citizens living permanently abroad has increased over the decades as a result of Italian citizenship laws, which permit Italian emigrants and—importantly for our purposes—their descendants to hold dual citizenship. Under the rules of *jus sanguinis* (‘right of blood’), the descendants of Italians who migrated overseas are eligible to claim Italian citizenship despite being born, raised and enculturated in another country. While legislative changes<sup>3</sup> introduced by the Italian government in 2025 impose a generational limit on Italy’s diasporic communities’ access to citizenship (Moench, 2025), a significant number of persons born and raised overseas remain eligible.

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<sup>2</sup>These decisions may be due to a number of factors such as temporary migration, lack of awareness of Italy’s citizenship laws, and the desire to assimilate into their host society or, at least in the past, to avoid military service, which was compulsory for all Italian male citizens over 18 until 2005. However, these are just speculations and a thorough analysis of these factors was not central to our study.

<sup>3</sup>The Decree-Law no. 36 of 28 March 2025, converted into Law no. 74 of 23 May 2025, waters down the principle of *jus sanguinis* and imposes new conditions for Italian citizenship eligibility. Applicants must now satisfy one of the following requirements: ‘must be exclusively an Italian citizen; a parent or a grandparent must possess—or have possessed at the time of death—exclusively Italian citizenship at the time of the applicant’s birth; a parent who is an Italian citizen must have been resident in Italy for at least two consecutive years, after acquiring Italian citizenship, before the birth or adoption of the applicant’ (Consulate General of Italy (Melbourne), 2025). These restrictions do not apply to citizenship applications submitted on or before 27 March 2025.

The Italian transnational community has acquired greater political and diplomatic importance in the country of origin over time. The turning point occurred in 2001 when Italy recognized the right of all Italians residing abroad (including second, third and subsequent generations of Italian citizens) to participate in national elections and Italian national referendums without having to return to Italy (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2002). Before 2001, Italians abroad had to return to their last municipality of residence to cast their vote for Italian elections. The 2001 change in legislation enabled all non-resident Italian citizens to cast a (postal) vote, as well as creating an Overseas Constituency with four electoral districts representing them in the Italian parliament.

While we acknowledge the complex and diverse composition of the Italian transnational community, which includes various generations of permanent migrants as well as more recent (often temporary) migrants, our focus in this book is on a specific category of non-resident voters, namely those who are eligible to vote as a result of having acquired Italian citizenship by descent through their Italian-born parent(s) or grandparent(s) (*jure sanguinis*). Under Italian electoral law, all Italian citizens permanently residing abroad and registered with AIRE, regardless of whether they were born (and have ever lived in) in Italy or not, are permitted to exercise the right to vote in their place of residence for national elections, referendums and elections of the European Parliament.<sup>4</sup> Italian residents residing temporarily abroad (for a period of 12 months less) continue to vote in their usual local constituency in Italy, although those who decide to relocate abroad for longer (12 months or more) must enrol in the Overseas Constituency electoral district in which they are residing, by registering with AIRE (Consolato d'Italia a Perth, n.d.). This practice, however, is not universal. Although registration with AIRE is compulsory by law, until recently it was not accompanied by sanctions. For this reason, the Italian government recently introduced new sanctions (between 200 and 1000 Euro per year for a maximum of 5 years) for those Italian citizens who fail to register with AIRE once they have permanently moved overseas (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2023). As well as Italians moving abroad who register with AIRE, their descendants (and, more generally, any Italian citizens by descent who live outside Italy) are automatically registered with AIRE and enrolled in the Overseas Constituency electoral district in which they reside once they (or their parents) have registered their birth with the relevant embassy or consulate.

Italian non-resident voters are organized into one *Circoscrizione Estero* (Overseas Constituency) that is divided into four electoral districts, or *Ripartizioni* (districts):

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<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that non-resident voters may only participate in elections for the European parliament if they are residing in another European Union (EU) member state (Tintori, 2015, p. 117). This means that only non-resident voters enrolled in the Europe electoral district (and, more specifically, in another EU member state within that district) may vote in these elections, with voters residing in other (non-EU) European states or in the other three electoral districts of the Overseas Constituency not being allowed to do so. Furthermore, Italian citizens residing in another EU member state may also choose to vote for European Parliament seats allocated to that country, although in that case they cannot also vote for the seats allocated to Italy.

Europe (1), South America (2), North America (3), and Africa, Asia, Oceania and Antarctica (4). The Overseas Constituency with its four electoral districts exists alongside 28 other (internal) constituencies allocated according to region and by population. Across the four Overseas Constituency electoral districts, a total of 8 deputies and 4 senators are returned.<sup>5</sup>

While the number of elected members designated for the Overseas Constituency is small compared to the overall total of elected members in both the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) and the Senate of the Republic (upper house), Italy's mercurial multi-party system renders every electorate critical to determining the outcome of national elections. Moreover, by international standards, Italy's diaspora is active, as measured by turnout (Østergaard-Nielsen & Camatarri, 2022, p. 202). Tintori (2015, p. 117) even postulates that non-resident voters who acquire their citizenship by descent are 'much more likely to be enrolled...than Italians temporarily residing or travelling out of the country' because they 'are automatically registered with the AIRE when they receive their passports and their electoral cards are delivered to their residence'. Non-resident voters also vote differently from their resident Italian counterparts (Battiston et al., 2024; Battiston & Luconi, 2020), suggesting that non-resident Italian voters inject a different set of dynamics into Italian electoral politics.

The existence of a non-resident voting constituency and the enfranchisement of non-resident citizens by descent pose thorny questions about whether this subset of the non-resident voting constituency possess the language skills to engage meaningfully in Italian politics, given that many of them have never lived in Italy. Few studies have, however, addressed this question. Language and literacy are a critical precondition for voting. Voting is widely acknowledged to be a cognitively demanding task, even for voters who reside in the country in which they vote and who are proficient in its dominant language. Studies show that electors can be easily confounded and fatigued by voting. Indeed voter participation and voting proficiency are sensitive to an array of factors, such as the number of candidates listed on the ballot paper (Goidel, 2024), the wording (comprehensibility) of questions and instructions on it (Lau & Redlawsk, 1997; Reilly & Richey, 2011), and its design and format (Kimball & Kropf, 2005), as well as the voter's familiarity with the mechanics of voting (Summers et al., 2017).

These challenges are magnified when a voter has low proficiency in the language in which all this information is conveyed. For example, an experiment conducted by Ulbig and Reilly (2021, p. 35) found that voters with poor language skills are not

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<sup>5</sup>There are 400 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (lower house), of which the four Overseas Constituency electoral districts return just 8, that is 2 per cent. The Senate has 200 seats, of which the Overseas Constituency electoral districts return 4 between them, that is 2.5 per cent. The number of deputies elected for each district is dependent on population. The European district is entitled to three deputies, South America two, and North America and Central America two, while the much smaller Africa, Asia, Oceania and Antarctica district is afforded one deputy. Both the Europe and the North American electoral districts are awarded two senators apiece, whereas South America and the Africa, Asia, Oceania and Antarctica district are each conferred one senator (see also Chiamonte & D'Alimonte, 2018, p. 11).

only less able to vote in a manner consistent with their preferred issue positions than more linguistically proficient voters but also more inclined to ‘cast potentially erroneous ballots when confronted with complex ballot language’ (see also Abrajano & Panagopoulos, 2011). This suggests that low language proficiency can also result in a high level of invalid votes, as we discuss in Chap. 4. Therefore, and assuming lower proficiency in the country of origin’s dominant language than that of resident voters, non-resident voters are much more likely than their resident counterparts to cast an incorrect vote, thereby unintentionally disenfranchising themselves at higher rates.

Certainly, studies have found a close link between language proficiency and levels of civic participation among immigrant communities. Voters with limited language skills struggle to communicate with the dominant population and to identify opportunities to become politically active and involved (Boyd, 2012; Heath et al., 2013). While first-generation non-resident citizens might struggle to participate politically and socially in their host country, they typically have the language skills to participate in elections in their country of origin. The reverse, however, is likely true for subsequent generations. Subsequent generations typically enjoy the language proficiency to participate in elections in the country in which they reside but they are less likely to possess the level of language proficiency required to participate in elections in their country of origin. The likelihood of diminished language proficiency increases with every subsequent generation of non-resident voters.

## 1.1 Purpose of This Book

This book explores whether existing Italian (trans)national institutions sufficiently acknowledge and address the particular language needs of non-resident citizens, especially in connection with their political participation. It does so, in part, by exploring non-resident voters’ perceptions of their efficacy in relation to these institutions. Focusing on second- and third-generation Italo-Australians,<sup>6</sup> the book examines how these voters perceive their ability to participate in Italian politics. The book explores these themes alongside an analysis of the effectiveness of the Italian government’s language policies, and the extent to which Italian language skills are recognized by the Italian state as necessary for second- and third-generation non-resident citizens to become fully competent voters.

The Italian case provides an opportunity to challenge the existing literature on diaspora institutions and non-resident voting policies by assessing the capability of these institutions to meet the language needs of a highly specific, but important, subset of the transnational community. The term ‘non-resident voter’—or,

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<sup>6</sup>We use various terms to refer to this particular Italo-Australian cohort, such as second- and third-generation voters or subsequent-generation voters.

sometimes, ‘external voter’<sup>7</sup>—ultimately masks a diverse collection of voters, which includes first-generation voters, Italians who are abroad but who intend to return home, and subsequent generations. Of these three cohorts, subsequent generations—while accorded the same voting rights as first generations and temporary non-resident voters—have a much weaker lived experience of their ancestral homeland.

Australia provides a useful setting for this study for two related reasons. First, Australia has been a historically important location for successive waves of Italian migrants, especially in the post-WWII period (Ricatti, 2018). The trajectory of Italian migration to Australia provides a unique opportunity to explore language and identity construction among non-resident Italians who have never resided in Italy. As we explain in detail in Chap. 2, the Italian migration flow to Australia has lessened considerably compared to the exodus of Italians following WWII. As a result, second- and third-generation Italians are increasingly making up a greater numerical share of the Italian diaspora in Australia.

Second, the popularity of Australia as a migration destination for Italians over the decades has given rise to a rich scholarly literature that has carefully documented Italian migrants' experience (Baldassar, 2001, 2005; Cresciani, 2003; Ricatti, 2018), their contribution to Australian society and politics (Abbondanza & Battiston, 2023a, 2023b; Castles, 1994; Cresiani & Mascitelli, 2014), the multidimensionality of identity construction and transmission across generations (Marino, 2020, 2022; Smans & Glenn, 2011), and the implications of the diaspora for Australian-Italian relations (Abbondanza & Battiston, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Mascitelli, 2014). Such literature provides a robust foundation for situating our study.

Drawing on the experiences of Italo-Australian non-resident voters, we seek to recentre the importance of language to the identity-building process that is vital for facilitating engagement with the country of origin. Much of the existing scholarship on the Italian language among the diaspora community has been focused on its cultural and social dimensions (Benatti & Tarantini, 2017; Palmieri, 2019, 2023; Rubino, 2014). Our study, however, is concerned largely with the political dimensions of language among non-resident members of the Italo-Australian diaspora, and the ways in which comprehension, fluency and literacy in the Italian language shape their relationship with voting at Italian elections.

The theoretical framework on which this research rests is derived from the *linguistic justice* literature (De Schutter & Robichaud, 2015; Kymlicka & Patten, 2003; Van Parijs, 2011). This literature, which has developed in political theory and philosophy over the past 25 years, is concerned with the just political treatment of linguistic diversity. Linguistic justice scholars ask how liberal democratic states ought to respond to the presence of diverse language groups within their territory (De Schutter, 2022; De Schutter & Robichaud, 2015; De Schutter & Song, 2023; Kymlicka & Patten, 2003; Van Parijs, 2011). Most of this scholarship has focused

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<sup>7</sup>We will use the two terms interchangeably throughout the remainder of the book.

on two specific categories of linguistic groups that are present in liberal democratic societies: autochthonous linguistic minorities (e.g. the French Quebecois in Canada, the Basque in Spain, or the Welsh and Scots in the United Kingdom (UK)) and immigrants, that is persons who migrate from their country of origin in order to settle in another country (e.g. Hispanics in the US, Turks in Germany, or migrants of South Asian origins in the UK). The central question usually asked in relation to members of these groups is whether the state in which they live should recognize and promote their languages (if different from the official/majority one(s)), for example by offering public services in those languages or providing support for classes or cultural activities aimed at their promotion. The literature is generally divided between those who support this kind of recognition and promotion of linguistic diversity, on the one hand, and those who stress instead the importance of the linguistic integration of language minorities, favouring the government promotion of (and societal convergence towards) a dominant language or lingua franca, on the other hand.

However, the linguistic justice literature has so far entirely neglected one important category of individuals: non-resident citizens. As already noted, and depending on the citizenship policies of each specific country, this category may include not only emigrants, that is, those citizens who have left their country of origin to settle in a different one at some point during their lifetime, and who have not relinquished the citizenship of their country of origin. It may also include people who have never lived in their country of origin and who were born overseas but who are still entitled to acquire citizenship of that country by descent—e.g. children and grandchildren of emigrants. While, of course, *emigrants* from a country are always also *immigrants* to another country, linguistic justice scholars have only focused on their status as immigrants, asking, for example, whether immigrants' heritage<sup>8</sup> language should be recognized, accommodated and/or promoted *by their host country*. However, linguistic justice scholars have generally neglected the question of whether immigrants' *country of origin* should also play a role in the recognition and promotion of its emigrants' (and their descendants') heritage language and linguistic identity.

With growing numbers of countries extending voting rights to non-resident citizens—including second- and third-generation non-residents—this question requires urgent attention when it comes to political participation. More specifically, are sending states responsible for supporting non-resident citizens to be able to participate in elections when their language proficiency is poor or inadequate and, if so, why? And, if and when linguistic barriers to political participation have been ascertained, how should sending states support their non-resident citizens? These are the two research questions central to this book. We answer the first, normative question by developing the first theory of linguistic justice for non-resident citizens, centred

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<sup>8</sup>In this chapter we use the term 'heritage language' in a broad sense to refer to 'nonsocietal and nondominant languages spoken by groups often known as linguistic minorities' (Valdés, 2005, p. 411). Moreover, we include among heritage language speakers also those who do not speak or understand that language but identify with it from a cultural perspective (Valdés, 2005, p. 411; see also Fishman, 2001).

on the view that states have a duty to provide the non-resident citizens whom they have enfranchised with the capacity to exercise their voting rights, including via language support when necessary. The second question underlies our empirical analysis. We address it by showing the complex and multi-faceted ways in which language barriers may hinder second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' political participation and, based on this evidence, by suggesting ways in which the Italian state could help these citizens overcome those barriers.

## 1.2 Methodology

In this study, we adopted a 'mixed methods' approach, combining normative political theory with empirical quantitative (online survey) and qualitative (semi-structured in-depth interviews) research involving second- and third-generation members of the Italo-Australian community, as well as key stakeholders who represent particular Italian diaspora institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Normative political theory aims a) 'to clarify arguments and to highlight the values involved in political choices' (Bauböck, 2008, p. 40), and b) to develop 'the norms we ought to endorse about the use of power, and/or the way that power and resources ought to be distributed based on those norms' (Rehfeld, 2010, p. 475). In normative political theory, 'prescriptive or evaluative statements are treated as sets of propositions that must be internally consistent and must be defended against opposing views, rather than as subjective opinions whose validity cannot be established through argument' (Bauböck, 2008, p. 41, original emphasis). We apply this methodology in Chap. 3, where we develop a new theory of linguistic justice for non-resident citizens. More specifically, our analysis in that chapter involves tracing and scrutinizing chains of argumentation from premises to conclusions to assess the coherence of arguments about the language interests of non-resident citizens, and to establish whether these interests warrant corresponding rights. Throughout the chapter, we describe and clarify underlying assumptions, evaluate the robustness of arguments, and situate theories within relevant debates.

A key innovation of this book, however, is that we combine this normative theoretical approach with empirical research. We consider the two approaches complementary. On the one hand, normative political theory explains how things *ought to be*—in our study, what language rights non-resident citizens ought to have, and why. However, normative arguments may be insufficient to inform policy-making unless they are accompanied by empirical research investigating *how things are*. More specifically, drawing on empirical research is necessary in order a) to contextualize normative arguments in real-world terms and b) to ensure that such arguments, and any policy proposals resulting from them, are not grounded in empirically flawed assumptions (Bauböck, 2008, pp. 55–56)—in the case of our study,

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<sup>9</sup>Human Ethics Application approved by Monash University (ID 2021-24499-64687).

assumptions about the language barriers that citizens may encounter when exercising their political agency.

Our empirical data collection was structured around four key areas of interest. First, we sought to capture second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' perceptions of their (Italian) language interests, that is, the interests they have in learning Italian. As we explain in Chap. 3, language interests are central to the linguistic justice literature and provide the foundations for language rights, that is the moral and legal entitlements to various forms of language support by the state. The second theme concerns Italo-Australians' self-assessed knowledge of the Italian language. Here we sought to understand how proficient Italo-Australians believe themselves to be in relation to their linguistic skills, and how important they perceive language competency to be in relation to their engagement with Italian politics, both as non-resident citizens and as electors. The third theme relates to second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' access to information about Italian politics. We focused particularly on Italo-Australian's self-assessed engagement with Italian politics, the language barriers that they typically confront, as well as the strategies that they have developed to compensate for their linguistic deficiencies. The fourth and final research theme concerns the formulation of policy recommendations aimed at reducing linguistic barriers to political and electoral participation based on the lived experiences of second- and third-generation Italo-Australians. Drawing from the observations of the second- and third-generation Italo-Australians whom we surveyed and interviewed, we develop policy recommendations intended to assist Italo-Australian voters—and, potentially, Italian non-resident external voters more generally—to be able to fully exercise the electoral and political rights conferred to them by the Italian state.

## 1.3 Participant Data

### 1.3.1 *Online Survey*

The online survey was conducted between May 2021 and March 2022 using the Qualtrics platform. The survey was promoted via an array of Italo-Australian community channels, such as local Italo-Australian media outlets, Italian organizations in Australia, social media, group chats on apps, and word of mouth. An online survey was the most appropriate method to reach as many people as possible, considering the geographical size and spread of the Italo-Australian population in Australia. Online surveys have significant advantages compared to other data-gathering tools including relatively cheap distribution, the capacity to reach participants regardless of geographical location, and the ability to capture data efficiently (Braun et al., 2021).

A total of 204 eligible participants completed the survey in full. The eligibility criteria were the following: participants had to be 18 years old or older, be

second- or third-generation Italo-Australians, and have acquired Italian citizenship (including voting) rights. The survey included questions designed to filter participants based on these criteria. In particular, we identified second- and third-generation Italo-Australians by asking respondents questions regarding their place of birth and the country in which they had completed their education. The education-based filtering question was based on the assumption that people who completed their education in Italy would be fluent in Italian and could, therefore, engage with political debates in the country of origin with few, if any, linguistic limitations. Both questions also allowed us to eliminate from the sample new Italian migrants who arrived in Australia in the last 15–20 years.

The survey attracted a fairly even mix of second- and third-generation Italo-Australians by age group. Of the 204 participants who completed the survey, 20 per cent were aged 18–30 years, 35 per cent were aged 31–45 years, 28 per cent were aged 46–60 years, while 17 per cent were aged 61 years and older. The age range of the participants makes it probable that our cohort is composed of second-, third- and possibly even fourth-generation Italo-Australians.

In relation to the gender composition of the respondents, it skewed heavily female. 61 per cent of respondents identified as female, 38 per cent identified as male, and 1 per cent chose not to disclose their gender or declared that their gender identity was not listed. None of the respondents identified as non-binary/gender diverse. In terms of levels of educational attainment, 50 per cent of the participants reported holding a Bachelor's degree, 25 per cent indicated that they held a post-graduate qualification, and 10 per cent declared to have completed a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualification. Less than 5 per cent of respondents reported not having completed secondary schooling.

The survey included questions designed to tease out participants' engagement with Italian politics, their use of news and other media in relation to Italian politics, questions regarding their electoral participation, as well as—crucially—questions about their (self-assessed) Italian language skills, which were further analysed (and verified) through the semi-structured in-depth interviews.

### ***1.3.2 Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews***

Survey participants were provided with the option to indicate an interest in taking part in an interview to explore the topic further. 47 survey respondents from a range of age groups and locations in Australia were interviewed. This group was composed of 22 men and 25 women, representing 23 per cent of online survey respondents. The interviews were conducted online between September 2021 and March 2022.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather more granular information about second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' perceptions of their language interests and linguistic competence. Semi-structured in-depth interviews provide the opportunity for researchers to explore topics with the participants,

allowing deep exploration of the respondents' experiences, perceptions and understanding of matters of particular interest to the relevant study (Scanlan, 2020). Interviewees were also asked general questions about their views on their right to vote at Italian elections, and how they sourced and managed information about Italian politics. Interviews were also conducted with key Italo-Australian stakeholders, including members of Italian diaspora institutions in Australia. Stakeholders were drawn from a diverse set of organizations and institutions, including elected members who have represented the Italian Overseas Constituency electoral district of Africa, Asia, Oceania and Antarctica, along with representatives from Australia-based Italian media organizations, such as the Italian language newspaper *Il Globo* and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)<sup>10</sup> Italian (see a full list of the stakeholders and their affiliations in the Appendix). These stakeholders were included in order to provide insights into the official position of Italian institutions and non-governmental organizations on the promotion of the Italian language abroad, the role and impact of transnational institutions within the Italo-Australian community, and the challenges arising from the expansion of the Italo-Australian community in the region. The stakeholder interviews took place either in person or via Zoom between November and December 2020.

Stakeholders and participants were given the opportunity to be interviewed in either Italian or English, to ensure that they were able to express and share their thoughts in their preferred language. Two of the study's researchers are fluent in both languages. The stakeholder interviews were conducted exclusively in Italian. We attribute this to the fact that all the stakeholders are Italian native speakers, working for Italian organizations and institutions in Australia or in Italy, and therefore more comfortable with the Italian language. In contrast, the interviews with Italo-Australian voters were conducted almost exclusively in English, even though the option of using Italian was available. Unlike the stakeholders, the voters are primarily native English speakers and English is their everyday language. The researchers were also extremely mindful to avoid any perception that the interviews were an unofficial language test to assess participants' proficiency in Italian.

The interviews and survey were conducted prior to the aforementioned 2025 legislative changes restricting citizenship entitlements to the Italian diaspora. This amendment does not affect the relevance of this study, its findings or, crucially, the essential argument that we defend. The 2025 Italian citizenship reforms will limit the ability of second- and third-generation members of the Italian diaspora (as well as members of subsequent generations) to gain access to Italian citizenship and, thereby, to the right to vote in Italian elections and referendums. However, the challenge posed by language barriers for non-resident Italian voters will endure and will remain an issue that the Italian state—and any state that grants voting rights to members of its diaspora community, regardless of how geographically and

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<sup>10</sup>SBS is an Australian government-funded independent media service. The principal function of the platform is 'to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society' (see Section 6 of the Special Broadcasting Service Act, 1991).

diachronically extended this is—must ultimately wrestle with if citizenship and voting are to be meaningful, fair and exercised on just terms.

## 1.4 Structure of the Book

The book is composed of six chapters in addition to the current introductory one.

Chapter 2 sets out the evolution of diaspora institutions. It describes the essential nature of these institutions, the forces leading to their establishment, how they have evolved over the decades, and the critical role they serve in nurturing the relationship between home countries and their citizens living abroad. We argue that an important change that has characterized these institutions in recent decades is the fact that many countries of origin are no longer merely interested in just maintaining economic connections with their transnational communities but, through diaspora institutions, they have been seeking to nurture cultural (including language-related) relationships with them. However, we also contend that such institutions are traditionally much less geared towards fostering the *political* inclusion of their diasporas, that is, a level of inclusion commensurate with the voting rights conferred to increasing numbers of diaspora community members. Nevertheless, things are changing. The increasing interest of numerous states in the political participation of non-resident citizens has precipitated greater attention and investment in their diaspora institutions to strengthen political ties between home countries and diaspora communities.

Chapter 3 contextualizes the unique characteristics of the Italo-Australian diaspora, the focus of this book. The chapter traces the different waves of Italian immigrants to Australia, and the different cultural and political contexts in which they immigrated. More specifically, this chapter explores the cumulative impact of two key policy initiatives introduced by the Italian state: the introduction of a dual citizenship policy in 1992 and the 2001 changes to external voting, which liberalized opportunities for Italian citizens living overseas to cast a vote at Italian national elections and referendums, and to elect their own representatives. The chapter argues that the inclusion of the Italian diaspora in the voting system is the result of a series of fundamental policy shifts designed to engage with Italians living abroad. However, these shifts limit non-resident Italians' impact on homeland elections, particularly via the creation of an Overseas Constituency (with four electoral districts) which arguably prevents the diaspora from directly influencing electoral outcomes in local domestic constituencies.

Chapter 4 defends the normative argument central to the book. We contend that diaspora institutions created by sending countries should contribute to the protection and promotion of non-resident citizens' language interests. Non-resident citizens, we argue, have a right to be proficient in the dominant language of their country of origin, in order to be able to exercise any fundamental rights that that country has granted them. States therefore have a duty to provide the non-resident citizens whom they have enfranchised with the capacity to exercise their

fundamental rights. That capacity, we propose, includes a sufficient level of proficiency in the dominant language of the country of origin, without which citizens may be unable to exercise their fundamental rights, including but not limited to their voting rights.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the empirical analysis of the perceptions of second and third generations of Italo-Australian voters about their Italian voting entitlement. Triangulating the survey and interview data, the findings indicate that second- and third-generation Italo-Australians express a high degree of awareness of the privilege that the Italian state has conferred to them in allowing them to vote. However, the findings point to a latent challenge for the future of electoral participation of subsequent Italo-Australian voters arising from the largely cultural basis of their Italian identity. These findings ultimately raise important questions about whether a strong cultural identity, even when it is accompanied by a legal entitlement to vote, is sufficient to induce subsequent generations to exercise their right to vote.

Chapter 6 examines how language intersects with Italo-Australians' ability to access and make use of Italian language information for voting purposes. Applying the linguistic justice theoretical framework central to the book, we assess whether Italo-Australians perceive their language interests in line with the normative scholarship on linguistic justice by drawing on the concepts of 'opportunity access', 'life-world access', 'dignity' and 'democracy' (De Schutter, 2022; De Schutter & Robichaud, 2015). We find that second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters do not prioritize or necessarily emphasize language as a tool for political participation. However, the chapter argues that participants' self-identified deficit in relation to Italian literacy (namely reading and writing) poses significant obstacles to their ability to fully engage in political participation.

Chapter 7 addresses the main barriers identified by second- and third-generation Italo-Australians in accessing the Italian language for the purposes of engaging in Italian politics and elections. The chapter identifies seven specific barriers. Five of them are language acquisition barriers: financial costs, time commitment, motivation, lack of awareness, and narrowness of the Italian language curriculum. Two of them are instead voting access barriers: technical language and monolingualism. The chapter also discusses the recommendations advanced by our participants in response to the language barriers that they confront in relation to their ability to participate in Italian elections and politics. A wide range of recommendations to improve the political engagement of the Italian transnational community are advanced based on the experiences of our participants. The authors have intentionally conceded the 'space' for participants to share their ideas, experiences, and suggestions. While the recommendations are derived from the insights shared by members of the Italian diaspora in Australia, we contend that they are applicable to any sending state that currently enfranchises its non-resident citizens, and specifically subsequent generations.

Ultimately, we argue that the conferral of voting rights to non-resident citizens imposes an obligation on the Italian state to ensure that such voters are able to participate in Italian elections as fully competent and informed voters. This requires, at

a minimum, that the Italian state, working through its diaspora institutions, fully acknowledges the language deficits of non-resident voters, and seeks to address them through sustained investment in language resources and language learning opportunities targeted at non-resident voters who acquire citizenship via descent.

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## Chapter 2

# Diaspora Institutions, External Voting, and Language



The creation of diaspora institutions has become a common practice around the world as states increasingly develop transnational policies to engage with citizens living outside their country of origin. For centuries, countries that experienced emigration waves chose to maintain connections with their diasporas for economic reasons. In recent decades, however, this approach has changed. Countries have invested significant resources in diaspora institutions not only for economic reasons but also because these institutions are perceived as beneficial for expanding their soft power abroad through the engagement with their transnational communities. Diaspora institutions have grown in reach (an increasing number of countries have gradually established them), focus (political and cultural, as well as economic) and aims (more diverse). This chapter explains what diaspora institutions are, the reasons for their creation, their evolution over the years, and the role they play in the relationship between home countries and their citizens living abroad. This is an important starting point for this book in order to demonstrate the binding link between diaspora institutions, external voting, and language.

The first part of the chapter provides an overview of diaspora institutions, including a definition of such institutions, the status of these institutions around the world, and the reasons behind their establishment. This discussion engages with the significant existing literature on diaspora institutions. Studies on this topic are fairly recent due to the novel nature of diaspora institutions as tools through which governments engage with their transnational communities. The second part of the chapter analyses the function of diaspora institutions with a particular focus on fostering the *political* inclusion of non-resident citizens and their descendants. This section provides an overview of why many countries have decided to include migrants in the homeland electoral system, the implications of this decision, and the increasing

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Parts of this chapter draw on material first developed in Bonotti, M. and De Lazzari, C. (2024). 'Linguistic Justice for Non-Resident Citizens: Protecting Language Interests Away from Home', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 26(3): 904–921, Copyright © 2023 (Matteo Bonotti and Chiara De Lazzari). DOI: 10.1177/136914812311724. Passages from this article are reprinted with permission from SAGE.

popularity of external voting policies among states. The last section of the chapter describes a specific type of diaspora institutions, those focused on the promotion of language, and discusses the importance of language diffusion, especially amongst countries that have a significant history of emigration.

This chapter reveals how diaspora institutions have evolved over the years, with countries changing the priorities and role of these intuitions to foster linguistic, cultural and economic connections. Diaspora institutions have continued to evolve by focusing on political engagement. We argue that while the scope of diaspora institutions depends on different countries' history and transnational interests, the nature (and growth) of language and political diaspora institutions has expanded in recent decades. This is particularly important for our study because, as we will show, at least in the case of the Italian diaspora in Australia, these two kinds of institutions have developed in parallel, with limited attempts to promote language learning among Italo-Australians in ways that can contribute to their participation in the country of origin's political life.

## 2.1 Diaspora Institutions

Migration waves and the settlement of many citizens outside the country of origin have encouraged many states to establish institutions aimed at supporting those citizens and their descendants. These institutions, known as diaspora institutions, have been defined as 'formal state offices dedicated to emigrants and their descendants' (Gamlen, 2014, p. 182). These institutions play a crucial role in maintaining connections, fostering engagement, and contributing to the social, economic, political, and cultural development of both the diaspora and the home country. Diaspora institutions can have different goals, including promoting culture and community in foreign countries, economic benefits (e.g. professional, business and development organizations, advocacy and lobbying groups), and education, including the teaching of the home country's dominant language abroad.

By 2015, 118 of the 193 United Nations (UN) Member States had some form of diaspora institutions (Gamlen, 2019, p. 38). Depending on the migration history of different countries and the presence of their population abroad, diaspora institutions are generally established by the state. Diaspora institutions can be designed to address the needs of citizens living abroad, including emigrants who have become residents of host countries, naturalized citizens living abroad (e.g. those who became citizens via marriage while living abroad), and second- and third-generation non-resident citizens.

Agunias (2009) identifies three main types of institutions that deal with diaspora issues: (1) government institutions at home (e.g. ministries for overseas citizens, sub-ministerial institutions, inter-ministerial committees, and local-level institutions); (2) consular networks (e.g. embassies/consulates, cultural institutes); and (3) quasi-governmental institutions (e.g. advisory councils). These three types of institutions are generally created by the executive branch of government, mainly at the

ministerial level. However, diaspora institutions can also be established within the legislative branch through the creation of overseas constituencies in homeland parliaments. Overseas constituencies are allocated seats in sending countries' parliaments for representatives of citizens abroad, elected by the latter, to protect the interests of diasporas (De Lazzari, 2020).

The emergence of diaspora institutions specifically targeting non-resident citizens has intensified over the last 25 years and is regarded as a novelty in the migration literature (Gamlen, 2019). As Gamlen et al. observe:

[i]n origin states around the world, diaspora members once disdained as victims, deserters or traitors are now more likely to be feted as national heroes in events such as diaspora congresses, and in holidays to celebrate their contributions to the 'homeland' ...Emigrants and their descendants are courted in campaigns to encourage financial remittances, investments, donations and 'roots tourism'...They are granted new categories of extra-territorial...citizenship and voting rights, sometimes with dedicated representatives in origin-state legislatures...These and other policy initiatives to promote solidarity with, concern for, and accountability to diasporas are becoming an increasingly visible element of the political landscape, not only in migrants' states of origin but also in international affairs (2019, pp. 492–493).

In response to the increasing presence of diaspora institutions around the world, a growing body of literature has emerged, focused especially on the analysis of state diaspora strategies (Filipovic et al., 2012; Ho et al., 2015) and the drivers that foster countries' decision to include non-resident citizens in homeland institutions, maintain connections with them, and protect them and their rights (Bauböck, 2003). Such research has found that the creation of diaspora institutions is often driven by countries' economic, diplomatic, and security interests. However, countries may also establish diaspora institutions to 'govern' their diasporas, demonstrate their compliance with global norms of migration governance (Betts, 2011), as well as to 'embrace' their communities living abroad by promoting a shared national identity (Gamlen et al., 2019). As this 'embracing' perspective suggests, nation-states often have an interest in maintaining connections with their non-resident citizens and retaining their loyalty by reinforcing nationhood bonds (Levitt & De la Dehesa, 2003; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). When it comes to political bonds, for example, countries that adopt an embracing approach to diasporas are interested in the wealth of experience and understanding of democracy that migrants and their descendants can bring to the democratic process in the country of origin through informal and sometimes even formal transfers of knowledge and resources. Scholars also argue that diaspora institutions represent what has been defined as 'state-led transnationalism' (Margheritis, 2007), where countries of origin aim to foster long-distance ethnic nationalism and to establish 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states' (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447).

Amongst the different types of diaspora institutions, the electoral participation of non-resident citizens in their country of origin via external voting and, more generally, the varying levels of engagement and enfranchisement that sending countries extend to their citizens living abroad, have become a topic of interest in the literature (Hutcheson & Arrighi, 2015; IDEA and IFE, 2007; Owen, 2010). Because of

the increasing popularity of external voting policies in the last 20 years, it is crucial to understand the evolution of these policies and the impact that granting voting rights to non-resident citizens has in the countries of origin and among transnational communities.

## 2.2 External Voting Practices around the World

As one form of diaspora institution, the engagement of non-resident citizens in elections in their country of origin has become an area of interest for scholars who have been analysing these processes from an empirical, theoretical and normative point of view (De Lazzari, 2020). Various studies focus specifically on empirical case studies to understand the choices made by different countries in this area and the rationale behind their implementation of external voting policies (Hutcheson & Arrighi, 2015; IDEA and IFE, 2007; Owen, 2010). Through the comparative analysis of specific countries, scholars have also aimed to identify similarities between those countries that allow non-resident citizens to cast their vote from abroad (Hutcheson & Arrighi, 2015). These studies have established that one of the most important factors that determine a country's willingness to institute external voting practices is that country's history of emigration. Successive and sustained emigration waves typically lead to the creation of large transnational communities. Historically, these communities have played an important economic role for their country of origin but, over time, this importance has increasingly shifted to the political sphere (Collyer, 2013), leading to greater pressure from diaspora populations to establish external voting practices.

While external voting practices were not commonly accepted in the past as standard practices around the world, in the last few decades the political and electoral interests of political parties towards citizens abroad have helped to facilitate the implementation of external voting as a distinctive type of diaspora institution. Political parties in countries affected by significant emigration waves have increasingly understood the significance of the presence of citizens outside national borders and its electoral potential. Even before the implementation of external voting practices as they are known today, political parties began to develop some forms of connection with citizens living abroad, having become increasingly aware of the electoral potential of transnational communities (Bauböck, 2009). These forms of connection have included establishing offices in host countries to engage with citizens abroad and funding the creation of associations to support national identity, including via regional clubs. All these initiatives have helped to maintain a form of engagement between homeland political parties and the first and subsequent generations of citizens living in foreign countries. At the same time, first- and second-generation citizens abroad have welcomed these initiatives and considered them useful channels for engaging with their country of origin, with the aim of influencing policies that affect them and creating opportunities for meaningful long-term engagement from abroad (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Portes, 1999; Vertovec,

2004). These initiatives, led by political parties from the homeland, together with the lobbying activities of citizens living outside the country of origin, have gradually contributed to the implementation of more inclusive policies towards non-resident citizens, including external voting policies.

Recent figures show that external voting has become a very widespread phenomenon, with almost 150 countries and territories around the world granting their non-resident citizens voting rights (Regalia, 2022). There remains, however, significant 'variation when it comes to which groups of people are allowed to vote from abroad, and under what circumstances, what is required from them, how and where votes can be cast and how they are counted' (IDEA and IFE, 2007, p. 3; see also De Lazzari, 2020). While external voting practices have become popular among many states, policies in this area are framed differently depending on the level of participation that countries of origin want to grant their citizens living abroad. For this reason, scholars have classified external voting practices by considering two key aspects: citizenship rights and external voting policies.

The first type of classification, based on citizenship rights, was developed by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004), who distinguish between three main categories of sending countries.

The first category (1) includes 'transnational nation-states', that is, countries whose government offices (e.g. embassies and diplomatic institutions) guarantee the external 'protection and representation' of their citizens abroad through voting practices from abroad. These countries aim to stretch their political influence outside their home territories, allowing citizens living abroad to vote in elections in the country of origin and, in some instances, to have dedicated representatives in parliament. This group of countries normally guarantee their emigrants dual citizenship by considering them to have a significant stake in the country of origin.

The second category (2) of states identified by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) includes what they call 'strategically selective states'. These countries are interested in maintaining a certain degree of political and economic engagement with their non-resident citizens to allow them to participate in the political and economic life of their country of origin. However, their engagement with their non-resident citizens is driven by the view that these citizens are not interested in returning home and that their stake in the home country is limited. As a result, these countries want to ensure harmony between the interests of the homeland and the interests of the transnational community, but they do not aim to implement extensively inclusive policies towards their non-resident citizens. For example, these countries may consider granting their non-resident citizens privileged tax status but may not recognize dual citizenship or full citizenship rights for them.<sup>1</sup>

The third category (3) of states identified by Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) includes what they call 'disinterested and denouncing states'. These are countries that display a lack of interest towards their emigrant community and therefore do

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<sup>1</sup>India, Barbados, Ireland, the Philippines, and Haiti are among those countries that follow this approach. Türkiye used to be part of this group but subsequently changed approach and extended political rights to emigrants.

not generally implement any policies to facilitate the engagement with and of their non-resident citizens.

Collyer and Vathi (2007) provide a second classification of external voting policies, based on the degree to which non-resident citizens can participate in elections in their country of origin. The purpose of their classification is to understand similarities and differences between external voting policies around the world. Based on their findings, there are five different approaches and, as a result, types of policies adopted by sending countries when it comes to the granting of political rights to emigrants. The five categories are: (1) vote in the home district (citizens must return to the country of origin to cast their vote); (2) vote abroad for the home district (polling stations are created abroad for citizens living outside the national borders but the votes are counted as if they lived in their country of origin); (3) vote abroad for direct representation (transnational communities elect their representatives in the homeland parliament); (4) expatriates are not allowed to vote in elections of their country of origin; (5) no elections are held in the country of origin (Collyer & Vathi, 2007).

The first three categories summarize the alternatives normally chosen by those countries that allow non-resident citizens to vote from abroad. The assumption underlying these first three options is that non-resident citizens have the right to participate in the political life of their home country, and the options simply provide different channels to facilitate that participation. The representation of transnational communities in homeland parliaments represents the most inclusive approach. Even though this model is not the most popular around the world, an increasing number of countries (especially in Europe) are adopting this policy. The fourth and fifth categories do not consider any representations for citizens living abroad and, in the case of the fifth category, any elections at all (authoritarian regimes).

The different approaches adopted by scholars to classify external voting practices provide an important insight for understanding patterns in the policy design of external voting policies around the world, and the degree to which different countries decide to include transnational communities in their political life. Citizenship remains the most important criterion for facilitating the political inclusion of citizens living abroad but, even so, acquiring the citizenship of the country of origin does not guarantee political rights in that country. This will depend on the level of inclusiveness in external voting policies. Countries with a longer tradition of emigration (historically or in more recent years) appear to be keener to extend political and voting rights to their non-resident citizens. However, the assumption (whether explicit or implicit) that seems to underlie this approach is that citizens living abroad know the language of their country of origin and therefore are capable of participating in the political life of that country. This book challenges this assumption. Based on our empirical data, we will show that, at least in the case of second- and third-generation Italo-Australians, holding Italian citizenship and the right to vote in Italian elections does not entail having the language proficiency necessary to fully avail oneself of those rights. But even before we consider our empirical findings, in the next section we show that many countries—including countries that grant political and voting rights to their non-resident citizens—have themselves established

diaspora institutions focused on language, testifying to the fact that, at least in some cases, they are aware of the language needs of their citizens abroad.

### 2.3 Diaspora Institution and Language

Among the various diaspora institutions and policies developed by sending countries, the promotion of their language and culture abroad is a matter of interest and significant investment on their part. When it comes specifically to language promotion, there are a number of reasons why countries establish diaspora institutions focused on this aspect.

First, the presence of diaspora institutions focused on language reflects a recognition by sending countries of the importance for migrants and their descendants to be able to preserve their language and its transmission across generations (Vertovec, 2007). Indeed, countries with large transnational communities often preserve and promote their language through their citizens abroad by offering language classes (Piller, 2003). Second, these types of diaspora institutions are useful for organizing cultural and educational programs—such as festivals and cultural events—aimed at maintaining and extending the influence of the home country’s language and culture abroad (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Third, countries may support the establishment of bilingual services and media platforms to support their communities abroad and provide them with information about cultural, social and political issues in their heritage language (Extra & Yağmur, 2004). Countries view this as an opportunity to foster socio-political connections with communities abroad by enabling the latter to access information from homeland media (and in the home country’s dominant language). Lastly, these types of diaspora institutions can play a crucial role in advocating for policies supporting the teaching and learning of sending countries’ languages in the host country, for example via the establishment of language schools and the implementation of policies aimed at promoting language diversity (Zentella, 1997). Countries regard this as an opportunity to maintain a cultural and linguistic presence in the host society as well as facilitate access to language education through institutions specifically created for the teaching and learning of the native language, without depending on the education system in the host country.

The promotion of language abroad is often, if not always, associated with the promotion of culture through the creation of cultural institutes within diaspora institution networks. Countries like Brazil, Italy, and Morocco, for example, have a long tradition of promoting their languages abroad due to their emigration history—or, in some cases, due to the cultural attractiveness and popularity of their language (see Palmieri, 2019, 2023)—including via the creation of institutions fully funded by their governments to implement language programs in foreign countries. These programs generally reside within the responsibilities of their Ministry of Foreign Affairs (or equivalent). In the case of Italy, language promotion is also an artefact of the wider cultural appeal of Italy—‘mainly its historical and artistic heritage’ (Palmieri, 2023:138).

Not all countries have developed institutions promoting their language and culture abroad to the same extent or for the same reasons. Countries with a specific history of emigration around the world (e.g. Italy and Mexico), for example, may have a particular interest in promoting their language and culture among (and maintaining a connection with) their transnational communities (Canagarajah, 2011). Those Western countries which, instead, had a significant global impact through colonization might use the promotion of their language and culture abroad as an instrument for successful foreign policy and for improving their international profile (King & Melvin, 2000), with very little emphasis on the relationship between the country of origin and its non-resident citizens.

This is the case, for example, of France, which shares with Italy the status of being one of the first countries to establish institutions for the promotion of its language and culture outside its national borders. The establishment of the Alliance Française, the institute that promotes French culture and language abroad, is dated 1883 (Alliance Française, n.d.) (a few years later, Italy founded the Società Dante Alighieri with the same purpose, the promotion of the Italian language abroad) (Società Dante Alighieri, n.d.). As it is highlighted on its Melbourne website, the Alliance Française

owes its success to the consistently faithful nature of a foreign public which continues to be enamoured by the French language. Deriving its strength from a name which is now recognised all over the world, it has been able to maintain a presence in 133 different countries (Alliance Française, n.d.).

As this mission statement suggests, France perceives language as a tool to further develop its foreign policy and foster its presence abroad. However, the mission of the Alliance Française does not pay any attention to diaspora communities and French citizens abroad, despite France's long history of colonization. Germany and the UK also have similar institutions, respectively, the Goethe-Institut, created in 1925, and the British Council, established in 1934. In the case of the British Council, it is interesting to highlight how its emphasis is on building connections between people in the UK and other countries, with no mention of non-resident UK citizens:

[w]e support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide (British Council, n.d.).

Another example of a diaspora institution focused on language is Portugal's Camões—Instituto da Cooperação e da Língua, I. P., known today as Instituto Camões. The institute was established in 1924 with the initial goal of promoting the Portuguese language through scholarships and funding for other institutions, such as universities. A few years later, the focus of the institute shifted to include an emphasis on the promotion of Portuguese culture and arts. In 1980, the institute changed its name to Institute of Portuguese Culture and Language since its mission shifted back to the promotion of the Portuguese language. In 1992 the institute changed its name again, to the current one. The current name also aims to reflect the broader scope of the institute, not only focused on the promotion of the Portuguese language but also on cooperation, education and dissemination policies, as well as on the promotion of Portuguese culture (Instituto Camões, n.d.). The Portuguese

example shows the importance of diaspora language institutions and of how countries calibrate the design of such institutions based on what particular purposes language serves for them (for example, promoting the home country's language, culture, and values in receiving countries or reaching out to expatriates).

Following these earlier examples, other European and non-European countries have over time invested resources in the promotion of their language and culture abroad. In 1991, for example, Spain set up the Instituto Cervantes to promote the teaching and learning of the Spanish language abroad (Instituto Cervantes, *n.d.*), whereas Japan established its Japan Foundation in 1972 (Japan Foundation, *n.d.*). Many countries promote their language and culture abroad also and especially in order to maintain connections with their transnational communities. For example, the mission of the Italian Cultural Institutes, which were created in 1939, includes the following statement:

[the] 84 Italian Cultural Institutes (IICs) around the world [...] are places for encounter and dialogue for intellectuals and artists, Italians living abroad and anyone wishing to cultivate a relationship with our country (MAECI, *n.d.*).<sup>2</sup>

A similar approach has been adopted by other countries, such as Armenia (Jebejian, 2011), Hungary (Hatoss, 2003), and Morocco (Agunias, 2009).

The establishment of diaspora institutions focused on the promotion of language and culture may be driven by different rationales. While, in some cases, their goal is to protect and promote language maintenance and learning among non-resident citizens, in many cases their establishment is driven by economic, diplomatic, and security interests. For example, as Myra Waterbury (2010) argues, states will often appeal to notions of a 'global nation' and target citizens abroad in order to gain geopolitical advantage, mobilize local political support, and gain access to resources such as remittances. As a result, language and cultural institutes are often instruments of foreign policy and can receive financial support from foreign ministries. This dynamic is particularly true where countries have large diasporas, such as Indians in Africa or Mexicans in the United States. In summary, countries establish language institutes for a number of reasons, such as to promote their culture and language in host countries to attract potential tourists, and to maintain connections with their non-resident citizens and mobilize them as resources (Fitzgerald, 2006; Itzigsohn, 2000; Shain, 2007). This second aspect is crucial in the analysis of language, politics, and the creation and impact of this type of institution.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined the importance gained over the years by diaspora institutions and the crucial role that they have played in fostering states' connections with citizens living outside the country of origin. As the chapter has argued, states have

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<sup>2</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

increasingly dedicated energy and resources to designing and implementing diaspora institutions to engage non-resident citizens in their country of origin's social and political life. States are no longer merely interested in maintaining economic connections with their transnational communities but, through diaspora institutions, they have been seeking to nurture political and cultural (including language-related) relationships with them.

States have gradually moved from a passive approach towards emigrants, focused on remittances, to a proactive approach aimed at facilitating and encouraging the engagement of non-resident citizens in the life of the country of origin. Sending countries have invested in diaspora institutions with an increasing focus on political and cultural institutions. The establishment of these institutions can be explained based on states' own self-interest, which appears to be the dominant factor when designing policies related to diaspora communities. However, financial and economic reasons are no longer the key drivers of diaspora institutions. Instead, domestic machinations (such as political parties' interests) and soft power dynamics (e.g. diplomacy) lay behind the establishment of diaspora institutions around the world.

In the next chapter we turn to our case study, Italo-Australians. We will provide a historical overview of Italian emigration history to understand the significance of the presence of Italian citizens around the world—including in Australia—and the continuing enlargement of the Italian transnational community over the decades.

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## Chapter 3

# Emigration and Citizenship: Second- and Third-Generation Italians in Australia



This chapter provides a historical overview of Italian emigration history to understand the significance of the presence of Italian citizens around the world and the continuing enlargement of the Italian transnational community over the decades. The chapter explores the importance of the Italian diaspora with a specific focus on the presence of Italians in Australia since Australia has historically been one of the most popular emigration destinations for Italians in the second half of the twentieth century. This chapter also discusses the evolution of debates about two key policy issues that have been central to the expansion of the Italian diaspora: the Italian dual citizenship policy, which has enlarged the Italian community abroad, and the implementation of external voting, which allows Italians living overseas to cast a vote in Italian national elections and referendums.

As we explained in the Introduction, a rich scholarly literature has developed over the years which has documented the Italian migrant experience (Baldassar, 2001, 2005; Cresciani, 2003; Ricatti, 2018), their contribution to Australian society and politics (Abbondanza & Battiston, 2023a, 2023b; Castles, 1994; Cresciani & Mascitelli, 2014), the multidimensionality of identity construction and transmission across generations (Marino, 2020, 2022; Smans & Glenn, 2011), and the implications of the diaspora for Australian-Italian relations (Abbondanza, 2023; Abbondanza & Battiston, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Mascitelli, 2014). Much of the existing scholarship on the Italian language among the diaspora community has been focused on its cultural and social dimensions (Benatti & Tarantini, 2017; Palmieri, 2019, 2023; Rubino, 2014).

Building on this growing literature, this chapter first provides an analysis of the evolution of Italian emigration waves from the 1860s to the present day to show how Italian institutions have historically related to Italian citizens residing abroad. The chapter next examines the different waves of Italian migration to Australia and how the nature and composition of this specific emigrant community have changed over time. The second part of the chapter provides a historical overview of the implementation of the current Italian dual citizenship policy, which allows people of Italian descent to acquire Italian citizenship and access full citizenship rights, including

voting rights. The last section of the chapter focuses on the drivers that fostered the implementation of external voting in Italy, highlighting the complex political environment that led to the decision to formally include Italian citizens residing permanently overseas in the country's political life. The chapter discusses the key policies that led to the creation and current composition of the Italian transnational community and the crucial role played by Italy's citizenship policy (which allows Italians to hold multiple citizenships and to transmit their Italian citizenship to their descendants) in the expansion of the Italo-Australian community.

It is argued that these policies, including the decision to expand the external voting constituency, were the product of very deliberate efforts on the part of the Italian state to further engage with the Italian transnational community. However, when implementing these policies, Italy did not consider the complex composition of the Italian transnational community and the consequences of the generous pre-2025 citizenship policy that enfranchised multiple generations of Italians who may have never lived in the country and do not speak Italian fluently or at all.

### 3.1 A Brief History of Italian Emigration

Italy has experienced a long history of emigration over the centuries. However, according to Gabaccia (1997), the 'modern Italian migration' commenced with the first mass emigration wave the country experienced in the late 1800s. This first mass emigration event was just the first of a number of significant emigration waves that affected Italy in the following decades. Italy continued to experience significant mass emigration for almost a century, until the 1970s, with many Italians relocating to every corner of the world because of unfavourable economic and socio-political circumstances in the home country. Italians were escaping poverty, overpopulation, unemployment, and natural disasters (Mascitelli & Battiston, 2008, p. 37). This resulted in over 26 million Italian citizens leaving their home country between 1876 and 1976 (Del Boca & Venturini, 2003), for both socio-political and economic reasons.

Maffioletti and Colaiacono (2004) organize the history of Italian emigration into four different phases: (1) 1876–1915, (2) 1916–1945, (3) 1946–1975, and (4) 1976–1999. The following section analyses the four phases to unpack the similarities and differences across each of these emigratory waves in terms of who emigrated and why they did so.

The first migration phase (1876–1915) is remembered as the period in which the highest number of Italian citizens exited the country. For this reason, this first emigration wave is remembered as the 'Great Migration'. During the Great Migration almost 14 million Italian citizens relocated to foreign countries, with most of them (nine million Italians, mostly from Southern Italy) migrating to the United States (US) (Maffioletti & Colaiacono, 2004, pp. 182–183). This is a significant number of migrants considering that Italy had a population of 27.3 million in 1871, which grew to 35.8 million in 1911 (Ardeni & Gentili, 2014). Despite the initial popularity

of the US as a destination, the US soon ceased to be Italians' preferred destination due to the implementation of more restrictive immigration policies by the US government from 1921 onwards. Because of these restrictive policies, European and non-European countries such as Argentina, Belgium, Brazil and Canada became popular destinations for Italian migrants, with over 100,000 departures toward these destinations per year from 1912 onwards (Audenino & Tirabassi, 2008, p. 24).

The second migration phase (1916–1945) was triggered by the rise of Fascism. Despite Italy's then leader, Benito Mussolini's initial attempt to reduce the number of departures—largely because of the need for manpower during WWII—emigration did not stop. In fact, since the early years of the regime, Mussolini demonstrated a strong interest in the Italian communities living abroad (Pretelli, 2009). In those years, the regime introduced the concept of 'fuoriusciti' (exiles) to refer to Italian emigrants, targeting these citizens abroad with the intent of using them to export and promote fascist ideas in foreign countries and the Italian culture amongst Italian communities overseas. Mussolini's strategy aimed to build a stronger connection between citizens abroad and the 'motherland', using emigrants to spread fascist ideology and ideas overseas (Cannistraro & Rosoli, 1979, p. 676). Mussolini also created new institutions such as the General Commissariat for Emigration under the Minister of Foreign Affairs and, in 1924, the first National Congress of Emigration and Immigration was held in Rome.

Despite the regime's efforts to contain emigration, almost 60,000 Italians left Italy annually during Fascism. In fact, one of the purported effects of Mussolini's initiatives was that positive sentiment towards Fascism remained alive for many decades amongst some Italian citizens abroad. For some Italian emigrants, Fascism represented the 'Golden Age' in their country's history and Mussolini was often praised for the interest he had demonstrated towards Italian emigrants (Pretelli, 2009, p. 384). In those years, the term 'diaspora' gradually became part of the Italian vocabulary used to refer to the phenomenon of Italian emigration (Corradini, 1923, p. 73).

The third migration phase was the period between 1946 and 1975. Following the end of WWII, Italians experienced high levels of unemployment and limited economic opportunities. This triggered a new emigration wave. Between the 1940s and 1950s, European countries like Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and France became the most popular destinations for Italians who wanted to leave their home country. In addition to these countries, Italians also began to explore new overseas destinations such as Australia. The latter, together with Canada, soon became a very popular destination among Italian emigrants (Castles, 1992, p. 37). As a result of the increasing number of departures from Italy, in 1946 a new Department of Italians Abroad (replaced by the Department of Emigration in 1947) was established to deal with the issues related to emigrants' relocation, including negotiating deals with countries considered popular destinations for Italian migrants. The mass emigration in this phase had a significant social impact in rural areas of the country where labourers abandoned their families, leaving women and children behind to pursue better job opportunities abroad (Gabaccia, 2000, p. 71).

In the years between 1948 to 1953, emigration was considered 'a vital necessity' to restore the Italian economy and manage demographic issues caused by the war

(Castles, 1992, p. 36; Colucci, 2002, p. 599). Italy came out of the second world war with significant financial challenges and a growing population. The government saw emigration as an opportunity to relieve the country from social and economic pressure. This approach led Italy to enter into bilateral agreements with host countries like Australia and some European states to support the settlement of Italians abroad, rather than facilitating a return migration process (De Lazzari & Mascitelli, 2016).

From 1976 onwards, improvements in Italy's economic circumstances resulted in a significant decline in the number of Italians leaving the country. However, during this fourth phase (1976–1999), emigration continued for other (new) reasons and the profile of Italian emigrants changed (Del Boca & Venturini, 2003). According to Del Boca and Venturini (2003), more than 800,000 people left Italy between 1977 and 1985.

Until 1976, Italian citizens moving abroad were mostly blue-collar workers coming from the country's poorest regions. During the fourth phase, however, emigrants were increasingly skilled and highly educated individuals pursuing professional opportunities and diverse lifestyles (Maffioletti & Colaiacono, 2004, p. 186). This significant change in emigrants' profiles also contributed to a change in the demographic composition of the Italian community abroad.

Italy's emigration history has continued well into the twenty-first century, especially following the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). Even though this wave cannot be compared with previous ones in terms of numbers (Armilli & Mascitelli, 2016), Italians have continued to choose similar countries of destination, including Australia. While it is hard to find data solely related to emigration, since the Italian Ministry of the Interior only provides data on Italians permanently relocated overseas (there is no official mechanism to capture temporary migration), the *Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo* (Report of Italians in the World) 2024 indicates that since 2006 the presence of Italians abroad—registered in the Registry of Italians Residing Abroad (AIRE)—has doubled (+97.5 per cent), reaching over 6.1 million citizens. This figure also includes Italians who have acquired citizenship by descent. However, in the last 10 years, AIRE registrations for the sole reason of expatriation have been 1,179,525 (Rapporto Italiani nel Mondo, 2024).

### 3.2 Australia: One of Italians' Preferred Destinations

As discussed in the previous section, Australia was not considered by most Italians as the preferred destination during the first two emigration phases, between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. However, Australia became a popular destination after WWII. In those years, the presence of Italian citizens in Australia significantly increased and, in a few decades, Italian-born residents became one of the largest minority groups in the country.

Even though the first part of the twentieth century was not affected by significant migration waves from Italy to Australia, the presence of some Italians in the country was recorded. According to Ware (1981), in 1901 there were 5678 Italians

registered in the country. This number represents an insignificant portion of the Australian population at the time, which was around three million. In the early twentieth century, Italians did not see Australia as an appealing destination due to several reasons including the distance from the home country and, most importantly, the immigration policy implemented at the time by the Australian state, the infamous 'White Australia policy'. This policy aimed to exclude people coming from continental Europe or other non-Anglo countries, preferring English-speaking migrants from the UK and Ireland to preserve the white Anglo identity of (non-Indigenous) Australia (De Lazzari & Mascitelli, 2016). This approach toward immigration completely changed in the second half of the twentieth century. The Australian immigration policy was redesigned due to the economic and demographic needs of the country which required a fast intake of skilled migrants to boost the economy and support demand in a country that was fast developing (Collins, 1989). This resulted in a more flexible approach to immigration which gave rise to mass migration waves from countries affected by WWII, including Italy.

In the early 1950s, Australia started welcoming Italian immigrants, mostly men who could be allocated to the industries that were most in need, such as construction and infrastructure. In the 1950s, Australia and Italy signed a bilateral agreement to facilitate the arrival of Italians into the country through an Assisted Passenger Agreement that would facilitate the relocation of Italian citizens to Australia. Italians (mostly men) used to arrive in Australia with a 2-year contract and the promise of a secure job. Migrating to Australia was an opportunity to escape the post-war financial crisis Italy was living in at that time.

However, due to the scale and speed of Italian arrivals, the Australian government proved ill-prepared to include all immigrants in the workforce. This resulted in temporarily placing Italian immigrants in detention centres far from the cities while the government allocated them to sites of work. Australia's lack of organization in the immigration process generated friction between Australia and Italy, pausing the Assisted Passenger Agreement for a few years. In 1954 the program resumed because of the continuous interest expressed by Italians to migrate to Australia and the need for a new labour force in the country. The bilateral agreement contributed to the exponential growth of the Italian population in Australia, which increased from 33,600 in 1947 to 119,900 in 1954 (Italian Historical Society, 1988; Ware, 1981). In those years, tensions between Italy and Australia continued in relation to the treatment of Italian nationals in Australia and the lack of assistance from the Australian government as Italian citizens were trying to settle into the new country (see, also, Abbondanza & Battiston, 2023c). Despite these challenges, Australia was still considered an appealing destination for Italians willing to leave their homeland.

Between 1960 and 1970, more than 150,000 Italians relocated to Australia, further expanding the Italian community in the country (Mascitelli, 2017). Over the years, the composition of the Italian community changed, with a growing presence of women and entire families migrating to the country. Italian immigrants were no longer confined to the construction workforce but they also started to work in other sectors like the hospitality and food industries (Mascitelli, 2017).

As their presence in Australia continued to expand, emigrant Italians began to receive funding from the Italian state to establish institutions and organizations to help Italian-born residents maintain a connection with their regional and national identity, and to support those of them in need. For instance, in 1961 the Italian Institute of Culture opened in Melbourne, an example of a diaspora institution with a specific focus on culture and language. In 1967 Co.As.It. (*Comitato Assistenza Italiani*) was established in Melbourne with Italian government funding to provide assistance to Italians. In subsequent years, regional organizations focused on cultural recreation, such as the Abruzzo and Veneto clubs, were established across Australia (Mascitelli, 2017). These bodies were funded by those Italian regional administrations that had a large presence of emigrants in Australia. Their aim was to foster the cultural ties and regional traditions that are crucial aspects of the Italian identity.

The 1970s marked the end of Australian mass immigration intake, contributing to the drop in the number of arrivals from Italy. However, while the most significant number of arrivals occurred between 1950 and 1960, in the following decade 72,333 Italians continued to arrive in the country, further contributing to the permanent presence of Italians in Australia. The presence of Italian-born residents in Australia reached its peak in 1971, with 288,300 Italian citizens in the country (Castles et al., 1987). In the meantime, the Italian community was expanding also because of the presence of second-generation Italians (the children born to Italian citizens in Australia).

In the 1970s the Italian community was re-shaping the composition of the Australian population. Italians represented 2.2 per cent of the entire Australian population and almost 10 per cent of non-Anglo community groups. The Italian language (together with its dialects and regional varieties) was one of the most popular languages other than English spoken in Australian households. By 1976 most Italians were living in Melbourne (42 per cent) and Sydney (27 per cent), followed by South Australia (11.4 per cent), Western Australia (10.5 per cent), and Queensland (6.7 per cent) (Ware, 1981).

Over the 1970s and 1980s, Italians continued to arrive in Australia but the number was not as significant as in the previous decades because of the economic boom Italy was facing at the time and the opportunities that emerged in the country. Despite that, the Italian presence in Australia continued to grow with Italians coming from different parts of the country.

In 2001, the Italian community in Australia (including Italian descendants) represented the third largest community in the country (Mascitelli, 2017). This is considered to be the peak for the Italian community in Australia. In the following years, the number of Italian-born residents started to decrease due to a number of factors, including the aging population and the limited number of arrivals from Italy. These factors, however, did not affect the overall size of the Italo-Australian community because of the generous pre-2025 citizenship policy implemented by the Italian state, under which Italian descendants were able to acquire Italian citizenship and maintain dual citizenship. Hence, despite the decreasing number of arrivals from Italy to Australia, the Italian presence in Australia has continued to increase (see, for example, De Lazzari, 2017).

Two other factors contributed to the increasing presence of Italian citizens in the country in the 2000s. The first is the establishment of the Working Holiday program between Australia and Italy in 2004, which has facilitated the arrival of new Italians in the country. In 2013, for example, Australia registered an increase in Working Holiday visa requests of 116 per cent (Della Bernardina et al., 2013). However, the entry conditions for the Working Holiday visa are completely different from the earlier 1950s agreement between the two countries. Due to the nature of the Working Holiday framework, Italians who migrate to Australia via this program do not have a direct pathway to permanent residency in the country. This marks a major difference for this generation of Italian-born immigrants who are not guaranteed a permanent relocation. Even though these Italian migrants are considered a temporary presence in Australia, the intake of young immigrants from Italy has contributed to reinvigorating and reshaping the Italian community in Australia, which is no longer represented solely by an ageing population and their descendants but also by young Italians who are 'refreshing' the Italian culture and traditions amongst the transnational community (Armillei & Mascitelli, 2016).

Second, following the 2008 GFC, a new emigration wave of young and highly educated Italians appeared between 2010 and 2013 (Pascoe & Cafarella, 2019). Owing to the aforementioned Working Holiday program, which gave many Italians fast (though temporary) entry into Australia, the latter became a preferred destination for many Italians who wanted to leave their home country. Australia's 'reputation as an open and meritocratic society that offers ample opportunities in the fields of education, work and a better lifestyle' made it one of the most popular destinations, second only to the EU (Giardiello et al., 2023, p. 285). Once again, numbers cannot be compared with the immigration figures registered between the 1950s and 1970s. However, the nature of this new emigration wave presents some similarities with the one which occurred in the previous century, in particular the willingness to find a way to relocate permanently to Australia (despite the significant limitations imposed by the Australian immigration process), seeking better job opportunities in the new country.

The past and more recent immigration waves have contributed to the establishment of a permanent Italian presence in Australia, which is currently defined as the Italo-Australian community. According to the Italian Ministry of Home Affairs, in 2021 there were 156,777 Italian citizens permanently residing in Australia who were registered with the Italian Registry of Italians Abroad (AIRE, 2021). This contrasts with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. According to the census in 2021, 1,108,364 Australian residents claimed to have Italian heritage (this includes people with and without Italian citizenship). Of this 1,108,364, only 171,520 were born in Italy, proving that the Italo-Australian community is predominantly composed of second, third and fourth generations of Italo-Australians. ABS (2021) data also shed light on the extent to which the Italian language is spoken at home, suggesting that 228,042 Australians claim to speak Italian at home. It is also reasonable to assume, based on the timing of the predominant migration wave, that regional Italian languages and dialects, rather than standard Italian, are more likely to be spoken (Benatti & Tarantini, 2017, p. 472). Based on ABS data, the

Italian-Australian community makes up 4 per cent of the entire Australian population. These figures provide important insights into the composition of the Italian-Australian community which is the result of a combination of Australian immigration and Italian citizenship policies.

The next section provides an analysis of the Italian citizenship policy to better understand its implications for Italian transnational communities, including Italians in Australia.

### 3.3 Italian (Dual) Citizenship Policy

The country's long history of emigration has influenced the approach that Italy has adopted over the decades in relation to citizenship policies (Zincone, 2006). While emigration was considered a crucial strategy in response to the socio-economic struggles the country faced during the first half of the twentieth century, Italian politicians did not initially realize the repercussions that the various migration waves would have on the country (Pastore, 2004). This gradually changed and, while facilitating the relocation of Italian citizens overseas, the Italian government also began to focus on maintaining a strong bond with Italian communities living abroad. This resulted in the implementation of inclusive policies to help citizens living abroad to take part in the life of their country of origin. Despite the existing citizenship policies implemented in the late 1800s, and some minor amendments to them over the 1900s, Italy had to wait until the late 1990s before a comprehensive citizenship policy was implemented. The desire to build Italian diaspora institutions to keep a strong connection with Italian transnational communities became evident in the legislation which led to the implementation of the country's citizenship policy in 1992. According to this new policy, Italian diaspora institutions would regulate the transmission of citizenship rights to Italian descendants following the *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) principle (Tintori, 2018).

The path that led to the 1992 citizenship policy was the result of complex historical developments. Indeed, since its creation in 1861, the Italy has constantly had to manage and balance the tension between its preferred principle of citizenship transmission via blood ties (*jus sanguinis*) and the sensitivities of receiving states that had accepted Italian migrants. The position of the Italian state has always been that Italian citizenship could be maintained and transmitted among generations of Italians based on blood ties. However, this approach often caused diplomatic tensions between Italy and the receiving countries (Abbondanza & Battiston, 2024; Pastore, 2004).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dual citizenship policies were not accepted as common practice amongst states. Moreover, most of the receiving countries to which Italians migrated grounded their citizenship policies in the principle of *jus soli* (right of soil). This resulted in Italy having to adjust its citizenship policy over the years to accommodate the needs of the host countries that

were trying to build their own population of nationals (for example by naturalizing immigrants) while at the same time developing a transnational community of Italian citizens abroad through the transmission of citizenship to Italian descendants. For example, during the first Italian emigration wave in the late nineteenth century, most Italian emigrants relocated to North and South American countries. These countries had a different tradition when it came to granting citizenship rights, compared to Italy. More specifically, countries on the American continent implemented citizenship policies following the principle of *jus soli*, which allows people to acquire citizenship of the country in which they are born or in which they have resided for a certain period of time. The *jus sanguinis* principle, on the contrary, allows citizens of a country to transmit their citizenship to their descendants based on 'blood ties'. Italy's position was in tension with most other states at that time, which required people to surrender their first citizenship in order to acquire the citizenship of their new homeland. In those years, Italian citizens had to choose between one of the two citizenships since dual citizenship was not allowed.

The 'Great Naturalization' policy implemented in Brazil in 1891 represents an example of how Italian emigrants were forced to renounce their Italian citizenship to acquire Brazilian citizenship (Rosoli, 1986). Despite the importance of Italian emigration to the country, Brazil refused to work with the spirit and intent of Italian citizenship regulations. Brazil did not allow its new citizens to hold dual citizenship, thereby forcing migrants to renounce their Italian citizenship in favour of Brazilian citizenship. Losing Italian citizenship in those years meant that the children of those emigrants also lost the opportunity to acquire Italian citizenship.

The Brazilian case is only one of many examples of situations in which Italians abroad had to choose between two citizenships. More broadly, the different approaches in granting citizenship caused significant problems for the recognition of citizenship rights for Italian descendants living in foreign countries since the possibility for them to re-acquire Italian citizenship was lost if they were living in countries where naturalization was required and only one citizenship was allowed. In those years, the concept of dual citizenship had not been developed yet. The dual citizenship policy was introduced for all Italian citizens in 1992.

Due to the complex circumstances caused by conflicting citizenship policies between Italy and the receiving countries, the reacquisition of citizenship rights gradually became a key topic of discussion among Italian policymakers, although their focus was often mainly on fostering cultural ties with the diaspora community rather than political engagement. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Italian policymakers were particularly concerned about migrants' cultural disaffection towards their country of origin resulting from the loss of Italian citizenship (Zincone, 2006). Despite different approaches and regulations in receiving countries around the world, Italian policymakers continued to seek to create a strong bond with Italian communities overseas through the implementation of citizenship policies.

During the first few years following its formation in 1861, the Italy did not have a clear approach towards a citizenship policy designed to regulate the status of emigrants. The regulation of citizenship was first introduced in 1865 in the new Civil

Code; however, the regulation soon proved to be inappropriate to deal with the new emigration waves that were affecting the country (Tintori, 2006).

Following ongoing debates in subsequent decades, in 1912 the first citizenship law was finally approved (law 555/1912). The law was based on the core principle of *jus sanguinis* for the transmission of Italian citizenship to descendants and allowed minors to keep dual citizenship until the age of 18. When turning 18 years of age, Italian citizens living abroad had to choose one of the two citizenships: the citizenship of their host country or the citizenship of their sending country. Moreover, this new policy stated that Italians could lose their Italian citizenship only through voluntary action. Italians had the possibility to reacquire their citizenship after two consecutive years of residency in Italy. The reacquisition of citizenship based on residency was implemented to overcome the issue caused by citizenship policies implemented in receiving countries. This policy helped to maintain a strong connection with Italian transnational communities, allowing migrants to transmit Italian citizenship to descendants and, at the same time, reacquire it if needed. According to Zincone (2006), this law also aimed to facilitate the return migration of Italians. The attempt made by the Italian institutions with the law 555/1912 was later criticized for being too protective in the ‘preservation and recovery of Italian nationality’ (Quadri, 1959).<sup>1</sup> However, this approach did not change over the years, with policymakers aiming to maintain a solid connection with citizens living abroad. Many years later, with the new migration waves that affected the country during and after the two World Wars, the Italian approach based on the *jus sanguinis* principle came under great scrutiny.

The core principles of the law survived Mussolini’s Fascist regime even though some changes were made during the dictatorship (Tintori, 2006). Laws were introduced to facilitate the reacquisition of Italian citizenship for those Italians who renounced it in favour of overseas citizenship. In 1935, another amendment was made to the citizenship law to allow the government to grant Italian citizenship at its complete discretion. Despite these changes by Mussolini’s regime, the structure of the citizenship law remained largely unchanged. At the same time, an increasing number of countries of destination chosen by Italian emigrants structured their citizenship policies following the *jus soli* principle. In response to changes in citizenship laws in other countries, Italy signed bilateral agreements with receiving countries like Argentina (law 282/1973) to permit dual citizenship for Italians who relocated to those countries.

Apart from a few bilateral agreements, the Italian citizenship policy implemented in 1912 survived almost a century (including the monarchical period, the Fascist dictatorship and the republican era) without any major revisions. This changed in 1992, when a new revision process was finalized and a new policy implemented. Until the changes implemented by the Italian government in May 2025, this remained the law regulating Italian citizenship for more than three decades. The policy preserved the principle of *jus sanguinis* for the acquisition and transmission

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<sup>1</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

of Italian citizenship. At the same time, dual citizenship practices became increasingly tolerated by countries around the world, including many Italian emigrants' destination countries. As a result, Italy was able to expand the range of policies to maintain ties with citizens abroad.

The bilateral citizenship agreements and other modifications agreed to over the years, such as the recognition of dual citizenship rights, the transmission of citizenship favouring family ties, and the introduction of equal gender rights in the transmission of citizenship were included in the new citizenship policy. The issue of dual citizenship was finally resolved with the new policy in 1992, allowing Italian citizens to have dual or multiple nationalities and permitting Italian citizenship for Italian descendants.

However, the transmission of Italian citizenship to descendants soon became one of the most debated and sensitive issues. As Pastore (2004) highlights, the extension of Italian citizenship to descendants soon raised growing concerns. As a result of the new policy, an increasing number of people living overseas began to claim Italian heritage in order to obtain Italian citizenship even though, in many circumstances, that heritage was hard to prove. Despite the controversy over the reacquisition of Italian citizenship by emigrants and questions about the legitimacy of the principle of *jus sanguinis*, until 2025 Italy never reconsidered the underlying approach that guided its citizenship policy.

While Italian policymakers have traditionally considered the *jus sanguinis* principle the most relevant citizenship criterion, based on Italy's history, academics have widely criticized this approach. For example, the 1992 Italian citizenship policy has been described by Gallo and Tintori (2006) as an ethnic law that fosters the maintenance of blood connections with Italians overseas rather than facilitating the integration of the new migrants living in the Italian territory. As Zincone (2006) further highlights, Italian citizenship is considered a family matter and citizenship can only be transmitted by generational connections. In current times, this principle appears to be anachronistic, especially in light of the new migration trends and the changing demographic profile of Italy.

The increasing number of Italians residing permanently overseas, together with the increasing presence of migrants relocating to Italy and the implementation of the external voting policy has increasingly become a matter of concern. Laws related to the transmission of citizenship and the legitimacy of granting full citizenship rights to second- and third-generation Italians living abroad have been in the spotlight. This has raised concerns amongst the general public, policymakers, and political parties that Italians living abroad—and their descendants—are permitted to seek full citizenship rights, including voting rights, even though they no longer live (or have never lived) in Italy. Arguably, these concerns underlie the 2025 legislative changes to citizenship eligibility for the descendants of non-resident Italians.

### 3.4 Voting from Abroad

Including Italian citizens living abroad in the life of the home country has represented one of the greatest challenges for Italian policymakers during and after Italy's numerous emigration waves. Over the decades, allowing Italians abroad to participate in the political life of the country of origin became the most popular approach to maintaining their connection with the motherland. Policymakers gradually realized that citizens living abroad could play a role in their home country's political life despite living far away.

Political participation of Italian citizens living outside the country of origin, as we know it today, was the result of century-long negotiations which ended with the implementation of the external voting policy in 2001 and the creation and inclusion of the Overseas Constituency in the Italian Constitution.

The first time in which ensuring political participation for Italians abroad was considered as a way of including them in the home country's social and political life was in 1908, during the First Congress of the Italians Abroad, which highlighted the desire of many citizens living abroad to actively participate in the political life of the country of origin (Tarantino, 2006, p. 7). This was the first of many discussions, involving emigrants' representatives and the Italian government, on whether the former should be allowed to cast their vote from abroad, given their interest in the home country's political life and the stake that many of them still had in it. These discussions continued in the following years and eventually triggered a political debate on the question of whether Italians should be allowed to vote from abroad.

As mentioned above, during Mussolini's Fascist regime the presence of Italians abroad was considered crucial for spreading fascist ideology and Italian culture overseas. As a result, Mussolini saw the possibility of involving migrants in Italian elections as a great opportunity to advance his regime's nationalistic goals. In 1927, the General Commission of Emigration changed its name to the General Bureau of Italians Abroad. Moreover, Mussolini's regime tried to change the narrative and perception of Italians abroad, rejecting the term 'emigrant' in favour of the term 'citizens abroad' to highlight the sense of belonging of Italian citizens who relocated to other countries: migrants were Italian citizens first and foremost (Smith, 2003, p. 741). Over time, the connection between Fascism and Italian emigrants resulted in the stereotype that most Italians abroad were conservative and right-wing nationalists (Lafleur, 2011, p. 489). This stereotype survived for decades and played a major role in the more recent political debate about the political involvement of Italian emigrants.<sup>2</sup>

The participation of Italians abroad in the electoral system was initially a marginal issue in the broad Italian political debate after WWII, despite the Italian Constitution clearly stating that all Italians had the right to vote with no limitations

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<sup>2</sup>This stereotype remained strong until the first elections including Italians abroad were held in 2006. The elections disproved this belief since the majority of Italians abroad voted for the centre-left coalition *L'Unione*.

in terms of residency (Mascitelli & Battiston, 2008). Over the decades immediately following WWII, a number of political parties occasionally showed an interest in the topic, raising the question of how Italians abroad could be better involved in the country's political life, but no real political plans or solutions emerged from these scattered debates.

The Italian Social Movement (*Movimento Sociale Italiano* - MSI), a far-right neo-fascist party widely regarded to be the natural successor to Mussolini's Republican Fascist party, played a particularly central role in these debates and tried to elevate the political participation of Italians abroad in its political agenda in the 1960s and 1970s. The MSI saw in the Italian transnational community a 'reserve of votes' which could potentially be beneficial for them during election time. For these historical reasons, the MSI, which later changed its name to National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale* - AN), became the party that most strongly supported the inclusion of Italian citizens in the electoral process via external voting (Mascitelli & Battiston, 2008).

In the 1970s and 1980s, interest in extending the electorate to include Italians living abroad grew. Other political parties, beyond the MSI, began to understand the political and electoral advantages that granting voting rights to Italians abroad could potentially bring for them too. For example, in the 1970s, the Christian Democratic party (*Democrazia Cristiana* - DC)—Italy's main party between WWII and the early 1990s—realized that there was political mileage to be gained from allowing Italians to vote in Italian elections from abroad.

According to Lafleur, three significant events led Italian political parties to change their view regarding external voting: (1) Italy's economic development and the end of mass emigration after 1976; (2) the transformation of the domestic political scene; and (3) the efforts of migrants to break a deal on external voting between political parties (Lafleur, 2013, p. 78).

With regard to the domestic political scene, in the 1980s the DC became receptive to MSI's external voting policy proposal because it did not want the MSI to be the only party supporting the inclusion of Italians living abroad in elections. The DC understood the potential scale of the Italian electorate abroad and wanted its share of that potential voter support (Fusaro, 2002). After many years of scepticism, the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano* - PCI) also gradually adjusted its stance on external voting. In an analysis of the electorate conducted by the chair of the PCI Emigration Office Giancarlo Pajetta, it was estimated that there were almost 300,000 people who returned to Italy to cast their vote during the 1973 elections, most of them coming from Europe. This figure became of great interest to the PCI which started a campaign to help Italians return home to vote. The party saw the Italian community in European countries as a potential reserve of votes that had been underestimated over the years. This was one of the first examples of Italian political parties developing some interest in the political engagement of the Italian diaspora (Battiston, 2012).

In the late 1970s, a minor reform of the citizenship policy helped to re-establish connections with those Italian emigrants who had lost their Italian citizenship after their relocation overseas due to the citizenship policies in the host countries. More specifically, law 40/1979 (implemented in 1979) allowed Italians living abroad to reacquire full citizenship rights (including voting rights). The law also allowed

Italians living abroad to be registered in the electoral lists with no time limits of residency<sup>3</sup> unless they had renounced their Italian citizenship. Moreover, Italians who had been removed from the voting lists could be reinstated (Battiston & Mascitelli, 2012, p. 26). In the same year, the first European Parliament elections were held, and this event gave Italy the opportunity to build bilateral relations with European countries to allow Italian residents in European Economic Community (EEC) countries to cast their vote without returning to Italy. This was the first time Italians could vote *in loco* or via mail from overseas without returning to their home country.

Even though there was no progress regarding the implementation of an external voting policy, in the 1980s Italian communities abroad started gaining more importance with the creation of dedicated institutions that aimed to represent them and their interests. More specifically, in 1985 Italy established the Committees of Italians Abroad—also known by the acronym Com.It.Es. (*Comitati degli Italiani all'Estero*)—with the intent of promoting Italian cultural and social activities in countries with a large presence of Italian citizens. In 1988, the Registration of Italian Citizens Residing Abroad (*Anagrafe degli Italiani Residenti all'Estero* - AIRE) was also established with the aim of having an official registry of Italian nationals permanently residing abroad. In 1989, the General Council of Italians Abroad (*Consiglio Generale degli Italiani all'Estero* - CGIE) was also created. This body allowed representatives of the Italian community abroad to engage in a dialogue with the Italian government about the role of Italian communities overseas and the issues faced by them, including issues related to political representation.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Italy witnessed significant changes to its political system, with most of the political parties that had dominated electoral and legislative politics after WWII either dissolving or experiencing significant electoral losses. These changes brought new leaders and new dynamics into the Italian parliament but, despite this new political environment, the topic of external voting did not disappear. In fact, during the 1990s the implementation of an external voting policy gradually became a much more concrete possibility, especially thanks to the support and advocacy of far-right party AN (formerly MSI) and its MP Mirko Tremaglia (Mascitelli & Battiston, 2008, p. 94). Indeed, the external voting policy became one of the most important policies in the AN policy agenda. However, the constitutional amendment required to introduce external voting was only possible because of the bipartisan support that the policy received in parliament. No party wanted to miss out on the potential votes of Italians abroad (De Lazzari, 2020).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The Italian government was not concerned about the length of Italian emigrants' residency abroad. No matter how long they had been living abroad, Italians could register to vote as long as they had not renounced their Italian citizenship.

<sup>4</sup>Variation in the extent to which Italian parties engage in outreach with diaspora voters has been observed. Piccio's (2020) review of Italian party constitutions reveals that this variation reflects party age. Parties established immediately following the establishment of the Italian Republic were found to invest more heavily in the creation of transnational party structures compared to newer parties. Piccio (2020, p. 930) further notes that the challenge of campaigning and outreach is also exacerbated by the 'large, dispersed and highly heterogeneous diaspora in terms of age, socio-economic status and income'.

Support for the constitutional amendment in parliament reached the required two-thirds qualified majority threshold, thus averting an unpredictable constitutional referendum. In 2000 the constitution was amended to include external voting as well as the creation of an Overseas Constituency which allowed representation of Italians abroad in parliament via dedicated MPs. The final vote for the implementation of the external voting policy was cast in parliament in December 2001. As a result of the constitutional changes and the new policy, Italian citizens residing in foreign countries could now elect their representatives in the Chamber of Deputies (twelve members of parliament) and Senate (six senators). These numbers were reduced, respectively, to eight and four following a constitutional referendum, held in 2020, which resulted in the reduction of the size of the Italian Parliament (ABC News, 2020).

Despite it being implemented in the early 2000s, the Italian external voting policy is still considered one of the most inclusive policies towards citizens living abroad implemented by a sending country.<sup>5</sup> Countries that have experienced significant emigration waves over the years have considered the Italian experience and policy framework as a model for their own external voting policies. Not only is the political inclusion of Italian emigrants considered to be a successful outcome for Italy and its transnational community, it has also triggered a broader conversation about the political rights of emigrants and their political identity-building.

Once the external voting policy was implemented, Italians living abroad could cast a vote (without having to return to Italy) for the first time at the 2006 national elections. In fact, their vote played a key role in the outcome, since MPs elected in the Overseas Constituency became crucial for the left-wing coalition *L'Unione* to reach the number of seats required to form a government. Given the decisive role played by the newly created Overseas Constituency, a debate ensued questioning whether people living permanently abroad should have such a big impact on domestic politics. More specifically, this outcome opened up a new debate as to whether Italians abroad should be entitled to cast a vote, considering they do not live in Italy and that, in most cases, policies and decisions made in Italy country do not affect them directly (De Lazzari, 2020).

Moreover, the composition of the Italian transnational community has increasingly been under scrutiny, considering that the electorate has significantly expanded as a result of dual citizenship rights, granting voting rights to any individuals who acquire citizenship via the *jus sanguinis*. These include people who have never lived in Italy and, especially in the case of second and third generations, who often do not speak Italian.

After more than 20 years since the constitutional amendments that granted voting rights to Italians abroad, and the numerous elections with the participation of

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<sup>5</sup>Battiston et al. (2024, p. 78) note that despite the generosity of the Italian voting regime, non-resident Italians are not extended the same rights as their resident counterparts in that postal voting is only available to those 'residing in countries where, at the sole discretion of the Italian government, suffrage can be freely and secretly exerted' and that 'absentee ballots can be mailed only in states that have signed agreements with Italy to that purpose'.

Italians abroad which have been held since then, there is enough evidence to suggest that some critical issues regarding the political participation of the Italian community abroad must be addressed. Even though the outsized role played by the diaspora in determining government formation at the 2006 election was an isolated event not since repeated, other issues and concerns have emerged over the last two decades with regard not only to voting but also, more generally, Italy's generous citizenship law. These critical issues include growing hostility within the Italian bureaucracy towards what has been described as a 'passport business' among the Italian diaspora, and among the Latin-American Italian diaspora more particularly (Bargel et al., 2025, p. 338)—a hostility that arguably contributed to the citizenship law changes implemented by the Italian government in 2025. Of relevance to this book, these issues also concern the language skills of Italian citizens living abroad, and their ability to follow domestic politics and cast an informed vote at elections.

### 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a historical overview of the Italian emigration history, the impact of the Italian emigration waves around the world, and the consequences of Italian emigration to Australia. It has focused on the policies that helped to create a strong bond between Italians living abroad and their country of origin. The evolution and implementation of the Italian citizenship policy, allowing dual citizenship for Italian nationals, and the external voting policy have created opportunities for non-resident Italians to establish and maintain a connection between Italy and the transnational community through the extension of Italian citizenship, and encouraged political participation among non-resident Italians.

In Australia, the dual citizenship policy and the external voting policy have provided the opportunity for second- and third-generation Italo-Australians to obtain full citizenship rights and cast their vote at national elections and referendums. As argued in this chapter, while more inclusive policies were designed to engage with the Italian diaspora and allow Italians abroad to cast their votes, questions regarding their ability to understand and follow political debate in Italy and their Italian language proficiency were never raised. This issue represents a significant oversight in the policy design since the assumption has always been that Italian citizens abroad will be able to exercise their voting rights without much difficulty.

In Chaps. 4, 5 and 6 we question this assumption, discussing the challenges faced by the Italo-Australian community in engaging with the political life of the homeland, understanding Italian political debate and, as a consequence, voting from abroad, due to deficiencies in their Italian language skills. Before delving into the analysis of our empirical data, however, in Chap. 3 we present the theoretical framework central to the book, a theory of linguistic justice for non-resident citizens.

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## Chapter 4

# Linguistic Justice and Non-Resident Citizens



In Chap. 1 we charted the growth of contemporary diaspora institutions and what their presence reveals about changing norms in relation to citizenship, rights, and identity. We argued that much of the investment by sending states in diaspora institutions has emphasized the largely cultural inclusion of non-resident citizens and rather less their political inclusion, despite expanding voting rights. The gaps in political support are curious given that among the rights conferred to non-resident citizens, voting rights especially require that individuals receive high levels of support to be able to exercise them in any meaningful way. Chap. 2 examined the unique characteristics of the Italo-Australian diaspora, tracing the different waves of Italian immigrants to Australia, and the different cultural and political contexts in which they immigrated.

In this chapter, we engage the linguistic justice scholarship to defend a novel rights claim on behalf of non-resident citizens whose language proficiency might prevent them from meaningfully exercising a number of fundamental rights, including their right to vote. As we explained in the Introduction, the linguistic justice literature which has developed over the past 25 years (De Schutter, 2022; De Schutter & Robichaud, 2015; De Schutter & Song, 2023; Kymlicka & Patten, 2003; Van Parijs, 2011) has so far entirely neglected non-resident citizens, focusing instead on autochthonous linguistic minorities and immigrants qua immigrants. To address this gap, in this chapter we argue that non-resident citizens have a right to being proficient in the dominant language of their country of citizenship and that the latter has a duty to protect that language right. Our argument is that when individuals have certain fundamental rights qua citizens of a specific state, that state has a

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duty to provide them with (and, if necessary, financially support) the means necessary to exercise those rights. Those means, we propose, include the right to a sufficient level of proficiency in the dominant language of their country of citizenship, regardless of where they otherwise permanently reside, without which citizens may be unable to exercise their fundamental rights (for example the right to work or voting rights). We conclude by suggesting ways in which diaspora institutions could be enhanced to protect non-resident citizens' language rights.

## 4.1 Citizenship and Language Rights

Do states have an obligation to recognize and promote their non-resident citizens' heritage language and linguistic identity? And, more specifically when it comes to political participation, are sending states responsible for supporting non-resident citizens to be able to participate in elections when their language proficiency is poor or inadequate? These are questions that the linguistic justice literature has neglected, and these are the research questions central to this chapter.

On what grounds can it be argued that states have a duty to provide their non-resident citizens with certain language rights, and what should these rights be? Our starting point is a widely endorsed understanding of citizenship, according to which '[a] citizen is a member of a political community who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership' (Leydet, 2023). We focus on the rights' dimension of citizenship, famously captured by Hannah Arendt's (1951) idea of citizenship as 'the right to have rights'. Importantly, we set aside the questions of how entitlement to citizenship should be established (for example, whether it should be based on *jus sanguinis* or *jus soli*) and what specific rights should be associated with citizenship. Broadly speaking, citizenship normally entails a bundle of legal, political and social rights (Marshall, 1950), though which specific rights may vary from state to state. Our argument is that when individuals have certain rights qua citizens of a specific state, that state has a duty to provide them with the means necessary to exercise those rights. Those means, we argue, include the right to a sufficient level of proficiency in the dominant language of that state, without which citizens may be unable to exercise some of their citizenship rights.

Our argument is grounded in Wellman's (1995, p. 27) idea of 'necessitation'. According to this view, 'if it can be shown that some prior right can be secure, given the circumstances, only if it is protected or supplemented by some additional right, then the courts can, and usually will, recognize this new right' (Wellman, 1995, p. 27). As Wellman points out, an example of this indirect justification for certain rights can be found in the landmark US Supreme Court decision *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which contains the following passage:

[t]he right of freedom of speech and press includes not only the right to utter or to print, but [also] the right to distribute, the right to receive, the right to read...and freedom of inquiry,

freedom of thought, and freedom to teach...Without those peripheral rights, the specific rights would be less secure (1965, p. 482–483).<sup>1</sup>

Our approach therefore makes language rights conditional on non-resident citizens having certain fundamental citizenship rights. That is, we believe that the responsibility to satisfy the peripheral language rights of individuals lies with the particular institution or body that is the source of those individuals' fundamental rights on which their language rights depend—in our case, individuals' country of citizenship. To be clear, we do not aim to justify those fundamental rights *per se* and we recognize that some of them may be considered problematic. For example, we are aware that the recognition of voting rights for non-resident citizens has been criticized by several normative political theorists (López-Guerra, 2005). However, for the sake of argument, we assume that *whichever* fundamental rights are attached to citizenship of a specific state are justified. Relatedly, we are aware that a number of scholars have defended the view that rights and legal citizenship should be disaggregated (Bosniak, 2006; Song, 2009; Soysal, 1994) and that therefore some rights that are currently considered an exclusive privilege of legal citizens—such as voting rights—should also be granted to resident non-citizens and, in some cases, taken away from non-resident citizens. Again, we work from the position that *whichever* fundamental citizenship rights non-resident citizens are granted—those rights may not perfectly match those of resident citizens—non-resident citizens are also entitled to peripheral rights that guarantee their enjoyment of those fundamental rights.

In summary, our argument is the following: if and when non-resident citizens of a state enjoy certain fundamental rights qua (resident or non-resident) citizens of that state, the state that has granted those rights to them has a duty to also grant them the corresponding language rights that are necessary for those citizens to securely exercise their fundamental citizenship rights. Failing to do so would, in effect, prevent those citizens from (fully) exercising their citizenship rights.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A slightly different version of this argument is Joseph Raz's (1984) theory of 'derivative rights'. A derivative right, Raz argues, is 'a right which is grounded in another [non-derivative or core] right' (Raz, 1984, p. 197). Some examples of derivative rights, Raz argues, are the following: 'My right to walk on my hands is not directly based on an interest served either by doing so or by others having duties not to stop me. It is based on my interest in being free to do as I wish, on which the general right to personal liberty is directly based. The right to walk on my hands is one instance of my general right to personal liberty. The right to personal liberty is the core right from which the other derives. Similarly with my right to make the previous statement, which is a derivative of the core right of free speech, and my right to spoil the cigarette I am holding at the moment, which derives from my ownership in it, and so on' (Raz, 1984, p. 198). We prefer Wellman's formulation of an indirect justification for peripheral rights because we think that it better captures the *means-end relationship* between certain rights and others—which, we believe, is the relationship between language rights and other (more fundamental) rights—whereas Raz's formulation considers certain (derivative) rights as *instances* of other (non-derivative) rights.

<sup>2</sup>In this sense, language rights in our account depend on a state extending certain fundamental rights to its non-resident citizens. For instance, one might agree that a state which allows its non-resident citizens to vote should also invest in their language skills, but also think that states can legitimately withhold voting rights from non-resident citizens (and thus also be absolved from maintaining their language skills). Or one might think that a state that attempts to promote its citi-

Our approach, grounding language rights in more fundamental rights tied to citizenship, presents a significant advantage in drawing clear boundaries around those who are conceivably entitled to these rights. While other categories of individuals may have language-related interests similar to those of citizens, their not being citizens prevents them from being entitled to the rights that citizens enjoy. This might include emigrants who are not citizens of their country of origin because they have relinquished that citizenship. Similarly, people with no citizenship nor ancestral ties to a country might also have weighty interests in learning its language, as evidenced, for example, by people's willingness to pay for language classes run by organizations such as the Alliance Française or the British Council. However, since these individuals do not have any citizenship rights tied to citizenship of that country, furthering those language interests via corresponding language rights cannot be considered necessary for the exercise of any fundamental citizenship rights.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, by considering language rights derivative of more fundamental non-language rights, our approach is also in line with the linguistic justice literature which considers the language interests in which language rights are grounded derivative of more fundamental interests. Indeed, as De Schutter and Robichaud point out,

[a]ll arguments [for or against language recognition] appeal [...] to the importance of language for individuals and states, whether that importance serves identity or other interests. Language is supposed to be good or important *for something else*; it is not defended as a good in itself (2015, p. 96, emphasis added).

But what does this 'something else' involve? As we explain in the next section, the linguistic justice literature identifies four main types of interests in which language rights can be grounded. The assumption underlying this approach is twofold: first, a right has the function to advance those interests of a right-holder that are considered to have sufficient moral weight to justify holding others under a duty to respect that right (see Wenar, 2021); and, second, certain language interests have sufficient moral weight to justify corresponding rights (De Schutter, 2022). Those interests are opportunity access, democracy, life-world access, and dignity (De Schutter, 2022; De Schutter & Robichaud, 2015).

## 4.2 Language Interests: An Overview

Language interests are interests in language that individuals have because they have an interest in realizing other (non-language) goals (De Schutter & Robichaud, 2015, p. 96). The realization of such goals may require that individuals be proficient in one

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zens' opportunities (for example via the right to work or to free education) should also be concerned about the language skills of non-resident citizens, but that states that do not grant their citizens some of these rights (e.g. states that do not provide their citizens with free public education) need not do so.

<sup>3</sup>Such language rights may of course be justifiable on other grounds but this goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

or more specific languages, which may not necessarily be their first or heritage language(s) but may also include the dominant language of the country in which individuals live. Language interests are normally divided into two categories: non-identity and identity interests. Let us consider them in turn.

The first non-identity interest concerns *opportunity access* (De Schutter, 2022, p. 423). Speaking (a) certain language(s) opens up opportunities, such as access to jobs and education. Consider the case of education, for example. In many states, citizens' interest in accessing educational opportunities is furthered via the recognition of their fundamental right to education. This right may require a peripheral right to language, since access to education is virtually impossible without some degree of linguistic proficiency in the language(s) employed in educational settings (Humphries et al., 2013). A number of scholars have argued that furthering individuals' opportunity interests (in job, education and other areas) requires maximizing their knowledge of the dominant language in a society. For example, writing about Hispanics in the US, Thomas Pogge points out that

the most important linguistic competence for children now growing up in the US is the ability to communicate in English; and the language of instruction in public schools in the US should therefore be chosen by reference to the goal of effectively helping pupils develop fluency in English (Pogge, 2003, pp. 118–119).

Likewise, Brian Barry (2001) highlights that opportunity access demands that children be taught the dominant language of the society in which they live. While Pogge and Barry's arguments also apply to children who are not US citizens (for example children of immigrants who were not born in the US), their reasoning is still relevant to our analysis of non-resident citizens: furthering someone's opportunity interests (which, in the case of citizens, are often advanced via corresponding rights) requires furthering their language interests in certain ways.<sup>4</sup>

A second type of non-identity interest concerns *democracy*. Most theorists of linguistic justice argue that participation in democratic life requires a shared language (Kymlicka, 2001; Patten, 2009; Van Parijs, 2011; see also Barry, 1999; Barry, 2001; Ipperciel, 2007; Mill, 1991). Some scholars do consider the possibility (and desirability) of multilingual forms of democratic participation and deliberation (Bonotti & Stojanović, 2022; Doerr, 2018) but this remains a marginal position within the literature.

Alongside non-identity interests, there are also certain identity interests associated with language. The first is *life-world* access. As Bonotti and De Schutter explain,

[l]anguages exist within specific localities. Proficiency in a language allows one to access the local options, life plans, societal discussions, implicit shared understandings and cultural preconditions of societal life linked to that particular language. Language groups have

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<sup>4</sup>An alternative to Pogge and Barry's approach may be, of course, to provide access to education in multiple languages—an argument often defended by multiculturalist theorists of linguistic justice. However, our goal here is to offer a normative justification for a specific way of furthering citizens' opportunity interests and rights, namely via state support for dominant language learning among non-resident citizens through dedicated diaspora institutions.

shared ways of speaking, shared cultural references (about novelists, poets, historical figures) and shared metaphors that present the world in a non-neutral way (2025, p. 391).

Life-world access is tied to individual autonomy. In his influential theory of liberal multiculturalism, Will Kymlicka (1989, 1995) argues that individual autonomy (a key liberal value) requires a cultural context of choice within which it can be exercised. Furthermore, according to Kymlicka, cultural identity offers an ‘anchor for...self-identification and the safety of effortless secure belonging’ (1995, p. 89, quoting Margalit & Raz, 1995, p. 448). In the specific case of language, it can be argued that members of a language group share ‘implicit knowledge of how to do what, of tacit conventions regarding what is part of this or that enterprise and what is not, what is appropriate and what is not, what is valuable and what is not’ (Margalit & Raz, 1995, p. 86) in the context of their linguistic and cultural community. This is where the idea of a ‘life-world’ is also relevant. According to De Schutter,

members of a language community share particular sets of options and information. A language structures its speakers’ ‘life-world’. This life-world interest in language can be the basis of an argument that advocates for the ability of people to continue living in their own life-world (2022, p. 423).

Asking people to abandon their life-world/context of choice and join another one (for example by assimilating into the mainstream culture of their host society) is both practically difficult (especially for older people) and unjust. More specifically, according to Kymlicka (1989, 1995), members of minority cultures are unlucky since their access to their culture and life-world is less secure than that of members of the majority culture is to theirs. This is what, in his view, demands the protection and recognition of minority cultures via multiculturalism policies and group-differentiated rights, including minority language rights.

Finally, another identity language interest concerns *dignity*. According to several linguistic justice theorists, the state recognition of different languages, or lack thereof, affects their speakers’ self-respect and dignity. If members of a linguistic minority live under a state which officially recognizes and promotes the language of the majority, and perhaps even some *other* minority languages, but not *their* minority language, it is likely that they will feel treated as second-class citizens. As Philippe Van Parijs points out,

[i]n a situation in which people’s collective identities are closely linked to their native language, there arises a major threat to the recognition of an equal status to all as soon as the native language of some is given what is unquestionably a superior function (Van Parijs, 2011, pp. 3–4).

This, according to Van Parijs, demands some level of equal recognition of different languages. In the context of the European Union (EU), for example, this already partly happens via the EU’s recognition of 24 official languages. Van Parijs defends a more demanding view, according to which every language should be granted a territory in which it is dominant. In the context of his overall theory of linguistic justice, which defends the role of English as a European and global lingua franca, this defence of linguistic territoriality is especially important for ensuring that speakers of languages other than English are not considered second-class citizens and do not suffer from low self-respect and dignity.

### 4.3 Language Interests and Linguistic Justice for Emigrants

The interest-based approach that is central to debates on linguistic justice in normative political theory has so far neglected the language interests of non-resident citizens qua non-resident citizens, that is, the language interests involved in their relationship with their country of origin. In this section, we develop a theory of linguistic justice for non-resident citizens. In doing so, we focus specifically on the two non-identity language interests outlined in the previous section: opportunity access and democracy. We do so because while it is possible to identify fundamental citizenship rights that clearly track those interests—for example, the right to work/to free education and voting rights—and therefore justify related peripheral language rights, the same cannot be argued regarding the two identity interests of life-world access and dignity.<sup>5</sup> As a result, we set those two identity interests aside here.<sup>6</sup>

Our argument, it should be noted, is not that the existence of non-resident citizens' language interests in *opportunity access* and *democracy* justifies granting them corresponding rights. Instead, as we explained earlier, we start from the assumption that citizens (including non-resident citizens) are legitimately granted certain fundamental rights by their state, based on certain fundamental interests they have which are morally weighty enough to justify holding their state under a duty to fulfil those rights. The full enjoyment of those fundamental rights requires that citizens (including non-resident citizens) are also granted certain peripheral language rights that are grounded in peripheral language interests. Our analysis in this section only aims to articulate two categories of language interests tracked by non-resident citizens' rights to better understand what linguistic justice demands in the case of non-resident citizens.

#### 4.3.1 *Opportunity Access*

Let us consider, first, *opportunity access*. Most states grant their citizens—including their non-resident citizens—the fundamental rights to work and to free public education.<sup>7</sup> Many non-resident citizens may want to exercise these rights: that is, they

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<sup>5</sup>There is, of course, an extensive literature examining the relationship between dignity and rights (Carozza, 2008; Meyer & Parent, 1992; Tasioulas, 2013). However, in that literature dignity is normally considered a kind of moral status or moral worth that can provide a foundation for rights but not a right in itself.

<sup>6</sup>This does not entail that a different justification for non-resident citizens' language rights based on their identity language interests may not be provided via a different line of argument. However, we set this issue aside here.

<sup>7</sup>While some countries also extend these rights to all resident non-citizens, others do not. For example, immigrants' right to work is often dependent on their visa status. Likewise, in some countries, families on certain temporary visas must pay hefty fees to enrol their children in government schools (see, for example, Department of Education, South Australia, 2023).

may have an interest in accessing job and/or education opportunities in their country of origin. Take, for example, the case of citizens of an EU member state who temporarily move to another EU member state in order to learn the local language, study, or work. Many of these emigrants intend to return soon to their country of origin, where they may seek job opportunities (unless they already have a job that they temporarily left before their departure). Clearly these emigrants have an interest in accessing job opportunities in their country of origin, an interest that is furthered by their fundamental right to work in that country, which they enjoy *qua* citizens. Based on our argument, these temporary emigrants also have an interest in mastering the dominant language of their country of origin, which is the language in which those opportunities are normally available.

Nevertheless, it seems plausible to argue that this interest and the corresponding right do not necessarily require providing them with any language-related support. If we assume that temporary emigrants are native speakers of the dominant language of their country of origin, it is unlikely that their proficiency in that language will decrease during their short stay abroad. Therefore, there does not seem to be a rationale for justifying any kind of language support from their country of origin based on their peripheral language interests (and rights) related to opportunity access. Or, to be more precise, one can argue that that right has already been fulfilled by their country of origin, for example through the provision of early literacy education.

However, this conclusion seems too rushed. While language loss is particularly common among second- and third-generation descendants of emigrants, first-generation emigrants (the category to which temporary emigrants belong) may also experience it to some degree. More precisely, they may experience what linguists generally refer to as ‘language attrition’, understood as ‘a reduction, weakening or loss of a first, second, third, or more language in an individual person or in a community’ (Ahlsén, 2013, p. 1). Two aspects of language attrition are especially relevant to the analysis of temporary emigrants’ language interests.

First, ‘[t]he degree of attrition can vary and different parts or aspects of language can be affected’ (Ahlsén, 2013, p. 1). This is important since while it is unlikely that temporary emigrants will completely lose proficiency in their first language (L1), it is not implausible that they might lose *some* degree of proficiency in *some* areas of that language, even after a short period of time spent abroad. Second, age is a significant factor in the process of language attrition. More specifically, the level of language attrition in L1 can be particularly high for children who migrate before puberty (Bylund, 2009; Schmid, 2002; Schmid & Köpke, 2007). The risk, for these children, is that they may lose full proficiency in their L1 once they become exposed to L2 in their host society (especially through full-time education), even if this exposure only lasts for a few months/years and even if they continue to be exposed to L1 (e.g. at home). If these children return to their country of origin, they may have lost the L1 level of proficiency necessary to access some key opportunities, for example educational or job-related. Depending on the level of language attrition they have experienced, it may take them some time to acquire (again) the proficiency level necessary to access those opportunities.

Therefore, temporary emigrants' peripheral language rights, grounded in their interest in opportunity access, impose a duty upon their state to provide them with at least some degree of language support. This duty, it should be noted, is not grounded in the fact that those citizens left the country of origin and let their language skills fall away but in the fact that the state continues to grant them fundamental rights. Language support may be tailored to the specific needs of these emigrants, for example the ability to write job/university applications and cover letters.

When considering permanent or long-term emigrants (those who never return to their country of origin, or only do so after a long time) and their descendants (at least those who are born and grow up in the host society), one might first assume that they do not have an interest in accessing opportunities in their country of origin. However, also in this case we should not rush into making these kinds of assumptions. There is evidence, for example, that many older emigrants decide to return to their country of origin in their retirement years, or at least divide their residency between that country and their host country (Bolzman et al., 2006). These emigrants may therefore have an interest in accessing various opportunities in their country of origin. These might include various forms of part-time work after retirement, volunteering, studying, or using public services—all opportunities that they normally have a right to access qua citizens. If they have lived for a long time away from their country of origin, these emigrants may have experienced significant levels of language attrition that may hinder their ability to fully access those opportunities in their country of origin. Therefore, they may have an interest in accessing language support that would compensate for that loss.

But access to similar opportunities may also be important for their descendants. There is indeed a rich literature on 'second-generation return' that explores the migration of second-generation descendants of migrants born in the host society to their parents' country of birth (Potter & Phillips, 2006; Wessendorf, 2007). These non-resident citizens may often be not fully proficient (or not proficient at all) in the language of their parents' country of origin. And indeed, in some cases, migrant parents actively encourage their children to return to their country of birth *in order* to learn its language (King & Christou, 2010, p. 169).

Therefore, it seems that even in the case of long-term first-generation emigrants and their second-generation descendants, proficiency in the language of their (or their parents') country of origin may be important to access opportunities in that country in case of return. And given that language attrition or even language loss may especially affect these kinds of non-resident citizens, linguistic justice demands that their (or their parents') country of origin provides them with language support to ensure that they can fully exercise the right that they have, qua citizens of that country, to access those opportunities.

### 4.3.2 *Democracy*

The second category of non-identity language interests is the interest in *democracy*. One of the fundamental rights of citizenship is the right to vote in one country's elections (and, where relevant, referendums) and, more broadly, to participate in democratic life. While the right to vote, at least in democratic countries, is usually granted to all resident citizens above a certain age, non-resident citizens are also often entitled to it. Indeed, one recent estimate is that around 150 countries and territories around the world grant their non-resident citizens voting rights, although with some variations in terms of specific rules (De Lazzari, 2020; IDEA and IFE, 2007; Wellman et al., 2023). The granting of voting rights to non-resident citizens is clearly a widespread phenomenon in the contemporary world. A discussion of non-resident citizens' language interest in democracy therefore also has broad relevance.<sup>8</sup>

Since the exercise of the rights to vote and to participate in democratic life requires that one is able to understand and communicate political information, states have a duty to ensure that their citizens—including their non-resident citizens, when they enjoy those rights—also have peripheral language rights that enable them to exercise those fundamental rights.<sup>9</sup> But to what extent does this apply to non-resident citizens? Some of the issues discussed in the previous section in relation to opportunity access are also relevant to the analysis of non-resident citizens' language interest in democracy.

For a start, in the same way in which emigrants who want to return to their country of origin may have a language interest in accessing job, educational and other opportunities there, they may also have an interest in participating in democratic life in that country if and when they return. And we have seen that there is a general consensus in the literature on linguistic justice around the idea that democratic participation is facilitated by the presence of a lingua franca that all citizens share. Therefore, it would seem that returning emigrants have an interest in accessing the lingua franca of their country of origin for this reason, and that this interest may require language learning when these emigrants have experienced language loss or attrition. Here a clarification is required. If democratic participation is understood in

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<sup>8</sup>One might point out that democracy interests are distinctive since the democracy interests of other citizens may be strongly affected by decisions/policies regarding non-resident citizens. However, this argument, and the question of whether the democracy interests of non-resident citizens are morally weighty enough to warrant corresponding voting rights in spite of their implications for other citizens, are beyond the scope of this chapter. As previously explained, we start from the assumption that whichever fundamental rights are attached to citizenship of a specific state are justified, and that related peripheral language rights are therefore also justified.

<sup>9</sup>However, we also acknowledge that the very channels and opportunities for citizens to exercise the right to democratic participation, access to information, etc. may not always be fully present, even in established liberal democracies. Therefore, it is important to stress that linguistic justice can only be realized if it rests on a wider foundation of procedural and substantive justice at home, that is on the presence of those institutions and channels through which citizens can meaningfully engage, often through language.

a very minimal sense—as only involving voting—it may be possible for these returning emigrants to be able to participate. However, if one endorses a more-than-minimal understanding of democratic participation, which may involve acquiring the information necessary to vote meaningfully—according to one’s preferences and/or the public good and/or by engaging in reasoned deliberation with one’s fellow citizens and/or running for office, then language loss or attrition might have significant negative implications for one’s ability to participate.

In many cases, a democracy-related language interest is important not only for those emigrants who decide to return to their country of origin but also for all non-resident citizens (including the descendants of emigrants who were born overseas) of those states which, as we have seen, grant them voting rights while living abroad. It is plausible that many of these citizens may have very little, if any, proficiency in the language of their country of origin. Imagine, for example, an Italian-American whose great-grandparents emigrated from Italy to the US in the late nineteenth century. If this person has Italian citizenship, they will also automatically have the right to vote in Italian general elections and referendums, even if they have never lived in (or been to) Italy before and, crucially for our analysis, even if they do not speak Italian at all. An analogous scenario can be imagined for all those countries in which external voting is quite permissive and no or limited restrictions are imposed on which specific categories of citizens have the right to vote from abroad. This is the case ‘[i]n a majority of the...countries and territories [that grant their non-resident citizens voting rights, where] the legislation on external voting does not include any special or restrictive requirement for individuals to be eligible for an external vote’ (IDEA and IFE, 2007, p. 18).<sup>10</sup>

If language proficiency, understood as the ability to read, write or comprehend to an adequate level, is important for accessing information related to political matters and therefore being able to vote, its absence is very problematic. Consider, for example, a non-resident citizen, with no knowledge of the language in which political debate and democratic participation are conducted in their country of origin. Can that person meaningfully participate in the country of origin’s democratic life and vote in elections or referendums if they cannot understand campaign speeches, read party manifestos, and more generally access and understand media and news sources? Perhaps this person may be able to access that information in the dominant language of their host society (or in whichever their first language is) via local media or media run by the country of origin in the local language.<sup>11</sup> However, the information provided by these sources may be very limited (as our analysis of the Italo-Australian case in Chap. 5 will show). It seems that, therefore, the peripheral language rights of non-resident citizens who are granted external voting rights by their country of origin entail some degree of language support sufficient to enable them to meaningfully exercise their fundamental right to vote.

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<sup>10</sup>This scenario, of course, will become less common in the case of Italy following the 2025 citizenship legislation changes introduced by the Italian government.

<sup>11</sup>In Australia, for example, the English language version of the Italian newspaper *Il Globo* provides Italian citizens with some information about Italian politics (<https://ilglobo.com/en/>).

At this point it might be objected that emigrants consent to waiving their country of origin's obligation to satisfy their language interests via corresponding language rights. However, this argument seems to be problematic for a number of reasons. For a start, not all rights can be waived, especially rights to primary goods (Bauböck, 2001, p. 337; Carens, 2000, p. 81). For example, one might plausibly argue that emigrants cannot waive their right to opportunity access and to democracy and, consequently, the peripheral language rights that derive from those fundamental core rights. But even if we granted (for the sake of argument) that those fundamental rights could be waived, it would still be difficult to argue that all emigrants have voluntarily consented to waiving them. For example, certain emigrants—such as refugees who escape persecution in their homeland or emigrants who escape dire socio-economic conditions (of which they are often not responsible)—can hardly be said to have made a fully voluntary decision to leave their country of origin (Carens, 2000, p. 81; Choudry, 2002, pp. 63–64; Kymlicka, 1995, p. 99). Furthermore, it is certainly the case that the descendants of emigrants have definitely *not* voluntarily consented to waiving any of their rights since they did not decide to emigrate. Since it is especially descendants of emigrants rather than emigrants who are likely to lack (or have limited) proficiency in their country of origin's dominant language and require language support from that country, and also in view of all the aforementioned reasons, we believe that the consent objection fails to weaken our argument.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

The linguistic justice literature in political theory has so far neglected the language interests of non-resident citizens qua non-resident citizens, focusing instead on their status as immigrants and their relationship with their host society. In this chapter, we have addressed this gap by developing the first normative theory of linguistic justice for non-resident citizens, which can be employed to evaluate language-related diaspora institutions. More specifically, we have argued that non-resident citizens have peripheral language rights which track certain language interests and which their country of citizenship must protect in order for them to be able to fully exercise some of their fundamental citizenship rights. We have focused especially on two types of language interests: opportunity access and democracy, illustrating what they entail for non-resident citizens.

Our argument has important implications for expectations regarding the performance of language-related diaspora institutions discussed in Chap. 1. First, as we pointed out earlier, states have often used such institutions to promote their language and culture abroad among foreign citizens. In some cases, states have also used these institutions as soft foreign policy and diplomacy tools for enhancing their international profile. Our argument implies that such institutions should adjust their focus and pay more attention to the language interests of non-resident citizens, as some of them are already doing (MAECI, n.d.; Agunias, 2009; Hatoss, 2003; Jebejian, 2011).

Second, and relatedly, in order to cater for non-resident citizens' language interests, there should also be a shift in the way these institutions teach and promote language learning. So far, language promotion has often been associated with cultural promotion, and language has therefore been viewed mainly as a channel for accessing a country's literature, art, cinema, etc. However, we believe that more attention should be paid to non-resident citizens' language interests tied to opportunity access and democracy, and the corresponding rights. Non-resident citizens' ability to access opportunities in their country of origin, or to participate in the latter's political life, are language-dependent. It is therefore important that diaspora institutions also provide non-resident citizens with access to language learning that is instrumental to fulfilling those kinds of interests and exercising those kinds of rights. This goal may be achieved, for example, via language classes that teach them how to write a CV or cover letter in the country of origin's dominant language (to access job and educational opportunities there), or to read and understand the political language used in party manifestos and campaign speeches before elections (for them to be able to be informed voters and participate in political life). These are just some examples. The main point is that language-related diaspora institutions should diversify their language support for emigrant communities in order to help emigrants realize the full range of their language interests. Our analysis in Chaps. 4, 5 and 6 will examine one of the language interests discussed in this chapter, namely democracy, by focusing on second- and third-generation Italo-Australian non-resident voters.

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# Chapter 5

## Identity and Voting Among Second- and Third-Generation Italo-Australians



This chapter examines the perceptions of second-generation Italo-Australian voters about their Italian voting entitlement. Drawing on qualitative interview material and descriptive quantitative data,<sup>1</sup> the findings show that second- and third-generation Italo-Australians are cognizant of the privilege of the right to vote at Italian elections. However, the analysis points to a latent challenge for the future of electoral participation of second-generation voters arising from the underlying basis of their Italian identity. Our participants professed their Italian identity in cultural rather than political terms, even though they reported interest in Italian political affairs. This raises questions about whether a strong cultural identity, even when it is accompanied by a legal entitlement to vote, is sufficient to induce subsequent generations to exercise their right to vote, and what kinds of interventions the Italian state may need to consider in order to encourage their full political participation.

### 5.1 Second- and Third-Generation Italo-Australian Voters

While the concept of non-residents voting is a practice that some claim sits awkwardly with democratic norms (Carli, 2006, p. 35), the conferral of such rights by many countries to non-resident citizens has, nevertheless, been growing since the 1990s (Lafleur, 2013, pp. 24–25; see also Chap. 1). With the expansion in transnational voters globally there has been increased interest in the reasons states enfranchise non-resident voters, especially subsequent generations (Lafleur, 2013). This has given rise to growing attention to the voting practices of non-resident electors (Arkilic, 2021; Chaudhary, 2018; Goldberg & Lanz, 2021; Grad et al., 2020;

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<sup>1</sup>In this chapter, survey participants are referred to as survey respondents, while interview participants are referred to as interview participants. It is important to acknowledge that we make no claims about the representativeness of the data. Both the survey and interview data are used in an exploratory sense to illustrate core themes expressed by our participants (see Neha, 2021).

Ognibene & Paulis, 2023), including in Italy (Marchetti-Mercer & Virga, 2023), with studies revealing divergent voting patterns between Italian non-resident and resident voters (Battiston & Luconi, 2020; De Lazzari, 2020). Much of the emergent scholarship on transnational voters is, however, either focused on first-generation electors or does not differentiate between first- and subsequent-generation voters who possess the same entitlement (but see Battiston et al., 2024). As a result, we know little about an important subset of external voters in countries where citizenship and voting rights are conferred by virtue of inherited citizenship, and not on the usual basis of geography of birth.

There are important reasons to focus on subsequent generations of Italo-Australian voters. The most obvious of these is that second- and third-generation diasporic communities are experientially different from the first. Research shows that integration and assimilation is ‘much more central to the second than to the first generation’ (Morawska, 2003, p. 154). This arises from the fact that members of subsequent generations are generally conferred citizenship by the receiving state, a right that first generations often have no automatic claim to, have to take active steps to acquire and, even after years of living in their non-birth state, may still not hold, either because they chose not to or are prevented from doing so. This may suggest that first generations normally maintain a stronger link with their country of origin than subsequent ones, as that country may remain the only country of citizenship for them. We should also expect that subsequent generations are less likely to be economically tethered to their ancestors’ country of origin than their first-generation counterpart. Similarly, the cultural, social, economic, and political immersion of subsequent generations is also different from that of their first-generation counterpart. Unlike the first generation, subsequent generations typically complete their education in their country of birth (their parents’/grandparents’ host society), have normally only lived in that country and have natural fluency in its language. The creation of their dual identities (specifically the ancestor-aligned identity as against their country of birth identity) takes place through interfamilial transmission that occurs almost exclusively in the context of the receiving state.

This was true of the second- and third-generation voters who were surveyed in our study. As shown in Table 5.1, most of the survey respondents had not lived in Italy (62 per cent) and those who had had only spent short periods of residence there, ranging from 3 months to 5 years. Their formal education was completed entirely or almost exclusively in Australia.<sup>2</sup> And while the survey respondents self-reported that their ability to ‘speak’ (95 per cent) and ‘understand’ (87 per cent) Italian was high, most were not immersed in Italian language. Only 30 per cent of our survey respondents reported that they spoke Italian daily, and then again mostly with their parents and grandparents. A small but notable proportion of survey respondents reported having no or poor verbal and comprehension Italian language skills (9 per cent).

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<sup>2</sup>Education was a crucial criterion used to identify second-and third generation Italo-Australians and distinguish them from their first-generation counterparts for this study.

**Table 5.1** Characteristics of Survey Participants (The ‘Other’ category comprises people who did not complete education and/or completed their education in a third country)

	Italy (%)	Australia (%)	Both (%)	Other (%)
Primary education (n = 204)		90		10*
Secondary education (n = 204)		90		10*
Tertiary education (n = 204)		80		20*
	<b>Yes (%)</b>	<b>No (%)</b>		
Speaking Italian daily (n = 204)	30	70		
	<b>Extremely well %</b>	<b>Well %</b>	<b>Average %</b>	<b>Not well %</b>
Understand Italian (n = 204)	35	32	30	3
Speak Italian (n = 204)	29	27	35	9
Write Italian (n = 204)	18	31	30	21

A second reason to examine the perceptions of subsequent-generation Italo-Australian voters in relation to their Italian voting entitlement is because they will make up an increasingly larger share of future external voters. Between 1947 and 1974, approximately 3.2 million people migrated to Australia and Italian emigrants comprised 11.1 per cent of all arrivals in that period. By 1996, there were 100,000 more second-generation than first-generation Italo-Australians (Baldassar, 2005, p. 854). Moreover, the first-generation post-war Italian population—the largest of the different waves of Italian immigrants—arrived in Australia more than 50 years ago (69.4 per cent). This cohort is aging, with a median age of 72 years in 2021 (ABS, 2021). By contrast, the number of second-generation Italo-Australians with one or both parents born in Italy increased from 322,000 in 2016 to 347,000 in 2021. The number of Australians reporting Italian ancestry also increased from one million in 2016 to over 1.1 million in 2021, making Italian the seventh largest ancestry in Australia. Italian was also the seventh largest non-English language used at home in Australia with 228,000 self-reported speakers (ABS, 2021).

The fairly generous rules of Italian citizenship render many Italo-Australians eligible to apply for Italian citizenship (see Chap. 2) under conditions that have been denied to resident immigrants in Italy (Sredanovic, 2025, p. 354). Under the pre-2025 Italian law, a child of an Italian parent was an Italian citizen, with citizenship passed on from parent to child *without limitation of generation* so long as their ancestors did not renounce their citizenship. The result was that a substantial number of Australian-born Italian citizens were eligible to vote by virtue of first-generation ancestors who did not renounce their Italian citizenship.<sup>3</sup> While eligibility has been watered down under the 2025 legislative changes, second- and third-generation Italo-Australians remain eligible to apply for Italian citizenship under

<sup>3</sup> It is even possible that subsequent generations hold a right to Italian citizenship that their first-generation ancestors have subsequently surrendered. For example, the claim to Italian citizenship depends on the ancestor holding Italian citizenship at the time at which the second generation applies for it. It is possible that a first-generation Italian might relinquish their Italian citizenship after their second-generation progeny claims Italian citizenship.

certain conditions,<sup>4</sup> whereas for those with Italian ancestors beyond grandparents it may be more difficult to obtain Italian citizenship under the new rules.

Given slowing immigration from Italy and the aging of the post-war first-generation Italo-Australians, it is reasonable to assume that subsequent generations will soon dominate the ranks of Italo-Australians registered to vote in the Africa, Asia, Oceania and Antarctica electoral district.<sup>5</sup> While the data does not permit us to differentiate enrollments based on place of birth, it is likely that subsequent generations (permanent non-resident voters who acquired citizenship by descent) will dominate enrollments as a result of the contraction in immigration from Italy to Australia. Hence, the combination of subsequent generations' different spatial relationship to the Italian state and their growing numbers among the ranks of Italo-Australian external voters makes it important to understand the relationship of subsequent generations to the right to vote, especially because there is some evidence to suggest that non-Italian-born external voters are less likely to vote than their Italian-born counterparts (Battiston et al., 2024, p. 86). Before focusing on that relationship, the next section explores the basis of identity of subsequent generations of Italo-Australians based on our interview data.

## 5.2 Identity and Subsequent Generations

Identity formation is complex and multi-dimensional, especially in relation to diaspora communities and generations. Migrant communities and their progeny often 'inhabit hybrid identities that transcend the essentialized notions of identity and culture assumed by the nation-state' (Yeoh & Collins, 2022, p. 4). Opportunities for second generations to forge hybrid identities are facilitated by travel and technology, and increasingly encouraged by diasporic state-sponsored cultural and political institutions that aim to integrate them into their ancestral homeland (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). However, identity construction for subsequent generations occurs under very different conditions than in the case of first generations. In the case of subsequent generations, primary identity construction is heavily influenced by the replication of 'homeland practices' in the family home (Soehl & Waldinger, 2012). The intensity of their dual identity is also affected by the degree to which the receiving state is receptive to their inclusion and able to create opportunities for economic advancement and political integration. The more responsive the receiving state is to creating opportunities for meaningful belonging, the more attenuated ties to the country of origin become, and the less likely both first and subsequent generations

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<sup>4</sup>See Introduction, footnote 3.

<sup>5</sup>There were a total of 245,706 registered voters in Africa, Asia Oceania and Antarctica electoral district for the 2022 national election, with Italo-Australian voters being the largest of the national constituencies (Eligendo, 2022).

will be politically active in the country of origin of their forebears (see, for example, Superti, 2023).<sup>6</sup> Nor are these cultural ties sufficient to encourage them to vote in elections in the country of origin (Peltoniemi et al., 2023).

Certainly, studies of second and third Italo-Australian generations have shown that they report a strong attachment to their ancestors' homeland and identify as Italians (Baldassar et al., 2012, p. 9). This orientation persists even though subsequent generations of Italians are highly integrated into Australian society and the beneficiaries of greater social advancement than their ancestors (Baldassar, 2011, p. 119). However, the identity of subsequent generations is different from that of the first generation, and then again is likely to vary across subsequent generations depending on the socio-historical context in which their ancestors arrived (Baldassar, 2011, p. 109). Indeed, Marino's (2019) study of three generations of Australians of Calabrian heritage found differences in their identity construction, with first generations feeling displaced from both origin and receiving state, second generations 'identifying as neither Italian nor Australian, [while also paradoxically] considering themselves both Italian and Australian' (Marino, 2019, p. 36), and third generations embracing their ascribed ethnicities and openly performing their ethnic affiliation. That is, third generations felt no tension in their dual identity compared to their second-generation counterparts, and none of the feelings of displacement reported by the first generation.

Consistent with the literature, our interview respondents reported feeling pride in their Italian heritage, as reflected by this participant: 'I feel very, and I always, I'm proud of [my] Italian background' (interviewee 45, male, 46–60 years). Moreover, participants articulated strong identification with being Italian, as expressed by this interviewee: 'I do identify myself very much as Italian' (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years). In some instances, interviewees reflected that their connection to Italy was even deeper than that of their first-generation relative(s):

My mother, for example... was... born in Italy, but when she came over to Australia, back in those days, the Italians naturalized to become Australian citizens, she has no interest in getting her citizenship back. She has no interest in voting in Italy. She has no connection to the country whatsoever. Whereas me, somebody who lives in this country currently, I still have that connection (interviewee 40, male, 18–30 years).

Some participants even reported feeling more Italian than Australian, as explained by this interviewee:

[A]t times I feel more Italian. Let's say even now, even today, even though I was born in Australia and everything I know is Australia, I do feel very much attached to my roots (interviewee 36, male, 46–60 years).

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<sup>6</sup>See Chaudhary (2018, pp. 438–439) for a succinct overview of this literature. Moreover, Superti (2023) found that external voters 'who perceive immigrant rejection around them (a sort of "push" from the local society in the country of residence) but who are enfranchised (a "pull" from the country of origin) will engage more with origin-country politics and less with residence-country politics' (2600).

In other cases, participants reflected that they were attached equally to their Italian and Australian identity, with one participant explaining the duality in these terms:

[T]his is like asking if you care more about your mother or your father...one doesn't necessarily exclude the other (interviewee 39, male, 46–60 years).

Moreover, several of our interview participants observed that their Italian identity strengthened and deepened with age:

[A]s you get older, you sort of tend to want to return to your roots and especially when one's roots are so wonderful (interviewee 34, female, 60+ years).

Interview participants, however, largely described their Italian identity in cultural and kinship terms.<sup>7</sup> For some of our interviewees, blood connection formed the basis of their Italian identity, as expressed by this interviewee:

I've maintained a connection with where my parents came from, which is, you know, a country that's really important to me. There's such a thing as, I guess, what they call body DNA. So, when I'm back where my parents grew up, the connection to those streets and those areas where they [lived]...as adolescents or kids...[is] beyond something, I can't put it into words (interviewee 14, male, 18–30 years).

Formative socialization, homelife, food and parental influences were also identified by interviewees as foundational to their Italian identity:

I've always been brought up very much under the influence of [Italian] food, religion...[and]... language (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years).

And I guess for me...the way you grew up at home as well with your parents and what they instilled in you in the way they discipline you and how different it is to Australian...kids is just vastly different (interviewee 2, male, 18–30 years).

The Italian language was considered by some of the participants to be critical to their Italian identity. As one interviewee explained, Italian language proficiency reinforced their Italian identity because it allowed them to nurture and maintain kinship ties with family in Italy:

I've found that when I deepened my understanding of the language, I was able to then strengthen...my relationships with my cousins and aunts and uncles over there (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

Some interviewees even expressed scepticism about whether Italian identity could be meaningfully forged (or even rightfully claimed) independent of language proficiency:

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<sup>7</sup>We draw a fairly crude distinction between cultural and political identities. Cultural identity refers to 'values internalized from cultural groups to which the person belongs' and 'by definition, both an aspect of self and a referent for a group to which one belongs' (Schwartz et al., 2008, p. 637). Cultural identity manifests in engagement with Italian cultural practices and activities and often centres around family and friends. We define political identity 'as the collective label for a set of characteristics by which persons are recognized by political actors as members of a political group' and 'expect...to be affiliated in contests over governing power and its use' (Smith, 2004, p. 302). For our purposes, a political identity is expressed via engagement and participation in Italian political affairs, groups, and elections.

[It] sort of irritates me to some respect because a lot of people say, yeah, I'm Italian...But they don't...even speak [the language] (interviewee 25, female, 18–30 years).

Other interview participants, however, challenged the idea that language was critical to acquiring and sustaining an Italian identity, as this interviewee reasoned:

I think everyone...identif[ies] as Italian in different ways. It could be a cultural thing. It could be a professional thing. It could be that you've married an Italian citizen. It could be lots of things. And that doesn't necessarily make you less Italian if you don't speak the language. I think there's lots of ways of identifying with a culture (interviewee 3, female, 18–30 years).

Even those interviewees who regarded language as important to identity were receptive to the idea that identity was not rooted exclusively in language proficiency. One respondent reflected that while language was 'personally' important for them, their non-Italian speaking sibling 'identifies with being Italian Australian as well' (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

While familial cultural practices were identified by interviewees as the primary wellspring of their Italian identity, some participants observed that their Italian identity was reinforced by the ways they felt they had been constructed by the wider Australian community:

[M]y Australian friends see me as very, very Italian...here among my friends, I'm the Italian (interviewee 19, female, 46–60 years).

In other cases, participants referred to a very conscious and deliberate decision to cultivate their Italian identity:

And so I didn't decide...[about my formative] culture pretty much. And then I guess as I got older, I said to myself... 'I don't want to lose my culture because that's where I'm from' (interviewee 2, male, 18–30 years).

### 5.3 The Contingency of Identity

Despite expressing a strong Italian identity, our participants were cognisant of the duality of their identity, a finding consistent with other Australian studies on the Italian diaspora (Baldassar et al., 2012, p. 9). This sentiment is typified by these comments from interviewees:

I have, you know, on, on some levels, a strong connection (to Italy), (o)n other levels a very weak connection (interviewee 5, male, 18–30 years).

[I] consider myself Australian mainly, you know, [with] a little dash of Italian on the side, but you know, that could change over the course of my life as well (interviewee 11, male, 18–30 years).

In fact, many of our interview participants reflected that their Italian identity was contingent, and could be easily unsettled by situations and events that challenged the certitude with which they held it:

[I]n the Australian context, I feel more Italian. And I think I do lots of Italian things with the family and [I feel] quite connected to that side. But when I'm among my family in Italy, I feel [I don't fit quite] as well as everybody else (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

Some interviewees observed that visits to Italy ruptured their sense of certainty about their Italian identity by drawing into sharp relief the cultural differences between themselves and resident Italians:

[W]hen my grandparents came from Calabria, they brought the language, they brought the food...[and] the culture. But when they brought it here, [it] never advanced from that point on because they brought what they had and it stayed that way for nearly 60 years because that's how long they've been here for (interviewee 2, male, 18–30 years).

[As] a kid. I only ever defined myself as Italian...So, and then, you know..., I went over to Italy and...you say things and you do things and you think, oh my gosh, I am just a little Ozzy kid (interviewee 40, male, 18–30 years).

Spending time in Italy exposed participants to cultural practices, behaviours and aesthetics that were unfamiliar, and which led them to question their Italian identity<sup>8</sup>:

[W]hen I'm there, there are a number of things and then sort of Italian behaviours and things that occurred that as an Australian, I would find irritating (interviewee 28, female, 60+ years).

Because I do identify myself very much as Italian and probably 85 per cent of my really good friends are Italian or European...But when I'm in Italy, I can say [there is a] difference between me and my cousins...So, then I feel more Australian. So, it's kind of like this limbo in between states (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years).

It's hard to describe, but yes, you're definitely not a local, that's for sure. You know, language barriers and difficulties, some cultural things. The way we dress even makes us stick out a bit...And even other things, you know, like I remember once we were in Rome and seeing a bunch of 16-year-olds, 17, they're all smoking and you think, oh, that would never happen [in Australia]. So little things like that, I guess, remind you that there are differences in societal expectations and norms [which] influence who you are and how you act (interviewee 12, male, 18–30 years).

Along similar lines, one interviewee noted that seemingly trivial cultural and social artefacts—such as fashion and personal presentation—caused them to reflect on their Italian identity, certainly relative to resident Italians:

I think it's just like how I dress for one. Like, I definitely am a lot more casual than everyone else on the street (interviewee 9, female, 31–45 years).

The Australian multicultural context was also reported by some interviewees as attenuating the solidity of their Italian identity. While it remains common for subsequent generations of Italians to intermarry (Baldassar et al., 2012), many of them nevertheless marry outside of the Italo-Australia community, bringing with it both

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<sup>8</sup>This was not true for all participants. At least one participant remarked that their Italian identity was reaffirmed, and not diluted, on visiting Italy: 'when I arrived in Italy, everyone was speaking Italian, everyone. I guess the culture, the attitudes, the morals, it was all just, it was all normal to me. It was, it was, I didn't feel like I was actually [in a foreign country] at all because I knew the culture' (interviewee 9, female, 31–45 years).

exposure to, and the incorporation of, other cultural practices into their lived experience, as this participant explained:

I have a husband who's English speaking. He's Jewish. He's also second generation (interviewee 42, female, 60+ years).

In other cases, participants grew up in a mixed cultural household, which added yet another layer of complexity to their Italian identity formation:

I feel like being raised in Australia with Italian background and Slovenian background is very confusing and you always feel lost and you don't have...a cultural identity (interviewee 15, female, 31–45 years).

## 5.4 Perceptions of Political-Legal Rights among Subsequent Italo-Australian Generations

A consistent theme expressed by interview participants was that their Italian identity was the product of cultural ties and not strongly connected to the possession of citizenship rights. Interviewees either did not explicitly link their Italian identity to their Italian citizenship or were sceptical that their Italian identity rested in any substantial sense on this legal marker of belonging. As one interview participant argued, 'having (Italian) citizenship...doesn't define you, but just opens up more options' (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years)—a point to which we will return in Chap. 5.

The fact that interview participants expressed their Italian identity in cultural and not political terms is not surprising. Studies have found that receiving societies that promote multiculturalism, like Australia, present lower levels of homeland-oriented political claims-making among migrant communities (Koopmans et al., 2005). Certainly, one Australian study that explored the political practices of the Italo-Australian diaspora concluded that 'political engagement with Italy is not the way in which the diaspora is shaped or formed' (Baldassar et al., 2012, p. 63).

Despite the ambivalence that participants expressed about the relationship between formal political rights and their identity (Baldassar et al., 2012), citizenship rights are not irrelevant to their identity construction. Citizenship, and the vote entitlement that accompanies this status, was viewed by interviewees as complementing their Italian identity, even if it was not its central defining basis. Interviewees regarded Italian citizenship as emblematic of their Italian identity, as typified by this statement: 'the passport and the citizenship is [sic] symbolic' (interviewee 14, male, 18–30 years).

Moreover, the Italo-Australian voters surveyed for this book reported interest in Italian political affairs. When asked specifically how regularly they pay attention to Italian politics, respondents reported high levels of engagement. A plurality—45 per cent—of respondents reported daily (19 per cent) and weekly engagement (26 per cent), with an additional 19 per cent reporting monthly involvement. A further 21 per cent of respondents reported that they mostly engaged with Italian politics

**Table 5.2** Frequency of Engagement with Italian Politics

n = 2004	Daily (%)	Weekly (%)	Monthly (%)	During elections (%)	Never (%)
How often (approximately) do you engage with Italian politics (e.g. on TV, radio, social media, newspapers, or by talking with friends and family)?	19	26	19	21	15

during electoral events. A much smaller proportion of respondents reported no engagement with Italian politics (15 per cent) (Table 5.2).

## 5.5 Attitudes Towards the Right to Vote

One important marker of political engagement is the act of registering to vote. Italo-Australians make up one of the largest groups of registered external voters on a per capita basis from Anglo-European countries that were popular destinations for post-war Italians immigrants. As displayed in Table 5.3, Australia had one of the highest percentages of enrolled external voters per head of population in 2022 at 0.9 per cent, higher than the United Kingdom (0.5 per cent) and the United States (0.07 per cent). However, based on the 2022 Chamber of Deputies elections, Australia has one of the lowest levels of turnout, typically half or more than half the levels of similar states.

At one level, low levels of turnout among Italo-Australian voters at Italian elections might be considered surprising given Australia's compulsory voting context. One study found that external voters who participated in elections in the receiving country were twice as likely to vote in the homeland country (Chaudhary, 2018, p. 450). Based on this, one might expect that Italo-Australian voters are primed to vote at Italian elections because they are required to vote at Australian elections. Yet despite compulsory voting at Australian elections, Italo-Australian electors are seemingly more eager to register to vote than they are to cast a vote at Italian elections.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this, both survey and interview participants generally expressed support for the right to vote at Italian elections, with 56 per cent of survey respondents reporting that they agreed with the Italian policy of enabling non-resident Italian

<sup>9</sup>Studies have identified a range of factors that are likely pertinent to turnout such as the extent to which parties invest in mobilizing non-resident electors to vote at elections (Burgess & Tyburski, 2020); voter ability to access ballot papers (Battiston et al., 2024); voter perceptions of the legitimacy of external voting (Szulecki et al., 2021); the quality of democracy in the receiving state (Ciornei & Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020); the extent to which individuals follow politically oriented news in their country of origin (Himmelroos & von Schoultz, 2023); and ongoing economic ties to country of origin (Goldberg & Lanz, 2021)

**Table 5.3** Voter Turnout by Country at the 2022 Chamber of Deputies Elections

Country	Population <sup>a</sup>	External voters per capita <sup>b</sup>		Turnout <sup>c</sup>
		<i>n</i>	%	%
Australia	26,173,200	228,638	0.9	11.18
Canada	39,752,400	117,283	0.3	22.07
New Zealand	5,213,940	4610	0.09	17.35
United Kingdom	69,138,200	350,170	0.5	24.64
United States of America	345,427,000	248,851	0.07	20.07

<sup>a</sup> World Population Review (2024)

<sup>b</sup> Eligendo (n.d.)

<sup>c</sup>Based on turnout as a percentage of registered voters at the 2022 Chamber of Deputies elections

**Table 5.4** Views on Non-resident Voters

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not sure (%)
<i>n</i> = 204			
Since 2001 Italians living abroad (including in Australia) can vote in Italian elections and referendums. Do you agree with this policy?	64	36	N/A

citizens to vote (see Table 5.4).<sup>10</sup> As one interviewee explained: ‘if they’ve gone through the process to get citizenship...they should be able to use all the rights that citizenship affords them’ (interviewee 2, male, 18–30 years).

Some interviewees argued that the right to vote helped them to maintain their connection with Italy:

I think it's really good for the Italian community if they...cast a vote because it can make them feel more connected to being Italian...If Italian people feel connected to the community...they can promote the community overseas (interviewee 37, female, 18–30 years).

Furthermore, several interview participants referred to the right to vote at Italian elections as an extraordinary entitlement. Many of the interviewees regarded this right as signifying genuine commitment by the Italian state to its diasporic community, and also a generous one given that its grant is independent of any corresponding financial or other obligations for non-resident citizens:

[Y]ou are telling people, yes, we value you here, you know, as opposed to, we’ll only value you once you show us (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years).

Interviewees were, nevertheless, aware that the extension of this right to permanent non-resident citizens subverts the usual understanding of the relationship between voting and residency.

<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, ambivalence abounds about the right to vote, as Table 5.4 shows. Of those who we surveyed, 25 per cent indicated that they were uncertain or unsure about whether non-resident dual citizen Italians should be afforded the right to vote. A further 19 per cent expressed disapproval with the policy of extending voting rights to non-resident citizens.

So, you know, I'm in a position in which...technically I could vote for any of the parties, but I don't have to bear any of their [decisions]. If one party says we're going to do X, Y, and Z, I could vote for them, but it doesn't affect me (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years).

For this reason, many interviewees were sympathetic to resident Italian citizens' possible negative perception of permanent non-resident Italian citizens by descent holding the right to vote:

I can see how the idea of maybe being able to have a say about things that do happen in Italy can be confusing and confronting [for] some people (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

I would understand if they went, we really [only] want people who are living in the country to vote because, you know...they determine the taxation in the country (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years)

Despite such trepidation, most of the respondents whom we interviewed perceived the right to vote as a 'gift' or 'privilege', as encapsulated in the statements of these interviewees:

I kind of feel as though there are so many people who don't have and who fight for the right to vote...you should always vote when you have the opportunity. It is, you know...a gift (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years).

I mean [voting in Italian elections is] an amazing privilege. It really is an amazing privilege to be given that [right]. And yes, it makes me feel more Italian...more involved [and] more connected to Italy (interviewee 19, female, 46–60 years).

Particularly striking was the sense of awe that interviewees reported about their right to vote at Italian elections:

I still keep myself quite updated with the politics as much as I possibly can so that I am prepared when an election does come along. That I'm not just picking any kind of arbitrary box on a ballot paper and throwing a vote away...it really is a privilege and a right. So, with that comes responsibility (interviewee 40, male, 18–30 years).

The feelings of reverence about being conferred the vote may, however, have unexpected effects. In some cases, interviewees reported that they absented themselves from voting at Italian elections owing to feelings of discomfort about exercising the vote in a country in which they do not reside, as explained by this participant:

I don't feel like I can, or I should be voting on issues that don't directly affect me at the moment because I'm not living in that country (interviewee 6, female, 31–45 years).

Certainly, this sentiment may partially explain low turnout among registered non-resident citizens at Italian elections (see Table 5.1). Indeed, a qualitative study of Romanian and Polish migrants residing in Spain and Norway, conducted by Szulecki et al. (2021), found that some did not vote because they 'questioned the legitimacy of their own voting rights in the country of origin' (Szulecki et al., 2021, p. 996).

## 5.6 Motivation for Voting among Second- and Third-Generation Italo-Australians

Despite participants expressing reservations about the ethics of voting in Italian elections, most of our survey respondents reported that they vote. As Table 5.5 shows, approximately 64 per cent of the people whom we surveyed reported having voted in at least one election or referendum<sup>11</sup> and, of those who did, most were repeat voters (80 per cent), that is, voters who have voted more than once.

However, interviewees reported different motivations for voting in Italian elections. In some instances, the justifications were consistent with more conventional democratic rationales for voting, centred on political obligation. While interviewees framed this idea in slightly different ways, the statements below underscore the idea of voting as a duty arising from citizenship:

[If] [y]ou have citizenship in a country, I think...the right thing to do, the respectful thing to do [is to] vote (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years).

I've just sort of felt a...sense of patriotic duty (interviewee 5, male, 18–30 years).

Other interviewees, however, regarded voting less as an obligation arising from their Italian citizenship than as something owed to their ancestors who left their homeland to make a life in Australia. In this conception, the obligation to vote was not viewed as something that they owed the Italian state necessarily, but something that they owed their ancestors who sacrificed kin and country to migrate:

[T]hey're the ones that came from that land...So yeah, I guess that's...where my duty comes from because I'm like, well, when they're gone, they're gone, that's it (interviewee 2, male, 18–30 years).

In other instances, interviewees referred to their decision to vote as an entitlement-claim arising from their financial contribution to the Italian state. Such respondents invoked a more instrumental rationale for voting based on a desire to change or influence policy:

[N]ow that...I'm part owner of a property in Italy, we are taxed at a much higher rate on utilities and other forms of tax revenue [than] Ital[jians] (interviewee 19, female, 46–60 years).

Quite apart from invoking more familiar justifications for voting, interviewees also referred to what might be understood as expressive reasons for participating in

**Table 5.5** Voting Frequency at Italian Elections

n = 204	Yes (%)	No (%)
Have you ever voted in an Italian election and/or referendum?	64	36

<sup>11</sup> There may be legitimate reasons which explain why not every survey respondent voted such as they did not satisfy the minimum age requirements to vote or their ballot did not arrive on time, for example.

elections. For some interviewees, voting in Italian elections provided them with another way to connect to their ancestral homeland. Related to this was the view that voting in Italian elections imbued them with purpose and gratification: ‘I remember feeling quite proud’ (interviewee 28, female, 60+ years). In a similar vein, one interview participant expressed this sentiment in these terms:

[T]he status (citizenship) that I have there...is really kind of cool. When you think about it, like I’m in Melbourne, thousands and thousands [of] kilometers away, and I get to have [a say about] what’s going on over there [in Italy] as informed or uninformed as it might be (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

## 5.7 Voting Practices of Italo-Australian Voters

Despite perceiving the opportunity to vote at Italian elections as an immense privilege, many of the interviewees expressed some reticence about exercising their right to vote. Two key ideas were articulated in relation to voting hesitancy.

One broad type of claim conveyed by some of our interviewees in relation to voting hesitancy involved feelings of discomfort about voting at Italian elections given their residency status. As one interviewee noted, voting is a cognitively demanding activity even when one is voting in the country in which one ordinarily resides:

I mean, sometimes it’s hard to understand what you’re voting for in your own country, where you live and things affect you every day, let alone a country that, you know, you’re not, you’re not, you’re not paying taxes in... So whilst it’s legal and, and they’ve got citizenship, I would not feel comfortable knowing that someone in a far-away land was voting on an issue that directly affects me when some of them have never been to Italy... [W]hether they have an understanding of the language or not... that doesn’t bother me as much as someone who, although they’ve got a citizenship... has never been there [or] has never lived there (interviewee 6, female, 31–45 years).

Respondents also expressed concerns that exercising their right to vote at Italian elections could produce unintentional harm to resident Italians. They were particularly mindful of the disconnect between their right to vote in Italian elections, their country of residence, and the consequences of their voting choices:<sup>12</sup>

I’d be impacting people... halfway across the world, but without knowing the context of what’s actually going on (interviewee 10, male, 18–30 years).

<sup>12</sup>This concern is not unreasonable, especially considering that Italo-Australian voters are out of step with their Italian counterparts. In 2022, for example, the Democratic Party—Democratic and Progressive Italy group received 26.12 per cent of the vote in Italy, while in Australia they won 46.33 per cent of the vote. Similarly, support among Italo-Australian voters for the winning League for Salvini Premier—Go Italy—Brothers of Italy was much lower compared to Italian voters (27.72 per cent compared to 43.79 per cent among Italian voters) (Eligendo, 2022).

**Table 5.6** Knowledge of Italian politics

n = 204	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
Because I live in Australia, I have limited knowledge and understanding of Italian politics.	24	36	19	12	9

[I]f I was living in Italy, I would definitely vote, but being very disconnected from the policies that these parties are actually implementing, it didn't feel like something I should probably have a vote in (interviewee 27, male, 60+ years).<sup>13</sup>

A second set of reasons for voting abstinence expressed by respondents was related to anxiety over their knowledge levels about Italian politics. As Table 5.6 shows, most of the survey respondents reported that they had limited knowledge about Italian politics, even if they sought to remain engaged with Italian political affairs. Approximately 60 per cent of surveyed respondents indicated that they had limited understanding of Italian politics, with only 21 per cent of survey respondents confident about their level of knowledge. For these reasons, some interviewees reported that they abstained from voting because they believed that it was unethical for them to vote as non-residents based on concerns about their limited understanding of Italian politics:<sup>14</sup>

I don't understand enough of the political parties and their vested interests and commercial interests and all those things. So, I don't think it's ethically right for me to cast a vote, that's going to potentially have some impact on someone else's life (interviewee 3, female, 18–30 years).

A potential real-world manifestation of voters' perceived knowledge deficits is reflected in the high rates of invalid voting among Italo-Australian voters. Table 5.7 compares the rates of invalid voting between Italo-Australian external voters and resident Italian voters across Chamber of Deputies and Senate elections between 2006 and 2022. The data shows that rates of invalid voting among Italo-Australian

<sup>13</sup>The greatest consternation was reserved for the idea that non-resident citizens can elect their own representatives. As one interviewee commented: 'I think that the right to vote is separate to the rights to representation overseas' (interviewee 45, male, 46–60 years); 'I would much rather have a situation where we voted for our political representative in our place of origin in Italy' (interviewee 48, male, 60+ years). Essentially, some respondents were less concerned about the right of the non-resident citizen to vote than about the idea of a non-resident member of parliament who was representing a diaspora.

<sup>14</sup>It is important to note that this view was not universally shared. Others whom we interviewed took the view that many people voted in their country of residence without knowing much, hence any deficits of understanding between resident and non-resident voters would unlikely be extraordinarily different. This view is exemplified by the following observation: 'I don't think it's any different to people here who have no idea about politics and they just blindly go and vote' (interviewee 22, female, 60+ years). Interviewees who subscribed to this position were of the view that understanding of Italian politics and fitness to vote have more to do with interest than with geography/residency.

**Table 5.7** Invalid Voting, Non-resident Italo-Australian Voters and Resident Italians Compared, 2006–2022

Year	Australia		Italy	Australia		Italy
	Chamber of Deputies	Invalid		Senate	Invalid	
	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%	
2022	5229 (25566)	20.47	4.47	5331 (25630)	21	4.44
2018	5444 (31634)	16.68	3.19	5362 (29,689)	18	3.27
2013	5945 (32563)	18.25	3.58	4767 (29518)	16	3.56
2008	5813 (34988)	16.61	3.74	5804 (33195)	17	3.77
2006	3817 (34808)	10.96	2.91	3626 (32261)	11	3.11

**Table 5.8** Importance of Language to Voting

<i>n</i> = 204	Important (%)	Not important (%)	Not sure (%)
In your opinion, how important is it to know the Italian language to understand Italian politics and vote in Italian elections from Australia?	73	14	13

voters are significantly higher than among their resident Italian counterparts, peaking at over 20 per cent at the 2022 elections. Italo-Australian voters are being disenfranchised at much higher levels than resident Italian voters, presumably because they are unable to comply with the requirements to cast a valid vote. The high rate of informality indicates that Italo-Australian voters may require greater support to cast a formal vote.

While respondents were ambivalent about whether language was central to their Italian identity, there was greater agreement that language was important to their ability to make full use of the right to vote.<sup>15</sup> Table 5.8 reveals that 73 per cent of surveyed respondents believed that language was essential to casting an informed vote. Only 13 per cent of surveyed respondents were uncertain, while 14 per cent reported that language was not critical. Language fluency appears to be linked to turnout. One recent study that explored the characteristics of external Italian voters who failed to vote at the 2020 referendum and 2018 general election found that native speakers were much more likely to vote than non-native speakers (Battiston et al., 2024, p. 86). This finding is consistent with Himmelroos and von Schoultz's (2023) study which found that external voters who are able to follow politics in their country of origin via media engagement (whether traditional or social media) are much more likely to participate in elections in that country.

The sentiment that language is a precondition for being able to engage in informed voting was expressed by this participant, who argued:

<sup>15</sup>The link between language, political interest and voting among second-generation migrants is modest. For example, one study of second-generation migrants in the US found that net of other factors, acquiring the ancestor's language does not increase political interest or participation in civil society organizations (Soehl & Waldinger, 2012, p. 802).

**Table 5.9** Importance of language to voting

n = 204	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not sure (%)
Should the Italian government provide information on Italian politics and elections in English for Italians in Australia?	60	19	21

[T]o make an informed [vote] you need to understand what you’re voting for. And realistically you need to have a command of the language to do your research because I doubt there’s many English sources out there that are going to go cover Italian politics, to the extent to help foreigners make an informed voting decision (interviewee 2, male, 18–30 years).

Some of our interviewees acknowledged that there are challenges in allowing non-resident citizens to vote on matters which they might not be fully immersed in or informed about. While some interviewees believed that lack of knowledge about Italian political affairs might encourage non-resident citizens to learn more about the issues confronting the Italian state, there were concerns about the availability of accessible information for non-resident citizens:

I think [lack of knowledge] would at least encourage them to have a look at it and maybe read a bit more about it. And then it’s a question of, can they get that [information]? Especially for [people without language], could they get that information online in English? And I think it would be really difficult to get that [information] because I don’t...think it’s really widely reported on in English (interviewee 37, female, 18–30 years).

Some of the interviewees discussed the strategies that they had developed to overcome their lack of Italian language proficiency, as one of them explained:

I would research firstly on the Italian websites. But if I didn’t understand, then I would go to the BBC for example, or another website too, and, and read it in English to help me understand what was going on (interviewee 19, female, 46–60 years).

The interview data suggests that interviewees invest time and energy in their voting preparations. This was reflected in the responses of many of the survey respondents who also believed that the Italian government could assist more in facilitating their ability to vote. For example, when survey respondents (see Table 5.9) were asked: ‘should the Italian government provide information on Italian politics and elections in English for Italians in Australia?’, 60 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement, with only 20 per cent saying that it was not necessary and 21 per cent uncertain.

## 5.8 Conclusion

Second- and third generation Italo-Australian voters identify as Italians and feel a strong affinity to their first-generation relatives’ homeland. This connection is, however, primarily cultural, consistent with the orientations of subsequent generations in other settings where integration in the receiving state is high. The Italo-Australians

interviewed for this research generally do not identify as Italian in political or legal terms, even if they express interest in Italian politics and value their Italian citizenship status.

Despite their recognition of the enormous privilege of being able to vote in Italian elections, our participants reported two barriers to voting. The first set of challenges is what might be described as information constraints. Both survey and interview participants expressed concerns that they lacked sufficient knowledge, as well as language skills, to cast an informed vote. Low levels of language proficiency are known to dampen turnout among external voters (see, for example, Battiston et al., 2024) but they may also have other consequences, as reflected in the high levels of invalid votes cast by Italo-Australian voters (Table 5.7).

A second set of challenges to voting identified by our participants arise from scruples they hold about the ethics of voting in Italian elections because they reside in Australia. Voting hesitancy reflects beliefs about the sanctity of the link between voting and place. Second- and third-generation voters may be less inclined to vote because they consider it illegitimate (because they have no actual stake in the outcome) and unfair (because they do not pay taxes in Italy) for them to do so.

Our findings raise the question of how both challenges may be overcome if, as we postulate, non-Italian born persons will increasingly dominate the ranks of future external voters in Australia, at least for another generation or more.<sup>16</sup> The first barrier, the information constraint, may be resolved for example by providing external voters with Italian language lessons and improved English written materials for casting a vote, as we explain in subsequent chapters. The second challenge—the legitimacy barrier—will involve greater investment in civics and citizenship education to help external voters overcome their reticence about voting in Italian elections. The particular nature of the intervention will need to be given much thought, given that state-led outreach efforts are not necessarily always effective in mobilizing non-resident voters (Burgess, 2018). Szulecki et al. (2021, p. 1004) argue that the most effective channels for voter mobilization are to be found in ‘voter-to-voter mobilization...because it is adjusted to migrants’ transnational positionality’. More investment, therefore, by the Italian government in Italo-Australian networks and organizations, and second- and third-generation entrepreneurs, might hold the key to boosting turnout, along with greater investment in information sources written in the dominant language of the country in which the relevant external voters reside. Such themes will be returned to in Chap. 6.

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<sup>16</sup>The 2025 citizenship reforms do not rescind citizenship and voting rights for persons who have already acquired them but only for those who will no longer qualify in light of the imposition of generational limits.

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## Chapter 6

# Language and Political Participation: Key Stakeholders' and Italo-Australian Voters' Perspectives



In the previous chapter we considered the issue of language in the context of second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' perception of their identity. We found that while some of our interviewees consider language central to their Italian identity, others are more sceptical about its central role in sustaining that identity. While our analysis focused primarily on the cultural dimension of Italian identity, the chapter also touched upon the link between language and political participation in relation to engagement in Italian politics. This chapter focuses on that link more closely. It draws on qualitative interviews with representatives of Italian institutions and organizations as well as second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters. These interviews gathered the insights of both categories of participants on Italian language acquisition and proficiency among second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters, and on how the latter access Italian language information for voting purposes. While Italo-Australian voters provide insights about their experiences of membership in the transnational community and their engagement with Italian politics from abroad, stakeholders offered a broader view on the role of Italian diaspora institutions and organizations, and on the evolution of the Italian transnational community, including its participation in Italian politics from abroad.

The chapter is organized into two sections. In the first section, we explore the extent to which Italo-Australians perceive their language interests in line with the normative scholarship on linguistic justice discussed in Chap. 3. We find that while Italo-Australian voters tend to relate knowledge of the Italian language primarily to *opportunity access* and *life-world access*, the importance of *dignity* and *democracy* are also highlighted, albeit latently. In the second section, we explore the process of language acquisition among second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters, as well as their perceptions of their language proficiency. We find that their language proficiency is stronger in relation to conversation but relatively poor in relation to literacy (reading and writing), and that this poses significant obstacles to their ability to fully engage in political participation, particularly by acquiring the political knowledge necessary to make informed voting decisions and participating in public debates about Italian current affairs. The section further examines how language

intersects with Italo-Australians' ability to access and make use of Italian language information for voting purposes, and what strategies Italo-Australian voters have developed to get around language limitations.

## 6.1 Realizing Language Interests Through Italian

In Chap. 3 we set out our normative theory of linguistic justice for non-resident citizens. Language interests, we explained, are interests in language that individuals have because they have an interest in realizing other (non-language) goals (De Schutter & Robichaud, 2015, p. 96). The realization of such goals may require that individuals be proficient in one or more specific languages, which may not necessarily be their first or heritage language(s) and may (also) include the dominant language of the country in which they live.

A key limitation of the linguistic justice literature, however, is that its engagement with insights from sociolinguistics and other empirical disciplines is limited (May, 2023). One implication of this shortcoming is that the language interests that the linguistic justice literature identifies, while plausible, are not grounded in any specific empirical evidence. Therefore, in our empirical analysis, we sought to identify what kinds of language interests (if any) drive second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters to learn Italian and/or, more generally, what kinds of language interests they think knowledge of the Italian language helps them fulfil. This analysis, we believe, is important for our project. The normative thesis central to this book, defended in Chap. 3, is that when individuals have certain fundamental rights qua citizens of a specific state, that state has a duty to provide them with (and, if necessary, financially support) the means necessary for them to exercise those rights. In the case of non-resident citizens, this entails (among other things) that governments ought to help non-resident citizens to be proficient in the dominant language of their country of origin when this has an impact on their ability to realize their language interests.

Based on this framework, we believe that investigating how second- and third-generation Italo-Australians understand their language interests vis-à-vis Italian can help to devise better government interventions aimed at addressing the language problems confronted by these citizens. More specifically, we suspect that when non-resident citizens do not recognize the importance of one or more language interests—as is particularly the case, we will show, with the *democracy* interest for second- and third-generation Italo-Australians—that might affect their demand for adequate language support in that area and, consequently, the extent to which the government of the country of origin provides resources to offer that support. In other words, if citizens do not consider their lack of language proficiency a barrier to political participation (or, as in our case, do not even see—unless explicitly prompted—a connection between language proficiency and political participation), it is unlikely that they will put pressure on government institutions to provide the support necessary for them to acquire that proficiency.

And, indeed, the picture that emerges from our analysis in Chaps. 5 and 6 is one in which the language support that has been provided by the Italian government to second- and third-generation Italo-Australians has little if any focus on political participation. However, and as subsequent sections of this chapter show, once participants are prompted to reflect explicitly on the connection between language and political participation, we can gain very useful insights into the effect of language proficiency (or lack thereof) on their political participation, insights which will inform our analysis of recommendations in Chap. 6.

But let us take a step back and consider what the participants in our study thought about their language interests vis-à-vis Italian. In our analysis, we draw upon the four categories of language interests discussed in Chap. 3: *opportunity access* (languages open up opportunities, such as access to jobs and education); *democracy* (languages enable participation in democratic life); *life-world access* (languages give access to shared options and information); and *dignity* (the social and political recognition of a person's language, or lack thereof, can affect a person's equal status).<sup>1</sup>

Many interviewees highlighted *opportunity access* as one of the key language interests that knowledge of Italian helped them fulfil. It is uncontroversial that language learning does open up opportunities in such diverse fields as employment and education (De Schutter, 2022, p. 423). Some of the stakeholders whom we interviewed highlighted the link between the Italian language and *opportunity access*, especially as a tool that could facilitate Italo-Australians' ability to participate in Italy's social, cultural and economic life. For example, Nicola Caré, a member of the Chamber of Deputies (2018–Present) representing the Democratic Party for the Overseas Constituency electoral district Africa, Asia, Oceania and Antarctica, explained:

[Italo-Australians] must have the opportunity to return [to Italy], therefore I do not think they can be cut out from Italian social and political life.<sup>2</sup>

That migration is not unidirectional is a well-established fact in the literature on migration. Indeed several studies have shown that the decision to return to the country of origin might be common not only among those who actually migrated (Bolzman et al., 2006) but also among their descendants (Potter & Phillips, 2006; Wessendorf, 2007), who might not be as proficient in the dominant language of that country and therefore might require language support to be able to avail themselves of the opportunity to relocate there at some point in their lives. Furthermore, the growing phenomenon of 'circular migration'—the temporary and regular movement of people between two or more countries—has been shown not to be conducive to language learning (Geurts & Lubbers, 2016; Isphording, 2015). Although existing research on circular migration and language normally focuses on language acquisition in the host society, arguably similar implications follow if we

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there is no (and we do not assume a) hierarchy between these language interests in the linguistic justice literature.

<sup>2</sup> Our translation from Italian to English.

focus on non-resident citizens' circular movement between their country of residence and their country of origin, with proficiency in the latter's dominant language being hindered by the temporary nature of their regular visits to that country.

The intention to relocate to (or simply spend more time in) Italy was a strong motivational factor highlighted by some of the non-stakeholder interviewees when discussing their decision to learn Italian. One of the participants, for example, explained:

[A]s I get older, spending more time in Italy will become a focus for me. I can imagine, you know, taking some time off from work and spending...maybe six months in Italy...they're the sorts of things for me that are going to fuel my interest in terms of getting to a higher level of the language (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years).

Furthering business interests in Italy was another *opportunity access* argument expressed by both stakeholders and Italo-Australian interviewees. Francesco Pascalis, former President of the *Comitato degli Italiani all'Estero* (Com.It.Es) for Victoria and Tasmania (2015–2021), highlighted for example how 'the commercial aspect is [one of the key aspects that] can be related to the functionality of the [Italian] language'.<sup>3</sup> This insight is in line with recent research, which has shown that while English remains the dominant global language of trade and business, the use of lesser-known local languages is becoming more important in international businesses as it provides access to local markets (Pierini, 2016). The emphasis on the business opportunities that the Italian language could create was also highlighted by one of the Italo-Australian voters whom we interviewed, a business owner herself, who explained:

[I]f I had employees who knew nothing about the Italian language and needed to, because of work and things like that, if there's free language classes, they could go, yeah, I would, I would, I would love for them to go learn the Italian language (interviewee 17, female, 40–60 years).

A model for these kinds of classes is provided, for example, by the *Società Dante Alighieri*, which offers courses in Italian for business (Società Dante Alighieri, n.d.).

However, some of the Italian citizens whom we interviewed also stressed the importance of more personal, non-commercial opportunities, especially the possibility of (re)connecting with distant relatives and friends—even in the absence of a desire to relocate to Italy—as well as with those living in Australia but with whom language barriers might have prevented full communication. Certainly, one study of Italo-Australians found that connecting to their Italian heritage was a strong motivator for learning the Italian language (Benatti & Tarantini, 2017, p. 476; Palmieri, 2023). In this vein, one of the interviewees explained:

I think a lot of my investment in Italian language and, and studying Italian, whether that be language or culture...that's from a personal interest rather than...because I'm Italian... And I think a lot of the real benefits, for example...[include a] better connection with my nonna...[as well as]...really good relationships with teachers and academics at university...(interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

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<sup>3</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

Other interviewees made a similar point by also comparing their experience as (fluent) Italian speakers with that of their non-Italian-speaking counterparts, emphasizing the obstacles that the lack of Italian language proficiency could impose on Italo-Australians' ability to engage in meaningful personal relationships. For example, one of the interviewees stressed:

[A]lmost everybody, every Italian Australian...that I know of has some distant relatives in Italy. And I think one of the things that's stopping them from creating a bond is the language...But for me personally, I've found that when I deepened my understanding of the language, I was able to then strengthen my relationships with my cousins and aunts and uncles over there [i.e. in Italy]. And I do this almost on a daily basis through WhatsApp (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

A related theme that emerged from our interviews was the temporal and transgenerational nature of the relationships that knowledge of the Italian language could offer for some Italo-Australians. This issue aligns with the importance of the link between shared language and transgenerational communication evidenced by existing studies. Some of these studies particularly highlight the way in which the absence of a shared language often results from the phenomenon of 'shared language erosion': an immigrant child acquires greater proficiency in the host society's language but loses proficiency in their heritage language, whereas their parents and grandparents maintain heritage language proficiency but only acquire limited proficiency in the host society's language (Veltman, 1983; Worthy et al., 2002). This phenomenon can hinder communication between immigrant children and their parents/grandparents, potentially undermining the ability to form attachments and even leading to conflict (Cox et al., 2021). Describing their experience, one of our interviewees explained:

[N]othing transports me back to my parents and my childhood and my cousins and all the joy and...all the nostalgia and the memories of growing up, that's all connected with, you know, with Italian. And my father particularly described the village to such a degree that I knew where everybody lived and, you know, my first trip there was when I was about 13. And I knew exactly where these people lived because my father had described it to me. So it's about connection to your parents as well for me (interviewee 19, female, 46–60 years).

While *opportunity access* was viewed by many of our interviewees as a key language interest tied to knowledge of Italian, no less important for many of them was *life-world access*. As we explained in Chap. 3, each language discloses a life-world—a shared way of thinking and experiencing the world—for its speakers, who have an interest in preserving their access to that life-world for them and, in many cases, for their children and descendants (De Schutter, 2022, p. 423). Not being able to speak the language associated with a certain life-world means not being able to access that life-world. Conversely, speaking two or more languages can result in certain thoughts and behaviours that are more unlikely to emerge in monolingual settings. For example, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that different languages shape our thoughts in different ways, including when it comes to ethical and political beliefs (Collin, 2013; Peled & Bonotti, 2016). More generally, different languages disclose different life-worlds and, in the case of migrants, different

life-worlds tied to different languages may often coexist side by side, with the relationship between them evolving over time. As Bonotti and De Schutter explain,

second, third and later generations' life-worlds will often be closer to that of the majority language group than the first generation's life-world. The children of first-generation immigrants, for example, will tend to be more proficient in the host society's majority language than their parents, as they will go to schools in the majority language or generally learn to speak the majority language more fluently by simply growing up in the host society. This will help them to gradually gain access to the life-world that the majority language helps disclose and which will co-exist with the life-world disclosed by their heritage language (if they do also learn the latter) (Bonotti & De Schutter, 2025, p. 397).

One of the interviewees succinctly captured the connection between Italian language and Italian life-world in the following way:

So [knowing Italian] helps me to appreciate a lot more about the Italian way of thinking and the way of life. And it's been more than just learning a language. It's opened up a whole world, for example of literature. I mean, you can still read Italian literature, translated into English, but it's not the same... And I can watch Italian movies without having to read the subtitles, I understand idiomatic expressions a lot better (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

The same point was reiterated by another participant:

I just felt like I'd like to be able to, as I said before, I'd like to be able to read [Italian] a bit better, to consume a little bit more of the cultural information that's out there in a way that's clear to me, you know, without having to have a book and to have to stop every time and check some vocabulary or some historical thing and so on... Reading is a much more immersive way to really understand something without having a translation of something (interviewee 36, male, 46–60 years).

Other interviewees lamented the loss of life-world access that lack of Italian language knowledge could result in for them. For example, one of them explained:

Yeah. I feel like I've lost a lot of the stories that can be passed down, a lot of the culture. Like, so when I did recently a research paper on the lives of Italian women, migrant women in Australia... I couldn't interview my grandmother [and this was a problem] 'cause like many of the stories have not been passed down and been lost. So yeah, I feel like there could have been more interaction with my grandparents if I spoke the language (interviewee 15, female, 31–45 years).

While *opportunity* and *life-world access* figured prominently among our interviewees' responses, the other two language interests normally highlighted in the linguistic justice literature—*dignity* and *democracy*—played a much lesser role. Let us consider the former first.

The connection between language and *dignity* has been highlighted in previous studies. For example, Van Parijs (2011) argues that state recognition of different languages, or lack thereof, affects their speakers' self-respect and dignity. Accordingly, if a person lives in a society in which their language is not granted any official recognition while (an)other language(s) is (are), their self-esteem will be undermined. Other studies have underscored the link between individuals' linguistic repertoires and their dignity, showing for example how those migrants who have limited proficiency in their host society's dominant language often experience

inequality, devaluation and loss of dignity (Zschomler, 2019). In our study, however, the link between Italian language and dignity assumed a different rationale from the conventional understanding of dignity in the literature. As Francesco Pascalis, former President of the *Comitato degli Italiani all'Estero* (Com.It.Es) for Victoria and Tasmania (2015–2021), explained, *dignity* played a critical role in shaping the Italian state's diasporic activities:

There has been an emphasis [by Italian institutions] on cultural promotion, linking the Italian language with this goal. And I believe this approach might have worked in a specific historical period [after WWII] when there was a need to strengthen the Italian presence [in Australia]...and reinforce the cultural aspect to give dignity to the Italian presence, that is, to explain to Australians that, of course, we lost the war and made many mistakes...but we come from a great European country with a huge cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup>

The link between Italian language and *dignity* (or lack thereof) was also highlighted by some of the Italo-Australian voters whom we surveyed. When asked to reflect on why they had not attended Italian language classes outside their formal education, one respondent noted:

There was no need to learn Italian as it was victimized around the community when I was young (Q46 survey, Anonymous Respondent).

These statements offer a slightly different take on the dignity dimension of language compared to those found in the literature. In a context in which members of a linguistic minority—in this case, Italian migrants in Australia after WWII—are the target of distrust and prejudice, the country of origin's promotion of their language and culture can help improve their feeling of cultural security despite the host society's hostility. This introduces a new dimension of dignity which rarely emerges in the existing literature, which mainly focuses on the relationship between speakers of a language and state recognition by their host society.

Finally, the language interest in *democracy* was not explicitly mentioned by either stakeholders or Italo-Australian participants. Even when Italo-Australians were specifically prompted during interviews about the reasons why they had decided (or might decide) to learn Italian, no one stressed the ability to participate in Italian politics and democratic life as a reason. Yet, while none of the interviewees mentioned that understanding and speaking Italian would be crucial for their ability to acquire information about and participate in Italian political life, the same was less true of survey respondents. Indeed, when questioned explicitly about the importance of Italian language knowledge for understanding Italian politics and participating in Italian elections and referendums, approximately 73 per cent of surveyed respondents indicated that they considered that knowledge important. Relatedly, as we show in the following sections, once participants were prompted to reflect on their understanding of and participation in Italian politics, the linguistic dimensions of the democracy theme became prominent in our findings.

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<sup>4</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

This discrepancy between survey and interview responses reveals a potentially interesting fact about language interests. While such interests, we explained earlier, are not ranked in a hierarchy in the normative linguistic justice literature, it may be the case that some of them—specifically *opportunity* and *life-world access*—do play a more important role in people's everyday lives. This is not surprising. After all, work and education (which are linked to opportunity access) as well as relationships with one's family and community (which are tied to life-world access) are central to most people's lives, something that certainly cannot be said about participation in democratic life. In contrast, voting is an intermittent activity, something which Italo-Australian voters are invited to do every few years.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, recent work has highlighted how democratic institutions should be designed based on the assumption that people have limited time and inclination to engage in politics (Elliott, 2023). Nevertheless, and as the remainder of our analysis shows, once people are prompted to reflect on the connection between language and politics, we can gain very useful insights into the effect of language proficiency (or lack thereof) on their democratic participation.

## 6.2 Second- and Third-Generation Italo-Australians and Language Acquisition

Language learning among second-generation immigrants around the world is widely studied in the literature. More specifically, existing research has shown that children of immigrants normally acquire and maintain proficiency in their heritage language via two main channels: formal education and home language maintenance. However, it has also been shown that especially in English-speaking countries like Australia, state support for non-English languages in schools is limited (Benz, 2018; Clyne, 2005; Lo Bianco, 2008), and that community language schools are often largely ineffective in contributing to language preservation (Kondo, 1997; Tse, 2001). Conversely, home language maintenance—the persistent use of a non-dominant language in the domestic sphere (Liang, 2018), especially thanks to parents' and grandparents' support—normally constitutes the major source of heritage language learning for children of immigrants (Biedinger et al., 2015; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2009). In our study we wanted to understand how Italo-Australian participants had learnt Italian and through which channels and resources.

Formal education played an important role in the process of Italian language acquisition for many participants. More specifically, approximately 68 per cent of survey respondents declared that they had studied Italian in either primary/high school or community language schools (for example Saturday schools). However, this was not everyone's experience. In some cases, participants explained that their

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<sup>5</sup>It might well be that interviewees did not see any connection between language and political participation but it is also possible that the omission related to the timing of the interviews which did not coincide with an Italian election or referendum.

parents had not provided them with formal Italian language education. For example, one of them noted:

Some of my friends have learnt Italian...some Italian migrants keep the language and their parents had helped them learn the language by going to Italian school and things as a child. But my family didn't do that (interviewee 15, female, 31–45 years).

And even in those cases in which participants had the opportunity to study Italian in school, this was no guarantee that they would acquire the level of proficiency that they (or their parents) had hoped for. For example, one participant explained:

My parents valued education and they did make some sporadic efforts to send me to Italian school. I did not do well there, or I didn't relate to the teachers. And I didn't really...practice every day (interviewee 42, female, 60+ years).

Around half of the participants declared that they decided to attend Italian language classes later in life to (re)build their language skills. Their decisions were sometimes driven by specific circumstances and triggering events in their lives. One of the participants, for example, recounted their experience in the following way:

So I suddenly found myself in Italy and all these cousins who I couldn't speak to...And I think that for me was the trigger [for learning Italian] (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

The survey and interview data reveal that, for most of the participants, knowledge of Italian was acquired at home rather than via formal education. When asked whether they ever speak Italian at home, only 8 per cent of surveyed respondents declared not to have done so ever. The majority of survey respondents indicated that they spoke Italian in the familial context, with respondents reporting that they normally speak Italian to their parents (62 per cent), to their grandparents (41 per cent), to their children (17 per cent), and/or to other family members (48 per cent). Moreover, when asked about the frequency of their Italian use, 44 per cent indicated that they spoke Italian daily (see also Chap. 4).

However, the interviews revealed a more complex picture, showing different levels of engagement with the Italian language, arguably resulting in different levels of language proficiency. More specifically, some participants explained that the use of Italian language at home was strict, often because there was no other way for them to communicate with other members of their family. For example, some of them noted:

Neither of my parents was born in Italy, but they both had Italian parents. So they already spoke Italian when my sister and I were born, they only spoke to us in Italian (interviewee 25, female, 18–30 years).

I had no choice but to speak Italian at home with both my parents and my grandparents...Because if I didn't, if I didn't speak Italian to them, there's no way they would have understood what I was saying. So...there was total immersion (interviewee 21, female, 46–60 years).

At least one interviewee reported that their parents deliberately reduced their exposure to Italian language on the grounds that it was undermining the development of their verbal skills in the dominant language:

[T]here was a period...when [my parents] would speak to me in Italian, but then I started jumbling my English and my Italian. And so they...were like...this is not good. Let's just sort of stick with English and away we go (interviewee 5, male, 18–30 years).

The picture that emerges from our data about Italian language acquisition is, therefore, a complex one. Although many of the participants had the opportunity to learn some Italian via formal schooling, and some of them also decided to attend language classes later in life to (re)build their language skills, for most of them knowledge of Italian was acquired at home, though sometimes only in certain contexts and with certain family members. All of this reveals a rather haphazard language acquisition process which, unsurprisingly, is also reflected in the data about language proficiency that is examined in the next section.

### 6.3 Italian Language Proficiency Among Second- and Third-Generation Italo-Australians

Building on the analysis conducted in the previous section, this section focuses on Italo-Australians' language proficiency. Our key finding is that language proficiency is stronger among Italo-Australians in relation to conversational language but relatively poor in relation to literacy (reading and writing), not surprisingly given the prominent role that learning Italian at home as opposed to learning it via formal education played for most of them, as we showed earlier.

In the previous chapter we showed that while the survey respondents self-reported that their ability to 'speak' (95 per cent) and 'understand' (87 per cent) Italian was high, most of them were not immersed in the Italian language. Only 30 per cent of our survey respondents reported that they spoke Italian daily, and then again mostly with their parents and grandparents. A small but notable proportion of survey respondents reported having no or poor verbal and comprehension Italian language skills (9 per cent). While these data offer a snapshot of self-assessed Italian proficiency among our survey respondents, an analysis of our interview data reveals a more complex and nuanced picture.

Indeed, when pressed to self-assess their Italian language proficiency in greater detail, the majority of our interviewees expressed doubts about their language competencies. This, of course, was not true of all of them. For example, one participant explained:

I'm fluent. I've studied well, I'm a teacher as well by training. So I'm an Italian teacher and I've taught...VCE for Y12 for about 10 years now...So yeah, [I am] fluent reading, writing [and even], dream[ing] (interviewee 3, female, 18–30 years).

However, several of those who considered themselves fluent qualified their claims in some way, by stressing their lower competencies in certain areas of language use or vis-à-vis more complex or technical language. For example, one participant commented:

I consider myself pretty fluent, but if we were to...start talking about medical terms or, you know, the laws, the constitution or something a little bit more specific and technical where there's jargon associated, then that's where I'm a little bit...lost (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years).

One participant recognized instead some degree of language attrition:

Italian is my first language...I was only ever allowed to speak Italian at home...I did Italian throughout primary school and high school. And then subsequently at university...So I would say that I'm pretty proficient in writing, speaking and all of that. Probably not so much now...but I can always pick it up really well (interviewee 26, female, 18–30 years).

More importantly, the majority of participants admitted to having a limited Italian language proficiency, mostly confined to basic conversational use. For example, one of the interviewees explained:

Yeah, [my Italian is] very basic. I took basically two semesters of it when I was at Sydney Uni a few years ago. And...it's kind of fallen off the wayside a little bit in the last few years, just ended up getting absorbed in other things...I would say my Italian...is very basic and sort of requires...[that I use] Google Translate (interviewee 11, male, 18–30 years).

Some of the interviewees pointed out how their ability to understand Italian would often depend on the pace at which the latter was spoken. For example, one of them commented:

I can't read it. I can understand it, but it's gotta go slow...But if they go too fast and there's words...I haven't heard before [then I struggle] (interviewee 30, male, 60+ years).

Talking specifically about political participation and the act of voting, another participant stated:

No, I can't read [the instructions on the ballot paper] because I can't read Italian. So it's a bit difficult to understand even what to do. 'Cause I remember opening it and going, hey, there's boxes. Do I put a number or a tick here? Don't really know (interviewee 10, male, 18–30 years).

Generally, therefore, interviewees reported that they could understand enough Italian to get by during basic daily activities and interactions but that they would struggle when dealing with more complex language tasks, including those associated with voting and political participation.

The picture that emerges from our interviews is less rosy than the survey data introduced in the previous chapter might have suggested. This conclusion also aligns with some of the comments provided by the stakeholders whom we interviewed. For example, Ivano Ercole, Former Director of *Rete Italia* (an Italian-language radio network in Australia), observed:

[Italian] language proficiency is really poor and passive [among second- and third-generation Italo-Australians] in the sense that many of them...somehow manage to understand...some words but when it comes to speaking, they do not even try.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

We conclude our analysis in this section by considering an additional barrier to political participation that relates to the role of regional dialects in Italo-Australians' language repertoires. Around 15 per cent of survey respondents declared that the language they usually speak at home with their family is not standard Italian but a regional Italian dialect (sometimes combined with English). Several of our interviewees reaffirmed this point:

With my parents, we spoke the Sicilian dialect (interviewee 32, male, 60+ years).

My parents and grandparents always spoke dialect to each other. So we always grew up hearing dialect, but we never spoke it as kids like between myself and my cousins. And we never spoke Italian back to our grandparents, [it] was always in English (interviewee 17, female, 46–60 years).

Furthermore, some interviewees reflected on how the use of dialects could constitute a potential barrier to communication in at least two ways. First, it could prevent actual communication among Italians who only speak standard Italian:

I mean...you can't understand each other if you're speaking two dialects (interviewee 23, male, 60+ years).

I don't know if you've ever been to Naples, but I could not understand a word...The language is just, yeah, it's so different. Wow. It is very different (interviewee 2, male, 18–30 years).

Second, it could also result in various forms of prejudice, potentially excluding those who only speak dialect rather than standard Italian from participating in social interactions:

[S]ometimes I remember in my childhood, some of the teachers were not welcoming of, there was an attitude towards us. I don't know how to explain it. Yes. There was a condescension perhaps that we were, we had to be taught how to speak Italian correctly and that our dialects were of no value (interviewee 42, female, 60+ years).

[T]he biggest gift...[our mum]...gave us...[was]...teaching us pure Italian. And that...has put us in a different standing, I think, within the community because people of my age...[who]...just speak a...dialect...feel uncomfortable. Maybe the southerners more than the northerners feel more uncomfortable speaking it because it's not well-regarded and not well known (interviewee 20, male, 46–60 years).

These points are particularly important. As recent work in political science, building on extensive research in sociolinguistics, has highlighted, prejudice and discrimination targeting non-standard speakers of a language can constitute significant barriers to their ability to participate in political life, either as voters or as political candidates or both (Bonotti & Willoughby, 2023; Peled & Bonotti, 2019). Indeed, the views of those who speak with an accent, register or dialect considered non-standard may often be dismissed or excluded from democratic debate, with significant negative implications for democratic equality and inclusion.

Overall, our findings in relation to language proficiency suggest that the Italo-Australians who participated in this study reported highly uneven levels of language proficiency. This constitutes a significant obstacle to their ability to meaningfully engage with Italian politics. For a start, political participation requires at the very least the ability to fully understand voting instructions, and limited language proficiency, we have seen, can prevent that. But beyond that minimal threshold, meaningful political participation also requires being able to acquire the political knowledge necessary to make informed voting decisions and to participate in public debates about Italian current affairs—including via various forms of (social) media exchange and analysis—which requires the ability to read and write. Even the most confident of our participants are aware of their limited Italian language proficiency, which is partly due to their greater knowledge of dialect than of standard Italian and to their irregular Italian language use. These factors, our analysis shows, prevent many of them from fully understanding the nuances of contemporary Italian usage, which is crucial for a clear understanding of Italian politics.

## **6.4 Becoming Informed Voters: How Do Second- and Third-generation Italo-Australians Acquire Information about Italian Politics?**

The survey and interview data reveals that the language proficiency of second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters is highly uneven, a view shared by our expert stakeholders. Most of our participants reported acquiring Italian language in the home, with much of their learning centred on spoken rather than written Italian, and they also highlighted the irregular use of Italian. Given that, *qua* Italian citizens, Italo-Australians have the right to vote in Italian elections and referendums, how does language intersect with their ability to access the information that they require to be informed voters? While there is an extensive literature examining the relationship between migrants' proficiency in the dominant language of their host society and their civic participation and integration (Boyd, 2012; Heath et al., 2013), very little (if any) work has been conducted on migrants' proficiency in their country of origin's dominant language and their ability to participate in that country's social and political life via external voting. Our analysis of the Italo-Australian case throws light on that connection and its role in diaspora communities' life.

### **6.4.1 The Role of Social Networks**

To what extent were our participants familiar with the Italian political system and political life? Around 60 per cent of our survey respondents admitted that, due to their living in Australia, they have limited knowledge and understanding of Italian

politics, a point that was reiterated by many of our interviewees, as testified for example by the following comments:

[I am] not [familiar with] a lot of [Italian politics]. So not really. I mean, I occasionally see stuff [in the news]...but not, not a great deal (interviewee 10, male, 18–30 years).

I don't have any knowledge at all...about anything (interviewee 31, male, age not disclosed).

Slightly less than 50 per cent of survey respondents declared that they engage with Italian politics (e.g. on TV, radio, social media, newspapers, or by talking with friends and family) on a regular basis (daily or weekly), a figure which, however, is very similar to that which characterizes Italians in Italy (ISTAT, 2020).

In some cases, a higher level of knowledge and understanding of Italian politics was attributed to participants' social networks of co-nationals, especially friends and relatives, rather than mainstream Italian media sources. Indeed around 37 per cent of survey respondents declared that they gather information about Italian politics via their family and friends in Australia, and almost half of them (48 per cent) by communicating with their family and friends in Italy. This is not surprising and is in line with findings in the literature, which show that social networks of co-nationals provide migrants with key information about their country of origin's social and political situation, and contribute to shaping their political participation (Gherghina & Tseng, 2016). For example, some of the participants explained:

[W]henver something has come out that there's been a vote for, I've tried to first do as much reading as I can by myself and understand as much as I can in terms of news articles and that...[a]nd then I often have a call with my friend and say: Hey...what do you think is happening with this issue? And have a chat to a few people before deciding whether or not to actually vote on something (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

I still have family in Italy and I'm in contact with them on a regular basis. I also have a number of friends who are very like me, you know, Italian-born, but living here. And so we tend to talk often about [the] situation in Italy, what's going on, you know...the left and the right and the centre [referring to party politics] (interviewee 28, female, 60+ years).

For several of the participants, relationships and communication with their social networks of co-nationals were facilitated via social media platforms, a finding which aligns with recent work on 'digital diasporas' and the role of social media in maintaining connections with the country of origin (Ponzanesi, 2020). For example, some participants commented:

Facebook obviously, I'll get the information from my relatives in Italy...And what people tell me, I guess, and your relatives and people that, you know, Italian friends (interviewee 31, male, age not disclosed).

I converse with my cousin in Italy, on WhatsApp and on the other general social media, anything to do with Italy, anything to do with my parents' hometown (interviewee 21, female, 46–60 years).

However, friends and relatives are not the only people participants communicate with via social media. One interviewee, for example, explained:

There are a few influencers that I follow on social media that are Italian and...they always have an opinion on something that's going on. So I kind of pick up on bits and bits from them (interviewee 25, female, 18–30 years).

While this was an isolated comment in our study, it might signal the growing role of political influencers within diaspora communities and their role in contributing to migrants' social and political participation in their home country's life. Recent studies, for example, have highlighted the role of diasporic political influencers in promoting forms of 'long-distance nationalism' among their fellow citizens abroad (Nyangulu & Sharra, 2023) or in creating a 'third space' between home and host societies which members of the diaspora can occupy (Zhang & Sumin, 2020).

Finally, we also found that for several of the participants attending Italian language classes these were another conduit for information about Italian current affairs, reflecting recent emphasis on the importance of including current affairs content in language teaching (Dandan, 2022). For example, one interviewee explained:

I felt more in touch with Italy when I was going to [*Società*] *Dante Alighieri* [language classes]...because sometimes the Italian teacher would have us reading some things from newspapers or magazines and, and listening to Italian pop music or Italian things (interviewee 42, female, 60+ years).

Another participant echoed this sentiment, especially highlighting the important role of Italian language teachers in providing them with contextual information about specific Italian politics issues:

[W]hen I speak to a teacher, they can help fill it in a bit more [about events in Italy]...they [teachers] can provide background because obviously the teachers at the school are all from Italy. So often they can provide some context and often it's the context that you miss (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years).

### 6.4.2 *The Role of Mainstream Media*

While social media is an important source of information for the Italo-Australians who participated in our study, traditional media is also considered a significant information source by many of them. In line with well-established findings in the literature (for a summary, see Ohme & De Vreese, 2020), many of the participants reported that traditional media (newspapers, radio and television) were important to their political socialization. More specifically, 52 per cent of survey respondents declared that they gather information about Italian politics via Italian language media based in Australia<sup>7</sup> whereas around 49 per cent of them reported that they rely

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<sup>7</sup>For example, Italian-language newspapers like *Il Globo* and *La Fiamma*, or SBS Italian, an Italian-language radio program provided by the public service broadcaster SBS.

on Italian media based in Italy<sup>8</sup> A smaller percentage—37 per cent—indicated that they obtain information about Italian politics from Australian media.

The interviews broadly reflected these findings. Several participants, for example, explained that they regularly listen to SBS Italian and/or watch the Italian RAI [*Radiotelevisione Italiana*] news program, which is also available via SBS:

I listen to SBS radio...I'll try and listen to...SBS [and]...often it'll give me enough [information] (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years).

I watch, I try and watch the Italian news every day. Like in the morning, I'll start the day watching it (interviewee 76, female, 40–60 years).

However, a number of participants also stressed how this would often prove challenging due to time constraints and other commitments. This problem is, of course, common among citizens of any country but it is inevitably exacerbated when one has to stay up to date with political news concerning two (or more) countries. For example, one interviewee explained:

Well, I listen to, well, how do I do that? More or less? I get bits and pieces. I obviously haven't got some, you know, I've got very limited time with family and so forth and with work (interviewee 45, male, 46–60 years).

Other participants reported instead how the talking speed of presenters would often make it difficult for them to fully understand Italian language news programs:

[T]he newsreaders...appear to be talking very fast...So I really have to concentrate very hard to, to understand what they're saying (interviewee 32, male, 60+ years).

Some of the newsreaders read like Speedy Gonzalez, it is so fast...[W]hen they're talking about political issues...it's really hard to understand, you know, what's going on (interviewee 22, female, 60+ years).

However, it is not only Italian newsreaders who, according to some of our interviewees, speak too fast. Some of them also noted that Italian politicians often speak at a pace that makes it difficult to understand what they are saying. As one interviewee noted:

So, so when I hear...any of the politicians speak...on the Italian news, they speak very fast on the news. They speak very fast. So I probably understand 70 to 80 per cent of what's going on. I'm not sure if I can say I understand a hundred per cent, but yeah, exactly (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years).

As recent research has shown (Soo et al., 2020), effective communication and political contact between representatives and constituents is crucial for the latter's political participation and for the quality of democracy more broadly. When that communication is hindered by limited language proficiency, this can negatively

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<sup>8</sup>Examples, of Italian based outlets include RAI [*Radiotelevisione italiana* - Italy's national public broadcasting company] TV and radio, other Italian radio channels, Italian podcasts, or newspapers like *La Repubblica* and *L'Espresso*.

impact citizens' ability to understand what their political representatives stand for, to communicate their demands to them, and to hold them accountable.

Despite these obstacles, however, a number of participants offered interesting insights into the benefits of accessing information via Italian media, particularly due to the alternative perspective on Italian and global politics that the latter can provide. For example, one participant explained:

I watch, I try and watch the Italian news every day... I like it because it gives a very different perspective on world news, especially, but also obviously what's happening locally in Italy at the local level (interviewee 76, female, 40–60 years).

What this participant valued was not only the ability to access information about Italian current affairs that they would not otherwise be able to access via other Australian or international sources but also the fact that Italian news also offered them a novel perspective on global news more generally, perhaps one that is not Anglocentric. This point was also reiterated by Dario Nelli, Chief Editor of the Italian language newspaper *Il Globo*, who noted:

The Australian media do not cover any other country's politics except for the US and the UK. Everything else is *colore*...[and] they are not interested in Spanish or French politics [either]...only US and UK. That is their world...Therefore [through *Il Globo*] we have attempted to provide information about Italy...but from an Italian perspective.<sup>9</sup>

While television and radio were the two main media channels through which participants said they access Italian language information about Italian politics and current affairs, several of them also explained that they often gather this information via newspapers, including both Australia-based Italian language outlets such as *Il Globo* or *La Fiamma*, or Italy-based newspapers such as *La Repubblica*. For example, one participant explained:

[L]ike I said, I'm not an avid, I'm not all that politically engaged, but... I would use websites. So I would use, for example, I've got the *Repubblica* app on my phone (interviewee 16, female, 46–60 years).

Some of them, however, highlighted the difficulties that they encountered in doing so, arguably due to language barriers. For example, one participant noted:

I kind of read *Il Globo* and when I can *La Repubblica*, I'll try and get through bits and pieces. It takes me a long time (interviewee 1, male, 18–30 years).

Italian language media, however, were not the only traditional media that participants said they normally use to gather information about Italian politics and current affairs. Many of them also admitted to mainly relying on English language sources. Indeed, only around 20 per cent of survey participants declared that they feel more confident accessing information on Italian politics in Italian, with around 46 per cent preferring English instead, and 36 per cent a combination of English and Italian. These findings were reinforced by some of our interviewees' comments:

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<sup>9</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

English language media would be the only way that I received information... whether that's Australian media reporting on Italy or Italian politics, but often European media that's in English, whether it's the BBC or France 24 or any of those English language media outlets in Europe (interviewee 23, male, 60+ years).

Probably say [the kind of sources I would normally access to gather information about Italian politics]... was a 90/10 split English to Italian. And a lot of it was international media (interviewee 12, male, 18–30 years).

While English language sources certainly help many second- and third-generation Italo-Australians to gather information about Italian politics, their coverage of Italian news is generally limited compared to any Italian language news sources. Access to granular reporting about Italian domestic affairs therefore requires Italo-Australians to also use Italian language media news sources, assuming they have attained the Italian language skills necessary to be able to do so. For example, some participants explained:

Usually if it's something about politics, I would go to an Italian source because the English sources are normally not very detailed or they gloss over the level of detail that I'm trying to find out. It's much easier to get in Italian and it can be a bit complicated... So if I want to understand a bit more about that, I might do some reading on Italian websites to find out a bit more, but that's pretty occasional (interviewee 37, female, 18–30 years).

Yeah. So if I'm in a hurry and I need to understand it quickly, I will go to the BBC... If, if I've got more time and I think on, I really need to get across this and I want to spend the time perhaps broadening my, my language or broadening my vocab in this subject, then I would try and go to the, to the Italian website... and read through it... at a much slower pace (interviewee 16, female, 46–60 years).

These comments reveal a clear trade-off between accessibility and detailed local reporting of news. People are busy and will typically search out and use media sources that convey information about Italian politics quickly and efficiently, and in a language that they are fluent in. However, if they perceive that this information is limited and not sufficiently granular, they may be willing to invest time and energy in accessing sources in Italian, and to confront the challenges that this involves, including fast pace and complex verbal and written vocabulary.

A related challenge to the difficulties of comprehending Italian language news sources arises from the highly technical nature of Italian political language. Several of the participants noted difficulties in filling out Italian ballot papers and following the instructions listed on the ballot paper, as the comments below testify:

I do have to read it a couple of times to double-check because... everything's very, very technical (interviewee 41, male, 46–60 years).

[T]he language [on the ballot paper] is very like bureaucratic Italian... it takes a little bit of thought to sort of like sit down and like read the instructions and stuff. It's a bit opaque... [moreover]... issues are so niche that if you want to make an informed choice... [y]ou have to kind of... go out of your way to find info (interviewee 32, male, 60+ years).

What does that mean? Do I tick a box and for what? There is nothing. There's no material really...Do you get what the party stands for or how many parties are in the system? I don't know. What sort of, what sort of value systems they have and what sort of leadership is it (interviewee 30, male, 60+ years)?

What these comments show is that the often inaccessible nature of information about Italian politics results from a number of interrelated factors. Some of the language is inherently technical and difficult to decipher for non-native speakers. However, in some cases the main issue reported by the participants is lack of understanding of the context necessary to make sense of Italian political jargon. For those Italian citizens who are based in Italy, understanding that context is much easier, as they are immersed in it daily. But for those who live abroad, that task—and the ability to understand much Italian political jargon—is much more challenging and time-consuming.

## 6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we drew on our extensive interview and survey data to paint a complex picture of the language proficiency of second- and third-generation Italo-Australians, and its link with their understanding of and participation in Italian political life.

We first examined participants' perceptions of their Italian language interests to assess their correspondence (or lack thereof) with the language interests highlighted in the linguistic justice literature. We found that, for many of the interviewees, opportunity access—understood especially in social and economic terms—is a key interest that knowledge of the Italian language helped them fulfil. Particularly important, for many of them, are the personal and often intergenerational relationships that speaking Italian helps them (re-)establish, whether with distant relatives and friends in Italy or with those living in Australia.

However, we also found that for many of our interviewees, knowledge of Italian also discloses a life-world—in the form of literature, cinema and other cultural artifacts—that many of them cherish and are keen to share with their fellow nationals, and/or is a source of dignity that has helped them maintain their identity, sometimes (especially in the past) *vis-à-vis* a hostile social and political environment in the host society. Interestingly, we also found that a language interest in democracy is not particularly central to the way most of our interviewees relate to the Italian language, although our survey results revealed a different picture, namely one in which, when prompted, the vast majority of respondents did acknowledge the importance of Italian language knowledge for understanding Italian politics and participating in Italian elections and referendums as voters.

We then moved on to the analysis of participants' Italian language skills and found that although formal education plays an important (though not always effective) role in their Italian language acquisition, it is at home that most of them learn and practice Italian daily. This is a key finding in our study as it reveals a rather

haphazard language acquisition process which results in very uneven (and often superficial) levels of Italian language proficiency. Indeed, another key finding in our analysis is that Italian language proficiency among second- and third-generation Italo-Australians is stronger at a conversational level but rather poor when it comes to reading and writing. This uneven and often superficial level of Italian language proficiency, we explained, constitutes an obstacle to second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' ability to meaningfully engage with Italian politics, both in minimal terms (understanding voting instructions) and in terms of making informed voting decisions and/or engaging in political debate in person or via social media.

Our analysis also revealed the complex strategies that second- and third-generation Italo-Australians adopt in order to compensate for these language limitations, including drawing on their social networks of co-nationals—especially via social media—and accessing information via English-language traditional media. We suggested that these compensatory strategies are sub-optimal at best.

In the next chapter, we examine in greater detail the barriers that limited Italian language proficiency imposes on second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' ability to participate in Italian political life, and a number of potential policy interventions that might help alleviate their effect on political participation.

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# Chapter 7

## Engagement Barriers and Policy Recommendations



In this chapter, we examine the challenges posed by language barriers to second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' political participation and explore the potential interventions that might help reduce those barriers or, at least, mitigate their effects on political participation. To do so, we parse interventions to strengthen Italian language support for non-resident citizens proposed by our interviewees.

In the first part of the chapter, we describe the main barriers identified by second- and third-generation Italo-Australians in accessing Italian language learning for the purpose of engaging in Italian politics and elections. We already touched upon some of these barriers in Chap. 5. However, our analysis in this chapter is more detailed and systematic, and draws more directly on our interview data. We identify seven specific barriers. Five of them are language acquisition barriers: financial costs, time commitment, motivation, lack of awareness, and narrowness of the Italian language curriculum. Two of the seven are voting access barriers: technical language and monolingualism. In the second part of the chapter, we discuss the recommendations advanced by our participants in response to the language barriers that they confront in relation to their ability to participate in Italian elections and politics. A wide range of recommendations to improve the political engagement of the Italian transnational community are set out. And while these recommendations are based on the experiences of the Italian diaspora in Australia, and of the stakeholders whom we interviewed, they are applicable to any sending state that currently enfranchises its non-resident citizens.

Our decision to concede the 'space' for participants to provide their ideas, thoughts and suggestions for policy recommendations was intentional and driven by a strong commitment to 'participatory governance' or 'participatory policy design' (Blomkamp, 2021; Santiago Rodriguez & Komendantova, 2022). According to this approach,

[p]articipatory governance offers the possibility to deal with complex and contested policy issues...that involve several stakeholders and organizations, without the possibility of identifying a single decision maker or a defined group of stakeholders, but rather a diverse set of people with different perspectives, abilities and mandates...Hence, participatory

processes can facilitate the negotiation of compromise solutions involving a large variety of stakeholders with heterogeneous, difficult to reconcile views, interests, visions, plans, policy targets (Santiago Rodriguez & Komendantova, 2022, p. 7).

We believe that the link between Italo-Australians' language proficiency and political participation is a clear example of a complex and contested policy issue, given the variety of stakeholders involved, their contrasting views, and the complexity of factors and mechanisms that need to be considered when designing suitable policies in this area. Our methodological choice enabled us to unveil a number of issues and concerns that would have remained overlooked in our analysis in the absence of this participatory approach.

## 7.1 Existing Language Support for Italo-Australians

As discussed in previous chapters, among the diaspora institutions created by the Italian state, a significant emphasis is placed on the teaching and learning of the Italian language abroad. There are, for example, 86 Italian Institutes of Culture present around the world, which promote the teaching and learning of Italian language and culture among non-resident Italians (including second, third and subsequent generations) and people of non-Italian background (MAECI, n.d.). Italian Institutes of Culture have found a receptive setting in Australia. Moreover, in the Australian context the Italian state has worked with local governments to incentivize the creation of bilingual primary schools in major cities such as Melbourne and Sydney, resulting in the creation of the Italian Bilingual School in Meadowbank in New South Wales<sup>1</sup> and the Brunswick South Primary School in Victoria.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Italian state finances organizations such as Co.As.It. [*Comitato Assistenza Italiani*] to support the learning of the Italian language.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, Italian has also acquired an increasingly prominent role in public education in Australia. While in the 1950s and 1960s Italian was mainly taught as a 'community language', targeting students with Italian background, in the 1970s and 1980s it became part of the standard curriculum in many mainstream schools, partly under pressure from the Italo-Australian community which demanded greater acceptance of the Italian community and its culture among Australians (Slaughter & Hajek, 2014). Furthermore, at the university level, Italian has acquired a prominent role in Australia since the establishment of the Cassamarca Appointments in Italian Studies in 2000. These positions, funded by a donation by the Cassamarca Foundation based in Treviso, Italy constituted 20 per cent of Italian Studies full-time positions in Australia in 2012, the number being subsequently reduced to 5 across 4 universities following restructuring at various institutions (ACIS, n.d.).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.coasit.org.au/services/italian-bilingual-school/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://brunwicksouthps.vic.edu.au/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.coasit.com.au/>

In spite of the availability of Italian language learning resources, our data suggest that second- and third-generation Italo-Australians are generally unable to attain an adequate level of language proficiency to engage with the political life of the country of origin. This finding emerged both in the survey data and in the interviews with participants.

## 7.2 Language Barriers to Political Participation

Second- and third-generation Italo-Australians confront many barriers in learning Italian. In this section, we distill the main language barriers that our interviewees reported prevent them from participating actively and in an informed manner in Italian politics. Some of these barriers (1–5) are language acquisition barriers whereas the remaining ones (6 and 7) are voting access barriers and relate to the language in which information about Italian politics and elections is provided. The order in which the barriers are presented is not intended to signify the magnitude of their importance.

One of the main obstacles to Italian language learning that some of the interviewees highlighted are *financial costs* (**Barrier 1**). This is not surprising given the high costs associated with learning a new language (Allen, 2022). The interviews reinforced this finding, revealing how, for many participants, financial barriers were particularly prohibitive. For example, two of the interviewees commented:

So...at the moment [learning Italian] it's all private fees and it is quite expensive (interviewee 8, female, 31–45 years).

I mean, I've tried to...learn Italian since my university days, but you know, it's very expensive and that's...a hindrance for me. It's...hundreds and hundreds of dollars for however many weeks of classes, that's a big barrier for me going back and learning Italian (interviewee 23, male, 60+ years).

Another interviewee made a similar point while also emphasizing the difficult financial trade-offs that families often face when deciding whether they can offer their children access to Italian language classes:

I mean, we...were a family of six, four children and two parents, and it was enough for them to be able to give you a roof over your head and give you everything you needed...[As a result] there wasn't much room for being able to offer [Italian language] courses. And I think that my parents were so busy working...they didn't get a chance to think about retaining the culture (interviewee 36, male, 46–60 years).

Not all participants, however, highlighted financial costs as a barrier to Italian language learning. Others emphasized the challenges associated with the *time commitment* (**Barrier 2**) involved in learning Italian. Indeed, it has been estimated that the average time required to properly learn a second language is around 10,000 hours (Piron, 2001). The 'time' investment is especially high when the language being acquired is not the dominant language of the country in which the learner usually resides. As one interviewee explained:

I'd appreciate [more language support from the Italian Government] but I probably wouldn't take it because...it's less, it's far less about cost than it is about the time span...[B]ecause there's not enough hours in the day to be able to kind of stay focused and learn a new language...while doing other stuff (interviewee 10, male, 18–30 years).

A third obstacle that emerged from our interviews concerned *lack of motivation* (**Barrier 3**) to learn Italian. This sentiment is captured by the quote below:

I've worked on another research project, looking at third-generation Italians where I...interviewed my cousin [and asked him] 'why don't you speak Italian'? And he just doesn't see a need for it...And for him, there's just, no...no real emotional value in it. There's no real benefit for him to invest all that time in learning. And he's just not that motivated (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

The problem of personal 'motivation' is not universal. In Chap. 5, for example, we found that different kinds of opportunities (e.g. for personal or business relationships) constitute important motivating factors for many Italo-Australians to learn Italian. Yet, many Italo-Australians lack the same drivers or level of motivation to learn Italian represents a significant language barrier to their acquisition of language proficiency and full political participation. Furthermore, it is likely that the aforementioned legislative changes to Italian citizenship eligibility introduced by the Italian government in 2025 may over time further reduce this motivation among Italo-Australian, if many of them will no longer see Italian citizenship—and the rights and opportunities associated with it—as an attainable goal.

A fourth barrier identified by our interviewees relates to the *narrowness of the Italian language curriculum* (**Barrier 4**). More specifically, several interviewees highlighted that Italian language support—including language teaching and learning materials—tends to prioritize the cultural aspects of the Italian language, placing much less emphasis on its social and political dimensions and applications. This approach is likely to have resulted from the emphasis on the cultural attractiveness of the Italian language due to 'its historical and artistic heritage' (Palmieri, 2023, p. 138), which historically has characterized the interest in the Italian language in Australia, especially among non-Italians. For example, one of our interviewees, who is an Italian language teacher at a local Australian community school, explained:

So what I've noticed is when I was teaching the language to adults...all the books that I used were all centred around adults who were going to be traveling to Italy as tourists. So...you know...it's all the basics and how to pay for something. Being at the hotel, asking for a towel, it's all the.. language skills that you need in the short term to get through the trip...In terms of learning it in a much deeper structure, you know the grammar of deep level and really understanding the basis of the grammar and applying words and jargon that belong to different categories like law, there's really not a lot of that (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years).

Another interviewee echoed similar concerns:

I'm not sure that the [Italian] Institute [of Culture] or the Italian Government...promote all these different angles [e.g. society, politics, etc.]...The only angle I've seen come out of this [is] the travel angle (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

However, several interviewees reflected on the fact that one of the key language barriers to political participation is not the absence of support as such but the **lack of awareness (Barrier 5)** of Italian language resources. As one interviewee noted:

I think the problem is that...there's quite a sizable chunk of the Italian Australian community who isn't aware of the existence of the Italian Institute of Culture. They're not aware of the Dante Alighieri Society or Co.As.It. (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

This lack of awareness can be the result of a number of reasons, such as the lack of interest among Italo-Australians in searching for this information. However, the point made by the interviewees is the low visibility of these services within the community. Compounding matters is the fact that promotional materials advertising these resources are not always provided in English, which is the main language of most second- and third-generation Italo-Australians.

As we observed in Chap. 5, information about Italian politics and elections (including official information on the ballot paper) is often conveyed in a highly **technical language (Barrier 6)** and is, therefore, not easily accessible to many second- and third-generation Italo-Australians. That is, the official election paraphernalia, such as voting instructions and ballot questions, are framed in legal, formal Italian language that is generally inaccessible to non-native speakers. This point is shared by several of the stakeholders whom we interviewed. For example, Marco Fedi (CEO *Comitato Assistenza Italiani* (Co.As.It.) and former member of the Chamber of Deputies representing the Democratic Party for the Overseas Constituency electoral district Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Antarctica), explained:

I remember the [2016] oil drilling [referendum]...[T]here can be themes that can be interesting at the level of political debate but if you do not explain them in a language that is accessible [people will not be able to participate in that discussion].<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, referring to a different referendum, Alessandro Masi (President, *Società Dante Alighieri*) commented:

For example, [consider] the ballot paper for...the [2016] referendum to change the Constitution. There was awareness that...Italians living abroad would not understand the referendum question when receiving the ballot paper.<sup>5</sup>

Referendums can be particularly challenging when it comes to the use of highly technical language on voting materials, mainly because in referendums citizens are asked to directly express their views about complex policy matters, and must often possess a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the issues at stake than when they elect political representatives (Kildea & Smith, 2016, p. 369). If their vote is vitiated by the language barriers posed by technical jargon this can have an impact on critical policy and political outcomes.

Alongside the technical nature of the language in which information about Italian politics and elections is typically provided by Italian authorities, many of the

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<sup>4</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

<sup>5</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

**Table 7.1** Language barriers to political participation

Barrier 1	Financial costs
Barrier 2	Time commitment
Barrier 3	Lack of motivation
Barrier 4	Narrowness of the Italian language curriculum
Barrier 5	Lack of awareness
Barrier 6	Technical language
Barrier 7	Monolingual information

interviewees also commented that information is generally *monolingual* (**Barrier 7**), provided *only* in Italian. For example, one of the interviewees commented:

If the requirement was to get second- and third-generation [Italo-Australian] people to participate, then yes...English is almost essential. I've...had people come to me and say...what are they asking me to do? What do I do? What does this mean? (interviewee 16, female, 46–60 years).

The view that providing information only in Italian limits access to political information and reduces political participation among Italo-Australians was also supported by several of the stakeholders whom we interviewed. For example, former MP Marco Fedi (CEO *Comitato Assistenza Italiani* (Co.As.It.) noted:

The Italian Government has never provided any information in languages other than Italian, which testifies to the limited sensitivity to Italian communities abroad, where...the languages of the host countries are fundamental also to exercise a right like the right to vote.<sup>6</sup>

Support for bilingual electoral material represents a crucial finding in our research, underscoring the limited ability of Italo-Australians to comprehend the Italian political system, electoral material, and ballot papers if they are forced to rely only on Italian language material.

Table 7.1 summarizes the language barriers to political participation discussed in this section.

### 7.3 Addressing Language Barriers: Policy Recommendations

As well as asking our interviewees to reflect upon the language barriers that normally hinder their political participation, we also asked them to suggest potential policy responses that they thought might help address those barriers.

With regard to *financial costs* (**Barrier 1**), 70 per cent of survey respondents declared that the Italian government should provide more Italian language support for Italo-Australians in the form of free language classes. This proposal was also favoured among the interviewees. For example, one participant commented:

<sup>6</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

[I]f there w[ere] funded language classes, yeah, I would absolutely do it [i.e. learn Italian] (interviewee 23, male, 60+ years).

**Time commitment (Barrier 2)**, as noted in the previous section, constitutes a significant language barrier to political participation for many Italo-Australians. As recent research in linguistics has shown, one way in which this barrier can be overcome is by investing in technology-mediated language learning (for example via platforms such as Duolingo), particularly when accompanied by innovative teaching methodologies that maximize teaching effectiveness (González-Lloret, 2024; see also Kern, 2024). Several of our interviewees highlighted how online technology could help facilitate effective language learning amid spatial and time constraints. For example, Alessandro Masi (President, *Società Dante Alighieri*) explained how the *Società Dante Alighieri* began to use new technologies to promote language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic:

[The pandemic] forced us to close many [*Società Dante Alighieri*] branches and therefore to enter a new experience that for many was unprecedented, i.e. that of doing distance learning using Skype...and...[we]...launched the idea of building a large [Italian language learning] digital platform that may eventually also enable many young people, wherever they are, to join the platform from home.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of technology, not only for language learning *per se* but also for accessing information about Italian politics in response to time constraints, was also highlighted by some of the Italo-Australian voters we interviewed, as exemplified by this quote:

To be honest with you. I think we're really fortunate that we live in a time where, you know, my little computer here and my phone, I can go on Google and I can Google something and find out...what political parties stand for, who the candidates are, what the words mean on [the documentation] that has [been] sent [to] me (interviewee 22, female, 60+ years).

Italian language media outlets are also aware of the challenges posed by language teaching and learning, and have developed technology-mediated resources to address this problem. SBS Italian producer Carlo Oreglia, for example, explained how SBS Italian promotes Italian language teaching and learning in innovative ways, using the podcast format:

We use instruments aimed at giving Italian language teaching a different target [from other organizations such as the Italian Institute of Culture]...for example the podcast that I have now made for a couple of years...[and which is] dedicated to intermediate students and employs stories in Italian that are read slowly.<sup>8</sup>

These examples suggest that there is already some innovation underway to make Italian language learning more accessible, including among non-governmental and media organizations. In order to identify the full sweep of language teaching innovations, an audit of new and emerging language learning approaches and technologies should be conducted by the Italian state. Doing so might include

<sup>7</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

<sup>8</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

knowledge-exchange events and activities through which governmental and non-governmental organizations that offer Italian language courses could share teaching and learning tools, methods and approaches, and learn from one another.

Another potential solution to lowering the time commitment barrier is for the Italian state to fund intensive language courses which, as well as being more time efficient, have also been shown to be more effective in terms of language learning outcomes (Lightbown & Spada, 2020). For example, the Italian state could fund intensive language courses that rotate between the Australian states and territories to ensure that all Italo-Australians have regular access to an intensive language course. People residing outside of the state or territory in which the intensive course is offered could be permitted to attend but at their own expense.

In response to the issue of *lack of motivation (Barrier 3)*, two very different kinds of proposals emerged from our interviews. One such proposal focused on providing Italo-Australians with incentives to learn Italian. More specifically, one of the interviewees suggested that subsidies and free classes (discussed earlier) might not be sufficient to encourage language learning and that the Italian Government would need to adopt a more proactive approach if it wanted to encourage Italo-Australians to learn Italian. Such an approach would require the Italian state to empower its language institutions, through a combination of greater resources and modernised mandates, to establish a more direct and personal connection with Italo-Australians:

I think it would have to be a direct offer [from the Italian government]...where they would...say...‘you’ve been selected as one of...so many’ (interviewee 20, male, 46–60 years).

A very different kind of solution to the motivation barrier proposed by some interviewees was the introduction of language tests for Italo-Australians wishing to acquire Italian citizenship and/or the right to vote in Italian elections and referendums. Language tests for citizenship applications are increasingly used across Western liberal democracies. For example, a recent Council of Europe and Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) report revealed that in 2018, 33 of 40 reporting member states (82 per cent) had introduced a language test as a citizenship requirement (2020, pp. 56–57), an increase from 8 out of 19 (44 per cent) in 2003 (2020, p. 59). These tests are often justified by arguing that they help motivate would-be citizens (normally immigrants) to learn the language of their host society, although this claim has been challenged (Bonotti & Willoughby, 2022). Citizenship language tests tend to differ in terms of the level of language proficiency that they require, but normally they demand around A2 or B1 Common European Framework of Reference levels of proficiency (Council of Europe and ALTE, 2020, pp. 31–32). Italy recently introduced a language test (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 2018) for those applying for citizenship by marriage or residency, requiring a B1 proficiency level. However, this test does not apply to those who obtain Italian citizenship (and, therefore, the right to vote) by birth, based on *jus sanguinis*. The legislative changes to Italian citizenship eligibility introduced by the Italian government in 2025 have not changed this. Generally, nation-states that grant their non-resident citizens the

right to vote do not require that the latter pass any language test to (continue to) access that right.

However, several of the Italo-Australians whom we interviewed declared to be in favour of Italian language testing for Italo-Australians. For example, two of them commented:

To be honest, I'm inclined to say yes...[i.e. there should be an Italian language test for Italo-Australians]...it lends some credibility...to your commitment, to your Italian nature, if you like, or your Italian identity (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

[A language test] actually makes good sense because if someone's trying to acquire citizenship for a particular country...often it's because they may want to live or work in that country for a period of time. Well, if they're going to do that, it would just make sense that they have a certain level of language skill to be able to, to be there and to do the work and, and live there as they choose (interviewee 33, female, 46–60 years).

A more nuanced perspective was proposed by several participants, who defended a language test but with some provisos. For example, Franco Papandrea (member of the *Consiglio Generale degli Italiani all'Estero*) commented:

I have argued...that after the first and second generation, those who would like to keep their Italian citizenship, should be required [to be tested for their] knowledge of Italian to demonstrate their real interest before they are granted citizenship.<sup>9</sup>

Others defended the view that although an Italian language test should be introduced for non-resident citizens, some Italo-Australians should be exempted from it. For example, one interviewee commented:

I guess [we should take] into consideration that some people might not necessarily have the ability to learn it depending on where they find themselves [i.e. their life circumstances]. So, you know, if you're a second or third generation...in regional Australia where they might not teach Italian or...the closest school that teaches it might be hundreds of kilometres away...I guess having an ability to opt out of it [might be reasonable] (interviewee 12, male, 18–30 years).

Some interviewees, however, were strongly opposed to the introduction of language tests for Italo-Australians. For example, in line with similar arguments vis-à-vis immigrants already defended in the literature (Shorten, 2010; von Busekist & Boudou, 2018), some interviewees highlighted the unfairness of such tests:

I think...[a language test]...would cut a lot of other people out...People would probably be a bit upset about it (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

I think that's going to be quite difficult given that...it takes you one to three years to get there, three years of intensive language. That's quite difficult to ask. And it's, it's a massive block that will become a block against people becoming citizens (interviewee 36, male, 46–60 years).

Others combined concerns about justice and fairness with more personal considerations:

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<sup>9</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

Well, I'm a bit concerned because that would mean my husband wouldn't be able to get a passport...So that would be a bit awkward if we wanted to stay in Italy for extended periods...I don't think it's fair...[I]f you want to give a test to perhaps cultural knowledge or something else that isn't about language [that would be fine but] it's not fair to expect a high level [language] test (interviewee 42, female, 60+ years).

Ultimately, the idea of an Italian language test for Italo-Australians (and non-resident citizens more generally) was the most controversial among the recommendations contemplated by our interviewees. This is not surprising, given the degree of opposition that this kind of measure has received in academic circles, especially among linguists and political scientists, in recent years (see, for example, Bonotti & Willoughby, 2022). Furthermore, this was also the recommendation which, more than any others, was in tension with the central normative argument of our book, which is that when individuals have certain fundamental rights qua citizens of a specific state, that state has a duty to provide them with the means necessary for them to exercise those rights, including via language support where relevant. Introducing a language test for members of subsequent generations willing to acquire Italian citizenship and/or voting rights would seem to contravene that duty, shifting the burden of language support from the state to the rights-holders themselves. Therefore, a language test for non-resident citizens might only be consistent with our normative framework under certain conditions.

What conditions, consistent with our normative framework, ought to be satisfied to justify the imposition of a language test to gain citizenship? First, Italy should provide those undergoing the test with all the support necessary for them to pass it, for example by offering free language classes, free online resources, etc. Second, those failing the test should be allowed to take it again for an unlimited number of times to maximize opportunities for enfranchisement. Third, exemptions from the test should be made for applicants who, for genuine reasons outside of their control, are unable to undergo and/or pass the test. Interestingly, a recent decision by Italy's Constitutional Court deemed the language test currently required for citizenship by marriage or residency unconstitutional vis-à-vis applicants who are unable to acquire the required level of language proficiency due to disability and/or age (Corte Costituzionale, 2025). These and similar exemptions could be introduced to reduce the burden of the test on vulnerable applicants. Ultimately, even with all these conditions in place, it is likely that a language test would result in many Italo-Australians becoming politically disenfranchised due to their inability to pass the language test.

The fact that *some* potential non-resident citizens might be disenfranchised by the introduction of a language test is consistent with the need for some rules to protect the integrity of the franchise. For a start, several liberal democracies disenfranchise their non-resident citizens under certain conditions. For example, Australian citizens who permanently move overseas lose the right to vote in Australian federal elections (Australian Electoral Commission, 2024). More importantly, from a normative perspective, rights and legal citizenship may be disaggregated (Bosniak, 2006; Song, 2009; Soysal, 1994) and, therefore, some rights that are currently considered an exclusive privilege of legal citizens—such as voting rights—may also be granted to resident non-citizens and, in some cases, taken away from non-resident citizens. While we do not defend this position *per se* in this book, we do not think it

is unreasonable. Furthermore, citizenship is ultimately a legal status that entails both rights and duties. Although in this book we have mainly focused on rights, and on states' obligation to help citizens exercise those rights, citizens also have duties *qua* citizens. It is therefore not unreasonable to expect them to fulfil some specific duties in order to exercise certain rights, especially if they are provided with as much support as they need to fulfil those duties.

Finally, a language test could also help address a further issue facing Italo-Australians and, more generally, dual nationals in a similar situation. Dual citizenship inevitably entails conflicting obligations (Vasanthakumar, 2024) and one area in which Italo-Australians may experience this conflict is political participation. Although Italo-Australians are likely to be sufficiently proficient in English to understand and participate in Australian politics, they will still have to make an effort to acquire the political knowledge necessary to meaningfully exercise their voting rights—an effort that is likely to be compounded by the compulsory voting requirement in Australia. This will inevitably make it quite demanding for them to also invest time and energy in acquiring Italian language skills and an understanding of Italian politics. Although this will impose some constraints on the Italian government's ability to foster the required language and political knowledge skills among Italo-Australians and ensure that the latter take up any available support, using language tests as an incentive—as proposed by some of our interviewees—may help overcome some of these motivational barriers.

In response to the challenges posed by the *narrowness of the Italian language curriculum (Barrier 4)*, many of the interviewees suggested that the Italian government should diversify language support for Italo-Australians to help them realize the full range of their language interests, including but not limited to their democracy interest. As Nicola Carè (a member of the Chamber of Deputies (2018–Present) representing the Democratic Party for the Overseas Constituency electoral district Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Antarctica) pointed out, 'language [learning] resources must evolve'.<sup>10</sup> It is necessary for the Italian state to regularly review language learning texts and other materials/resources to ensure that they are fit for contemporary purposes and appropriate for the diverse language needs of Italo-Australians—needs which may be rooted in their personal and professional backgrounds as well as in their individual linguistic repertoires (including their level of standard Italian proficiency and the role played by dialect(s) within those repertoires).

Indeed, some interviewees made specific suggestions about which areas of Italian language learning they would like to see enhanced. For example, one participant stressed the importance of business-related language:

[W]ell for me, business-related language [is important]. Yeah. I would like to learn more about Italian business language for myself. And I would like my employees to learn more about the food link, like more about the Italian pronunciation of, you know, food items (interviewee 17, female, 46–60 years).

Focusing more on the link between language and political participation, another interviewee commented instead:

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<sup>10</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

It might be a case of, you know, [introducing] government-sponsored language classes...[including] both modern and classic history, so that people can form not just an understanding of, you know, Michelangelo, but...[also] the events of the last 200 years, you know, 150 years since unification, you know...that to me would be something really interesting (interviewee 5, male, 18–30 years).

This interviewee provides an important suggestion regarding the teaching of the Italian language, namely that language classes should include some focus on Italy's political history and its political system. This would facilitate second- and third-generation Italo-Australians' understanding of Italian culture as well as of the political foundations of the sending country. It may also have the secondary benefit of increasing these Italo-Australians' feelings of connectedness to Italy and, by extension, enhance their motivation to vote.

When it comes to the role of individual linguistic repertoires in guiding the educational offer, one of the points that emerged from the interviews was the importance of tailoring that offer to the fact that many second- and third-generation Italo-Australians are much more likely to be versed in some Italian regional dialect than in standard Italian (a point already illustrated in Chap. 5). For example, Franco Papandrea (member of the *Consiglio Generale degli Italiani all'Estero*) explained how the prominent role of dialect in many Italo-Australians' households also has implications for the design of teaching programs and materials:

Two years ago we conducted a project...in order to create a specific course for those who have some knowledge of [Italian] dialect[s]...because the normal courses that we use for adults are mostly aimed at those who have no knowledge of Italian.<sup>11</sup>

The recommendation that emerges from these reflections is that the Italian state should diversify not only the content of its Italian language teaching offer but also the way in which that content is designed and taught given the particular language needs, uneven proficiency levels, and individual linguistic repertoires of second- and third-generation Italo-Australians. As part of this approach, tailoring language teaching to dialect speakers is particularly important, since previous studies have shown that there is a negative relationship between dialect use and literacy outcomes (Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015). Specific pedagogical approaches to teaching standard Italian to dialect speakers might include de-emphasizing (and refraining from correcting) non-standard pronunciation features like accent while focusing on correcting those errors which result in the 'destruction of systematic relationships [a term which, in linguistics, refers to systematic relationships between key language components such as sounds, words and grammar] which may render communication impossible' (Danesi, 1974, p. 296).

As we explained earlier, a number of interviewees pointed out that one of the key language barriers to political participation is less the absence of support as such than the *lack of awareness* (**Barrier 5**) of the support already provided by the Italian state and by various non-governmental organizations. Therefore, to address this barrier, one interviewee suggested:

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<sup>11</sup> Our translation from Italian to English.

I think that the resources are there, and the people are there. I think maybe the only thing they need to do more of is to make people more aware through things like community festas (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

Marco Fedi (CEO *Comitato Assistenza Italiani* (Co.As.It.) and former member of the Chamber of Deputies representing the Democratic Party for the Overseas Constituency electoral district Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Antarctica) also highlighted the importance of marketing and communication, stressing that these should be done in both Italian and English to reach a broader audience:

[I]f we advertised Italian language courses only in Italian we would probably have to deal with a large number of people who waste a lot of our time on the phone and perhaps do not even enrol. If, instead, you communicate both in Italian and in English it is easier for people to enrol...[and] participate.<sup>12</sup>

How could the Italian government better advertise language learning opportunities? One suggestion might be for the government to conduct an evaluation of how Italian language courses are currently marketed, including the messaging and platforms around these courses. This should include a survey of Italo-Australian voters aimed at finding out where they normally look for and find information, in order to develop a communication strategy to connect with them.

As we explained in the previous section, while Barriers 1–5 are more directly tied to language acquisition, barriers 6–7 relate more directly to voting access, specifically to the language in which information about Italian politics and elections is provided. Let us consider responses to the use of *technical language* (**Barrier 6**) in relation to voting paraphernalia. Several of our interviewees suggested simplifying the language in which information about Italian politics and elections is conveyed. For example, one of the interviewees commented:

[P]lain Italian language would be the best option for everybody...I'm sure you're aware [that] in Australia...by law, the information needs to be provided in plain English as well as legal jargon...I don't understand why the Italian government couldn't do that [for Italian] (interviewee 34, male, 46–60 years).

This view was echoed by Francesco Pascalis (former the President of the *Comitato degli Italiani all'Estero* (Com.It.Es) for Victoria and Tasmania, 2015–2021), who noted:

We know that often even those Italians who live in Italy struggle to read documents written in a bureaucratic language, let alone those who are not familiar with the Italian language [like many Italo-Australians]...we certainly need to study strategies to pay attention to these aspects.<sup>13</sup>

A particularly interesting approach to this kind of language simplification was illustrated by SBS Italian producer Carlo Oreglia, who explained how SBS Italian endeavours to facilitate access to information about Italian politics among its audience:

<sup>12</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

<sup>13</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

We do not tend to interview politicians but rather...experts in the field so that they can explain [political issues] to us using...a less complex, radio-friendly and accessible terminology...[O]ur simplification does not annoy the experts. I think they can understand that its goal is to render [political] discourse clearer but it is not [the kind of] simplification [that you would use when speaking to] primary school children.<sup>14</sup>

SBS's approach reveals the importance of simplifying political language when Italian political debate is too complex to follow for someone with a low proficiency in the language. To this end, greater use of experts to break down Italian politics for non-resident voters might assist in understanding and navigating the complexities of political debate. This might involve, for example, developing videos by experts (such as academics and journalists) summarizing in plain (Italian) language different political parties' election manifestos and key policy proposals, and/or key information about Italian institutions and voting procedures.

Finally, we consider the suggestions advanced by our participants to address the *monolingualism* (**Barrier 7**) of Italian politics and elections. 60 per cent of survey respondents declared to be in favour of the idea that the Italian government should (also) provide information on Italian politics and elections in English for Italo-Australians. As outlined in Chap. 5, only a minority of our interviewees declared to be confident to access information about Italian politics only in Italian, with the vast majority of them preferring instead information in English or a combination of English and Italian. The survey results were confirmed by our interview findings. For example, Giancarlo Martini (former CEO *Comitato Assistenza Italiani* (Co.As.It.)) observed:

The dissemination of information about Italian politics should be done in English, you cannot do it in Italian because among second- and third-generation [Italo-Australians]...many have lost [knowledge of the Italian language].<sup>15</sup>

Many of the Italo-Australian voters whom we interviewed reinforced this point:

I know a lot of people who are Italian, but don't speak Italian...I think it would be helpful...if there's a want to increase that participation from people who don't live in Italy...[to provide information in] English (interviewee 35, female, 18–30 years).

[If I could access information in English] I could do my research and understand if I was doing things correctly [and this] would be a great relief and I could learn some more Italian because then I could compare the two, the two papers and that word means this. And because I really did try, but it's to do that. And we're also busy (interviewee 42, female, 60+ years).

I definitely think that [being provided with information in English] would be a fundamental help...I do believe that perhaps more content in English...that takes into account...a lot of the subtleties that need to be considered [would be helpful] (interviewee 40, male, 18–30 years).

English language information about the voting and registration process should be provided by the Italian government. This would be comparable, for example, to what the Australian Electoral Commission—the Australian equivalent of the Italian

<sup>14</sup> Our translation from Italian to English.

<sup>15</sup> Our translation from Italian to English.

*Direzione Centrale per i Servizi Elettorali* (Central Directorate for Electoral Services)<sup>16</sup>—undertakes with regard to enrolment and voting procedures vis-à-vis diverse linguistic communities in Australia (Australian Electoral Commission, 2025). The Italian state might adopt a similar approach for all its diaspora communities around the world. For example, there could be a review of the Central Directorate for Electoral Services website and separate pages created for each of the Overseas Constituency electoral districts, written in the dominant languages of the countries in each of those districts. This approach could also be extended to more complex aspects of the political process beyond registration and voting, such as republishing parties’ manifestos. For example, Italian political parties could be supported to produce pamphlets in English language (or in the relevant languages of the Overseas Constituency electoral district countries in which their candidates are running) outlining their policy priorities, and to make these pamphlets easy for voters to access online.

Providing information in languages other than Italian might, of course, raise some potential practical difficulties. For example, one interviewee commented:

[F]rom what I know of what governments tend to do, they just seem to be like, okay, well, if the messages are [not] getting across, we’ll just translate it into a bunch of languages... kind of like warranties. I guess when you open up a little box and there’s, you know, the warranty papers in 10 different languages. And I guess logistically how does that work? Because obviously...English speaking countries aren’t the only ones [where Italians may need to access that information] (interviewee 12, male, 18–30 years).

However, the growing availability and effectiveness of relatively inexpensive machine translation and interpretation tools can significantly reduce any potential financial and time costs associated with the provision of multilingual information (see, for example, Cabrera, 2024).

Another type of concern expressed by some participants of our study is regarding the need for appropriate limits, or balance, in relation to the extent of language translation assistance for non-resident citizens. For example, Francesco Pascalis (former President of the *Comitato degli Italiani all’Estero* (Com.It.Es) for Victoria and Tasmania (2015–2021)) noted:

[While information should also be provided in English] we cannot forget that Italian is the language of Italy and we cannot completely replace it [with English], we cannot create a non-Italian citizenry abroad that only speaks a foreign language, in short at least Italian must be included.<sup>17</sup>

Pascalis’s reflections highlights the importance of avoiding responding to the current monolingual (Italian-only) approach by replacing it with an equally monolingual (English-only) response which, as he suggests, would likely result in a form of linguistic segregation—even more so if extended to all Italian diaspora communities around the world. Adopting a bilingual approach would instead help send the message that non-resident voters still have an obligation to engage with the language of the country of origin in order to cast a vote.

<sup>16</sup><https://dait.interno.gov.it/dait/direzione-centrale-per-i-servizi-elettorali>

<sup>17</sup>Our translation from Italian to English.

## 7.4 Conclusion

Based on the findings of our research and the issues identified throughout the data collection, we have developed recommendations to address key issues regarding language and voting rights for the Italian transnational community.

First, the Italian state should undertake an audit of Italian language resources for non-resident citizens to identify gaps, inefficiencies and waste of resources with regard to the teaching and learning of the Italian language overseas. Second, as part of the Italian citizenship acquisition process, Italo-Australians of all ages should be provided with free or subsidized language classes by Italian institutions in Australia in order to facilitate their access to Italian language knowledge and thus to understanding of and participation in social and political debate. Third, the Italian state should modernise their approach to the promotion of existing Italian language educational offer (provided by both governmental and non-governmental organizations) via both Italian and English language channels in order to reach those Italo-Australians who do not speak Italian. Fourth, the Italian language programs offered by the Italian state (e.g. via the Italian Institutes of Culture) should be reviewed in order to tailor them to the needs and language proficiency levels of different learners, and to facilitate access to information about Italian social and political life (by making greater use of newspapers, magazines, documentaries, etc.). This should also include providing Italo-Australians with access to Italian language courses on civics and citizenship education to help them understand the structure and role of Italian institutions, especially in connection with their voting rights. Fifth, Italian diaspora institutions in Australia should also consider providing bilingual information about Italian politics and elections to facilitate the understanding of political information. Sixth, the language used in electoral material should be simplified to facilitate comprehension, especially in relation to referendums.

In summary, the Italian government should not take for granted that Italian citizens abroad have an adequate level of language skills to be informed citizens when casting their vote. As demonstrated by our research, the opposite is true. Second- and third-generation Italo-Australians are unable to fully engage in Italian political debate and require support. The aforementioned measures can help address the language barriers to political participation that these non-resident citizens face. In addition to these recommendations, we further propose additional measures that the Italian government could consider, such as requiring candidates contesting an Overseas Constituency electoral district to be fluent in both Italian and the dominant language of at least one of the countries in that district; providing a subsidy to political parties fielding candidates in one or more Overseas Constituency electoral districts to enable them to produce information on their manifestoes and policies in the dominant language of each of the countries included in the relevant electoral district; providing a subsidy to media organizations based either in Italy or overseas that produce information on Italian politics and elections in the dominant language of one or more Overseas Constituency countries; creating online sites for the Overseas Constituency (managed and coordinated by the *Direzione Centrale per i*

*Servizi Elettorali*) with information about the Italian electoral system, including how to cast a valid vote, in the dominant languages of each electoral district.

The Italian government should also review the existing citizenship policy in relation to language tests for accessing voting rights. As we explained earlier, according to the current citizenship law, language tests are required for those acquiring Italian citizenship through marriage or residency (immigrants naturalized Italians). This means that a language threshold exists in some instances where there is no certainty about the language skills of new/would-be citizens. As demonstrated in this book, the Italian government cannot assume that second- and third-generation (and subsequent generations of) non-resident Italians are proficient in Italian. For this reason, the Italian state should also consider introducing a language test for people who acquire citizenship by descent from abroad and want to participate in elections from overseas, though with the provisos and exemptions that we discussed in this chapter. This would guarantee a certain level of language skills that would facilitate non-resident citizens' engagement with Italian social and political debate.

The language proficiency and political engagement of non-resident citizens are central to the vibrancy and health of Italian democracy. Granting citizenship rights following the *jus sanguinis* principle contains a number of assumptions with numerous consequences, including the disenfranchisement of citizens who cannot participate in the political life of the country of origin because they cannot understand that country's language and politics. This aspect should be a priority for the Italian state if it wishes to continue following the *jus sanguinis* principle, even in the watered-down version resulting from the 2025 citizenship law changes.

In this chapter we have recommended options to help foster non-resident citizens' engagement from overseas and help them to learn the language of the country of origin. However, based on the evidence collected, political engagement requires a level of proficiency that can be reached if citizens show a real interest in learning the Italian language. Individual effort is crucial. For this reason, language tests can help boost individual effort to learn the language and become informed citizens able to cast a meaningful vote.

The existing double standards on citizenship existing in Italy, including having mandatory language tests only for a specific cohort of would-be citizens, reveal an important discrepancy that the Italian state should address. Based on the current policy, and even after the 2025 legislative changes, people who have never set foot in Italy, do not speak the language of the country of origin but who can prove to have a (grand)parent with Italian citizenship, can acquire Italian citizenship with no limitation on their rights. In contrast, migrants living in Italy, who are educated in Italy, who speak the Italian language and are active citizens in the country (including by paying taxes) have to wait many years (and pass a demanding language test) before being able to access citizenship rights.

In light of our findings, a review of the existing Italian policies is overdue, above and beyond the 2025 citizenship law reform. This book has provided the normative justification and the empirical data and analysis to support the recommendations that are advanced in this chapter. While the study is limited to the second and third generations of Italo-Australians, we believe that an analysis of Italian transnational

communities around the world would bring us to many of the same conclusions. There are more than six million Italians residing permanently abroad. How many of them are proficient enough in the Italian language to understand Italian politics and cast an informed vote? This is the question that will need to be asked in future research and policy reviews.

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# Chapter 8

## Conclusion



In this book we have combined normative political theory with mixed-method empirical research to defend a novel argument regarding the rights of non-resident citizens, with a special focus on the voting rights of second- and third-generation Italo-Australians. More specifically, we have defended the normative argument that sending states should protect and promote their non-resident citizens' language interests—especially via their diaspora institutions—by ensuring that these citizens are proficient in the dominant language of their country of origin.

This argument is based on the claim that when individuals are conferred certain fundamental rights *qua* citizens of a specific state, that state has a duty to provide them with the means necessary to exercise those rights. Those means, we propose, include the right to a sufficient level of proficiency in the dominant language of the country of origin, without which citizens may be unable to exercise their fundamental rights that country has granted them. Although there are arguably a number of rights that states might owe their citizens, such as—but not limited to—the right to work, to shelter, to education, and to a fair trial, we focused on the right to vote, which a growing number of countries and territories around the world grant their non-resident citizens.

The rise in the global phenomenon of states granting their non-resident citizens voting rights has generated new opportunities for sending states to bind their citizens to their country of origin, even when those citizens have chosen to reside permanently in another country. However, not all the non-resident citizens whom sending states enfranchise are necessarily equipped with the language proficiency that is necessary to make full use of their voting entitlement. A growing number of states, Italy being among them, confer citizenship to the descendants of emigrants—persons who have never resided in the ancestral homeland. This gives rise to the prospects of non-resident citizens who lack the language skills required to fully exercise their voting rights in the elections (or referendums) of the sending state.

In order to understand the dimensions of the language challenges confronting second- and third-generation Italo-Australians, and to identify strategies to ameliorate them, we employed a mixed-method approach which provided us with 'a rich

collection of data from various sources to gain a deeper understanding of individual participants, including their opinions, perspectives, and attitudes' (Nassaji, 2025, p. 129). To this end, a survey of 204 Italo-Australian was conducted, alongside 47 semi-structured interviews with members of the Italo-Australian community, as well as additional interviews with representatives of key Italian diaspora institutions, such as former members of the Italian Parliament and persons working in Italian language media.

While our subjects are Australian-based, and we make no claim to the wider representativeness of our participants, the insights that they shared provide a valuable and rich account of the experiences of non-resident citizens engaging in voting at Italian elections and, more specifically, the barriers that language can present to their ability to fully optimize their Italian democratic rights. Our research into second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters exposed the language barriers that they experience, and how this limits their confidence and ability to participate in Italian elections on equal terms to their resident citizen counterparts. It is not legal or physical barriers that hinder second- and third-generation Italo-Australians from exercising their Italian voting rights but rather poor or no knowledge of the Italian language, which undermines the ability of many of them to make an informed decision and to comply with voting instructions.

Among the barriers to participating in elections identified by our participants are those related to acquiring a sufficient standard of Italian language comprehension, both written and verbal. While our respondents expressed interest in learning Italian, they reported difficulties in accessing opportunities to learn Italian. While participants acknowledged that the barriers are sometimes a function of their life circumstances, such as time constraints and personal motivation, most pointed to obstacles that are largely outside of their control, such as the high financial costs of learning Italian, concerns about the relevance of the current Italian language curriculum to service their need to be able to engage with Italian politics and , low awareness of extant Italian language support programs owing to the poor visibility of such resources.

In addition to language acquisition barriers, the study also identified voting access barriers arising from the challenges of reading and comprehending the voting instructions and, in the case of referendums, the ballot question(s), as well as the monolingualism of official Italian voting and political information. While none of these barriers, taken in isolation, are fatal to Italo-Australians' ability to participate in Italian politics, combined they can have a significant impact on their ability to cast a valid vote or to vote in accordance with their actual preferences.

The challenges of voting access confronted by second- and third-generation non-resident citizens has critical implications for the normative thesis that is central to this book. If, as we argued, states have a duty to provide their citizens, regardless of where they reside, with the means necessary to exercise their fundamental rights, and since the right to vote is one of those rights, the Italian state ought to assist second- and third-generation Italo-Australians to overcome the language barriers that make it difficult for them to participate fully in elections. We crowdsourced the suggestions and reflections of our respondents to formulate a number of

recommendations to enhance non-resident Italo-Australian dual citizens' substantive access to the ballot.

Some might challenge the premise that Italo-Australians (and non-resident citizens more generally, whether citizens of Italy or of any other country) should even possess the right to vote in their country of origin in the first instance. Indeed, this was often one of the main criticisms that we received when presenting this book's central argument to academic audiences over the past few years. And, as we also acknowledged in Chap. 3, the recognition of voting rights for non-resident citizens has been criticized by several normative political theorists, such as López-Guerra (2005). However, our book did not aim to engage with this debate but was guided by the fact that most countries around the world (around 150) *do already* grant some kinds of voting rights to their non-resident citizens. Our focus, therefore, was on whether the exercise of these rights might be hindered by language barriers and what the Italian state owes such voters as a result. We found that second- and third-generation Italo-Australian voters perceive that their ability to cast an informed vote, and to engage with Italian politics, is limited by their [poor] Italian language skills, suggesting that the Italian state is failing to fully advance and protect the voting rights of many of its non-resident citizens.

While our analysis focused on the experiences of non-resident second- and third-generation Italian voters living in Australia, the normative framework that we developed is portable, applicable to other states which grant similar rights to non-resident citizens. More specifically, we believe that, first, future research should investigate whether the language barriers that we identified in this study are also present in other contexts where non-resident citizens of second, third and subsequent generations also have the right to vote in their country of origin, and/or whether additional barriers might also be present in those contexts and, if so, to what effect. Second, although our empirical study focused on the conditions necessary to fully exercise the right to vote, our normative argument relates to all the fundamental rights that non-resident citizens are granted by their country of origin—setting aside, once again, the question of whether it is justifiable or not that they are granted those rights. Hence future studies could investigate other categories of rights (e.g. the right to work), the kinds of language barriers which non-resident citizens may face vis-à-vis those rights, and what interventions states could implement to overcome those barriers, for as long as the sending state grants non-resident citizens those rights.

Our findings also have implications for debates beyond those concerning linguistic justice and external voting. We would like to signal one in particular. There has been growing discussion, in recent years, regarding the ethics of voting and the quality of democracy. One of the most prominent scholars in this field, Jason Brennan (2011), has pointed out that not all kinds of voter judgment are suitable in a democracy, and that we should expect voters to make their decisions in a competent way and in good faith. According to Brennan, democracy should in this sense follow the example of jury trials:

individual jurors [at least in the US] are sometimes disqualified because they exhibit bias or certain kinds of incompetence. In law, because criminal convictions can deprive defendants of property, liberty and (sometimes) life, defendants are entitled to a fair trial by an impar-

tial jury. After a trial, if it becomes known that the jury made its decision in a corrupt or incompetent way ... this can be a legal ground for overturning the jury's decision (Brennan 2011, p. 706).

Likewise, Brennan argues, in the case of democratic decision-making voters should be required to make their decisions competently, given the significant negative impact that doing otherwise might have on other citizens:

[d]emocratic governments, like juries, also can deprive citizens (and others) of property, liberty, and life. Indeed, they often do. Democratic governments can impose policies that significantly alter citizens' life prospects for the worse. If defendants are entitled to competent juries, there might be similar reasons to hold that citizens are entitled to competent governments (Brennan 2011, p. 706).

Based on this analysis, Brennan rejects democracy and defends epistocracy, namely a system of government in which the right to vote is only granted to 'citizens...[who]...possess sufficient moral and epistemic competence' (2011, p. 701). We disagree with Brennan's conclusion and believe that the best response to the democratic challenges that he identifies is a more accessible and visceral democracy rather than epistocracy—including deliberative democratic institutions which, as empirical evidence has shown, can produce clear epistemic benefits by pooling information, correcting individual voters' biases and logical errors, and promoting a diversity of perspectives, thus contributing to better decision-making in spite of inevitable flaws in individual voters' judgment (Benson, 2021; Landemore & Elster, 2012). However, Brennan's concerns about voter competence deserve to be taken seriously.<sup>1</sup> As our analysis in this book has pointed out, voter language barriers can also potentially undermine the quality of democratic decision-making, with potential negative implications for other citizens' rights, liberties and well-being. Understanding and addressing the language barriers that affect non-resident citizens' political participation can and should therefore be a key aspect of governments' endeavour to create more competent citizens and better democratic decision-making. .

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<sup>1</sup>For an alternative perspective on voter competence, see Goren (2012) and Boudreau and Lupia (2011). Hannon (2022) offers a normative appraisal which challenges the assumptions and claims underlying the notion of the 'knowledgeable' voter.

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## Appendix: List of Stakeholders

Name	Role and organisation
On. Nicola Carè	MP elected in the Overseas Constituency electoral district Africa-Asia-Oceania-Antarctica (AAOA)
Ivano Ercole	Former Director— <i>Rete Italia</i>
Marco Fedi	CEO <i>Comitato Assistenza Italiani</i> (Co.As.It.)—Former MP
Sen. Francesco Giacobbe	Senator elected in the Overseas Constituency electoral district Africa-Asia-Oceania-Antarctica (AAOA)
Giancarlo Martini	Former CEO <i>Comitato Assistenza Italiani</i> (Co.As.It.)
Alessandro Masi	President, <i>Società Dante Alighieri</i>
Dario Nelli	Chief Editor— <i>Il Globo</i>
Carlo Oreglia	Producer—Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) Italian Program
Franco Papandrea	Member of the <i>Consiglio Generale degli Italiani all'Estero</i> (CGIE)
Francesco Pascalis	Former President— <i>Comitato degli Italiani all'Estero</i> (Com.It.Es) Victoria e Tasmania