

**Immigration and Local Urban  
Participatory Democracy:  
A Boston-Paris Comparison**

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## **Immigration and Local Urban Participatory Democracy: A Boston-Paris Comparison**

### **Summary**

This paper deals with a comparison of two governmental initiatives in the direction of immigrants – the Mayor’s Office of New Bostonians (Boston, 1998) and Conseil de la Citoyenneté des Parisiens Non-Communautaires (Paris, 2001). In both cities, local political leaders justify their politics by referring to “participatory democracy” as a way to facilitate the inclusion of immigrants into city policy-making. Beyond this rhetorical convergence, we find crucial divergences about these politicians’ respective actual goals and method of functioning : the experience is relatively positive in Boston, whereas the Parisian one is a patent failure. We can underline these differences notably by advancing the following hypothesis: MONB, as a city department, has managed to build a partnership with civil society, particularly with ethnic grassroots organisations, whereas in Paris, the Socialist Party's top-down CCPNC - a consultative council - is part of a political communication that is destined to its Green political allies and to public opinion at large.

**Keywords:** Urban politics, Immigration, USA/France

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# Immigration And Local Urban Participatory Democracy: A Boston-Paris Comparison<sup>1</sup>

Boston (Massachusetts) and Paris are two important cities of immigration in which the political majority of each municipality is at the origin of top-down governmental bodies dedicated to immigrants : the *Mayor's Office of New Bostonians – MONB* (1998) and *Conseil de la Citoyenneté des Parisiens Non-Communautaires – CCPNC – Citizenship Council for Extra-European Parisians* (2001). In this context, a comparison can be made both internationally (U.S./France) and locally (Boston/Paris).

This comparative approach will enable us to analyse political stakes relating to new immigration in North American and French cities. In Western countries that are politically and historically different, such as France and the United States, why and how local political majorities decide and implement top-down initiatives in the direction of new immigrants ? In an attempt to answer this question, we will deal with two main elements of comparison between the two experiences: the first one deals with the influence of an international political context – Europe, in the case of Paris- ; the second main factor is the two cities' respective political models that are different and fundamental in both experiences' current results. Those elements are of help to explain why the outcome of the Bostonian's MONB is experiencing a relative success, which is not the case of current Parisian's CCPNC.

The present study is divided into four main parts. The first part deals with a local comparison of the two cities' main geographical, demographic and political contexts. A very limited

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<sup>1</sup> Large parts of this article are translated from an article published in French under the title : “Politiques municipales et immigration en milieu urbain : comparaison Boston/Paris”, in *CICLas* review, forthcoming issue 2004

number of convergences – notably the rhetoric used by local political leaders-, is to presented in a second part. Then, the third part is concerned with and identification and an analysis of the two urban experiences’ divergences : *differences of objectives* – we observe that the Parisian experience is highly influenced by a supra-national context, namely Europe, not Boston’s which is specifically locally-oriented -, and *differences of functioning methods*, linked in turn to different political models. Indeed, MONB has managed to implement a narrow partnership between local, diverse and independent actors ; whereas the city of Paris has adopted a hierarchical model of democracy through a top-down consultative council composed of immigrant councilors, all nominated by the city mayor. In our fourth and last part, we will try to explain the signification of the “participatory democracy” concept and its reality in the North-American and French contexts, this in turn will enable us to link the national level with our local comparison.

### ***1) The local context : The cases of Boston and Paris***

For this study, I have selected Boston and Paris for several reasons : in both cities, immigration is a key theme in relation to their repective history and demography; they have implemented – at about the same period – comparable entities for immigrants ; finally the mayors of these case studies are both “progressive mayors”. To compare these local experiences, a qualitative methodology is adopted through local observations and personal interviews with local actors of civil society, and notably leaders of associations - whether they participate or not to the local immigrant governmental entities -, and elected people. The covered period for this research is notably the last five years, but not exclusively.

To better understand the issue of local politics and immigrants in Boston and Paris, a description of the main cities’ characteristics is necessary here.

## *A) Geographical and demographic context*

### *Boston*

Boston – both the capital of Massachusetts and a city that is located in Suffolk County- is composed of sixteen neighborhoods in which live the 589,141 inhabitants. Both in Paris and Boston, the ethno-racial component of the population is considerable and diverse. Today, about 25% of the Bostonian population is foreign-born. Also, according to the 2000 census, the total number of minorities is almost half the total population : 49%.<sup>2</sup> Citywide, immigrants are concentrated in specific neighborhoods such as Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, East Boston and South Dorchester<sup>3</sup>, and a hundred and forty different languages are spoken. Recently, a spectacular population increase has been noted mainly in Asians and Latinos communities.

### *Paris*

Paris is at the same time the French capital, an administrative department and a city. It is divided into twenty *arrondissements* – areas. The total population is 2, 147, 857 according to 1999 national census.

In Paris, 14.5% of the population is foreign-born, 11.9% in the Ile-de-France region (Parisian region).<sup>4</sup> Within the city of Paris, the three districts in which the proportion of immigrants is most important are the 18<sup>th</sup> (north of Paris, 12.70%), 2<sup>nd</sup> (centre of the city, 12.79%) and the 10<sup>th</sup> (eastern part of the city, 13.77%).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> « Boston's Population 2000 » in *Boston Redevelopment Authority* (BRA)'s Report # 554, April 2002

<sup>3</sup> P. WATANABE and al., *A Dream Deffered : Changing Demographics, Challenges & New Opportunities for Boston*, Boston : University of Massachusetts, January 1996

<sup>4</sup> D. CHAPUIS., « Quatre étrangers sur dix habitent en Ile-de-France », *Les Echos*, January 11 2002

<sup>5</sup> « De larges disparités entre les arrondissements », *Le Parisien*, January 14 2002

The main geographical and demographic characteristics of Boston and Paris show that immigration is a key component in both localities. What are these cities' s current political contexts ?

***B) Political context : Boston and Paris local political majorities***

The mayor of Boston, Thomas Menino (Democrat), has been mayor for ten years now. He was first elected in 1993, then in 1997 and in 2001. There is no official document testifying the 1998 setting up of MONB. Nevertheless, according to several interviews with local actors (community leaders, administrative agents and elected people), it appears that it was the mayor himself who decided to create the MONB agency. Thomas Menino, who is himself the son of Italian immigrants, is considered by many as a “pro-immigrant” mayor.

In Paris, the Socialist Party and its political allies -the Green and Communist parties- have formed the political majority, since March 2001. The Green Party and the Socialist Party signed a governmental project on March 13, 2001 : *Contrat de Mandature 2001-2007*, before municipal elections of March 21, 2001. In this document, a paragraph deals with the establishment of a consultative council for immigrants “until immigrants have the right to vote”.<sup>6</sup>

Several months after the election of Bertrand Delanoë (Socialist Party) as the city mayor, the Council of Paris voted in favor of the creation of CCPNC, in November 2001. Then, CCPNC was officially launched in December 2002.

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<sup>6</sup> Paris-Changeons d’Ere et les Verts Paris political parties, *Contrat de Mandature 2001-2007*, March 12 2001, p20

What must be noticed here is that the two cities are experiencing their first and specific municipal structures for immigrants.

As we have developed the main characteristics of Boston and Paris, we have noticed that immigration is a key theme in both localities. Now, on what points do the MONB and CCPNC converge and diverge ?

## ***II) MONB and CCPNC : Convergences***

In addition to a common “participatory democracy” rhetoric, there are other few convergences between the two experiences such as a similarity of subjects – English/French language teaching, for example-, on which the top-down immigrants entities work. The most important convergence of the two experiences is the rhetoric used by local political leaders who highlight the virtue of “participatory democracy” for immigrants.

In both cities, the official rhetoric used by local leaders to justify the creation of top-down governmental bodies for immigrants is linked to an institutionalized “participatory democracy”. City officials use the expression “participatory democracy” when underlining the necessity to make immigrants participate (more) into city policy-making : “favoriser l’expression et la *participation* à la vie municipale”<sup>7</sup> (facilitate an expression and a *participation* into city’s political life)/ “Our purpose is to strenghten the ability of immigrants [...] to fully *participate* in the economic, civic, social and cultural life of the City of Boston”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Council of Paris’s *Projet de Délibération 2001 SG4*, , November 2001

<sup>8</sup> Office of New Bostonians’s *New Bostonians’ s Community Resource Directory*, Boston City Hall, April 2000



But, as the need to make immigrants participate more into mainstream local society is strongly felt, MONB and CCPNC mainly experience divergences about their respective actual objectives and process of functioning.

### ***III) MONB and CCPNC : Divergences***

#### ***A) Differences of objectives***

The French local voting right issue for immigrants is linked to the political supra-national level, that is to say Europe. Extra-European immigrants living in France are not allowed to vote, whatever the level. In contrast to the extra-European immigrants, the Europeans ones can vote locally in France : the 1992 European *Maastricht Treaty* officially set up reciprocity agreements between European countries concerning the local right to vote, for those who have a nationality from one the European countries.

Since the mid-1970s, in parallel with the development of the European integration, immigrant-specific consultative bodies have been developing in several French – and European- cities, for those who do not possess the nationality of one of the European Union countries.

According to political leaders of the Parisian municipality, one of the objectives of CCPNC along with “participatory democracy”, is to promote local voting rights for immigrants living in France.

The situation is different in Boston because the U.S. is not framed into an international supra-national level the way France is with Europe. So, indeed it is clear that in order to vote new immigrants should adopt the U.S. nationality. MONB agency works to make immigrants

being part of the city, as U.S. citizens, *as soon as possible* after the required five years of residency : “New Bostonians” should follow the way of old Bostonian citizens. In order to do so, they work to “integrate” them as one of the strong and diverse components of the city.<sup>9</sup> So Parisian and Bostonian local authorities want new immigrants to be new citizens, but differently. The Parisian situation is highly influenced by the European context. The mayor of Paris keeps repeating that CCPNC councillors, through their work and proposals, must also convince French citizens, French elected people notably, to get the local voting right.

The French debate on nationality vs. citizenship remains a considerable and controversial one between left and right wings of French political spectrum, with rare exceptions though. According to a majority of right-wing politicians, the local suffrage is to be considered both as a privilege and a consequence after having adopted the French nationality ; on the other hand, a majority of left-wing politicians think that local voting rights is a right and they argue in favor of a *citoyenneté de résidence* (residence citizenship), that is to say a citizenship of the “cité”, not a of the “nation”. *Citoyenneté de résidence* highlights a local citizenship, local voting rights being part of it, whatever the place where people live and their nationality.

In contrast to Paris, the issue of local voting rights in Boston is not based on a possible electoral reform but it is turned towards an implementation of local pragmatic actions – notably through education and voting registrations-, to make immigrants adopting the American nationality. One of the MONB’s programs is called *New Bostonians Vote* campaign. Officially, it is dedicated to educate new immigrants on the importance of voting

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Felix D. ARROYO, *At-large City Councillor and MONB President* : “It is our responsibility to work with immigrants and ask them to participate in and belong to the local democratic process. They need to know their city and how it works, MONB contributes to that”, Boston City Hall, May 20 2003

and facilitate the vote access for them.<sup>10</sup> Through the *New Bostonians Vote* campaign, more than five thousand additional people got registered on the voting lists, in November 2000. This figure was achieved thanks to an efficient partnership between many not-for-profit grassroots organizations, local foundations, local churches, etc, and MONB.<sup>11</sup> In Paris, as said before, the mayor is in favor of local voting rights for extra-European immigrants, even though he and his supporters are not that active to advance their idea. Beyond a symbolic rhetoric that is expressed by city officials, as noticed above, extra-European immigrants still do not represent a credible electoral force, they consequently do not have the opportunity to increase their power within local politics. Contrary to their American counterparts, they are politically non-incorporated. Extra-European immigrants living in France obtained the right of association late (1981). But as described above, the U.S. philosophy is different since immigrants should manage to get the U.S. citizenship rapidly in order to constitute an important electoral weight and have their *voice* heard into the U.S. pluralist political system that balances groups' interests through negotiation. But here too, there are exceptions : there are places where non-US citizens vote locally. It is the case for instance of Takoma Park (Maryland), where non-U.S. citizens have been able to vote in municipal elections since 1992<sup>12</sup>. At the city level, the U.S. geographical and political decentralization has favored a relative independence of cities from their respective local State. Indeed, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century *home rule* principle, cities can define their own municipal *charter*, and modify it

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<sup>10</sup> Mayor Thomas MENINO : “The best way to participate and voice your ideas and opinions is to cast your vote”, *City Record, Official Chronicle Municipal Affairs*, July 23 2001, Vol 93, N°30, p598

<sup>11</sup> « Boston Votes 2001, Remarks of Mayor Thomas M. MENINO, July 12 2001”, in *City Record, Official Chronicle Municipal Affairs*, July 23 2001, Vol 93, N°30, p598

<sup>12</sup> P. LEVITT., *The Transnational Villagers*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 2001, p207

when necessary. In comparison with France, the U.S. local level is autonomous, and as a consequence it remains possible for non-U.S. citizens to vote locally in some U.S. cities.

### ***B) Differences of functioning methods***

The other big divergence between the two local experiences resides in their respective functioning method that is directly linked to their respective political model. The *Mayor's Office of New Bostonians*, as an administrative department within City Hall, *works in partnership with local actors of civil society*, notably ethnic grassroots organizations. The CCPNC case is different : it is a consultative council composed of a hundred and twenty members– ninety tenured and thirty substitutes *individual* Parisian immigrants-, all nominated by the city mayor after they had volunteered. The task of these chosen councillors -of thirty-six different nationalities- is to make propositions that will be debated and/or voted during a Paris City Council meeting session. But here, *the conception and organization of CCPNC is controlled by the municipality*. Today, the partners of CCPNC councillors are city officials and various city administrative departments. There are several examples showing the centralized administrative weight and political control on CCPNC councillors, for instance they should first be approved then authorized by the *Délégation Intégration et Relations avec les Résidents Etrangers*, Integration and relations with foreign residents office, that supervises CCPNC<sup>13</sup>, before communicating with any other administrative department of the

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<sup>13</sup> For example, several CCPNC councillors expressed their dissatisfaction during the plenary meeting session of March 15 2003.

municipality and extra-municipality people. CCPNC councillors are not autonomous. Ten ex-CCPNC councillors left the Council since it started.<sup>14</sup>

True, MONB is the oldest initiative between the two – so it has more experience- but this argument is not strong enough to explain why MONB is relatively successful whereas CCPNC is experiencing great difficulties. An important number of councillors who feel demotivated and demobilized is one of the consequences of those difficulties. Many of them expressed this situation publicly in meetings and in private during interviews. We observe a considerable number of absentee councillors – about two-thirds of them- in meeting sessions. On the contrary, *MONB* is still working actively with their local partners. Today, the CCPNC's annual report is the only factual achievement, this report was presented during a Paris City Council meeting in April 2003<sup>15</sup>. Will the *CCPNC*'s propositions be taken into account ? Up to now, grassroots and/or mainstream local organizations and MONB agency developed a system of simultaneous translation equipment, they implemented a citywide department-based cultural competence whose goal is to help immigrants at City Hall, also they also increased the level of voting registration and they developed an important program of English language teaching through private-public partnership, etc.

Nevertheless, on many occasions, people from several organizations I interviewed have criticized the MONB for their lack of advocacy, and in particular political advocacy. On this point, Reverend Cheng Tan's argumentation – she is the MONB Director-, is clear: “we do advocate, we do not lobby”. The agency depends on the Mayor whose interest – among

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<sup>14</sup> Among them, two councilors have adopted the French nationality, so they cannot be part of the CCPNC any more ; it appears that the other councilors left because they were no more interested by the CCPNC Council

<sup>15</sup> Conseil de Paris's *Projet de délibération DPVI 27*, « Présentation du Rapport annuel du CCPNC », April 28 2003

others- is to keep his broad electorate, thus avoid taking “radical” positions. In fact, “radical” positions are taken by several city councillors, for example on the issues of the legalization of undocumented immigrants or bilingual education, those issues are addressed within the legislative branch of MONB, the *New Bostonians committee*, a committee that is mainly composed of city councillors (MONB is the executive branch).

According to Reverend Tan, working in *narrow partnership* between MONB and grassroots organizations is the *key* for the MONB’s success. She considers the Bostonian organizations not as “intermediaries” but as *crucial “partners”*[...] “we are not an advisory agency, we develop programs with our partners”.<sup>16</sup> When *MONB* started, Reverend Tan and her staff met with one hundred and twenty community leaders in twelve different neighborhoods of the city.

Generally speaking, MONB is a technical support (logistic, information), it is not an agency that supervises grassroots initiatives. The MONB staff neither replaces, nor controls the work of organizations. Here, the partnership working process is horizontal, contrary to the CCPNC’s which is vertical.

Moreover, one of the crucial differences between Bostonian and Parisian intermediaries, is the way they are financed. U.S. foundations are numerous and are of different types. The present research deals with “community” foundations, not family or corporation foundations. Every organization or coalition of organizations I met in Boston are financed through private funds that originate from several sources : banks, individual donators, membership fees, philanthropic associations, etc, notably the *Boston Foundation*, and not or slightly with public funds. Thus, grassroots organizations have a relative financial and political independence

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Reverend Cheng Imm TAN, *MONB Director*, Boston City Hall, May 14 2003

from local public governmental subsidies (more than their French counterparts in any case), especially militant organizations. American associations are considered as private organisations that cannot be financed through public funding (in this case, funds would originate from citizens' taxes). Several Parisian associations I interviewed were publicly financed and expressed dissatisfaction from being largely dependent on governmental public funds, mainly from the national *Fonds d'Action Social* (Social Action Fund of the French Social Affairs Ministry). In France, there are about 700,000 nonprofit associations and as Professor Sophie Body-Gendrot puts it : “[...] generally speaking, French mayors remain suspicious of grassroots associations and informal grassroots initiatives they do not control, these are considered as possible “counterpowers”<sup>17</sup>

#### ***IV) “Participatory democracy” and a comparison of the local level in the U.S. and in France***

Through this MONB/CCPNC comparison, we have mainly brought out divergences in their respective objectives and functioning method. We can analyze these differences through a comparison of local governmental models in the United States and in France, by doing so we can understand better these local divergences.

Indeed, in a Tocquevilian perspective that underlines North-American characteristics such as a decentralized political power that provides local autonomy – self-government-, and the opportunity for Americans to control elected political leaders, we notice that these characteristics form an institutional and political context that is favourable to the practice of a

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<sup>17</sup> S. BODY-GENDROT, “Local Governance, Community Organization and Crime : The Case of France” in S. BODY-GENDROT and M. GITTELL eds, *Social Capital and Social Citizenship*, Lanham (Maryland) : Lexington Books, 2003, p42

local “participatory democracy”. These historical and pragmatic characteristics highlight the fact that associations have a fundamental and relatively independent role, more than in other political systems, more than in France notably. Local actors in Boston, and notably grassroots associations, inherit from this democratic political tradition.

France is still experiencing a national and local political organization that is more turned towards “representation” as opposed to “participation”. In French political, judicial and cultural history “democracy” is linked to “nation”, not to the « locality”. According to Article 12 of the 1958 Law : “National sovereignty belongs to the people who exert it through their representatives or by (national) referendum”. Through elections processes, “representation” – is legitimized, “participation” less so, see Article 72 of the same Law : “Territorial collectivities freely administer themselves through elected councils and in the conditions that are described in the law”.

Beyond this law, the importance of “representation”, as the main source of legitimacy of French political local power, has origins that are deeply anchored into French political history.<sup>18</sup> The *commune* –town/district-, and the institutionalized mayor, are the only stable political institutions since the French Revolution, they have indeed survived several French revolutions and constitutional transformations.

The majoritarian municipal electoral system refuses the representation of private interests that are distinct from the general interest of the communal population. In addition, the persistence of the French *cumul des mandats* -concurrent positions-, gives the mayor an essential role in the the French political and institutional framework, not only at the local level but also at the national one. Thus it is more difficult in France than in the U.S. to consider open political opportunities for non-elected groups, especially for extra-national residents. These extra-national residents form a small part of the total population who do not possess suffrage rights



so they are not taken into account, as a consequence. It is not the case of the North American local community model that legitimizes local citizenship through a variety of local elections.<sup>19</sup> Today's centralized France is in a process of decentralization even though the gap between public and private spheres remains important. French decentralization mainly started at the beginning of the 1980s up to a recent law named *Démocratie de Proximité* – Democracy of Proximity – voted in February 2002<sup>20</sup>. *Démocratie de Proximité* is a State law that trickles down to the local level. For instance, French cities that have 80,000 inhabitants or more *must* create and finance the *conseils de quartier* - neighborhood councils - with other public collectivities. Moreover, and still in accordance to this law, mayors are the presidents of the consultative councils.

This comparative study enables us to bring out a combination of local and national political elements that provide a better understanding of why and how local political majorities, like in Boston and Paris, decide and implement specific governmental bodies dedicated to immigrants, and why these experiences' results differ. Even though we have noticed some convergences in the two local and urban experiences – mainly the rhetoric used by local political leaders in both cities-, we have mainly underlined their important divergences. Indeed, we find differences of *objectives* - the Parisian experience is highly influenced by the supra-national political context of Europe concerning the issue of local voting rights for immigrants in Europe-, whereas the Bostonian experience is essentially local and deals with groups' interests of the local pluralist political system, in which new immigrants is a component ; and differences of *functioning methods* –narrow partnership between MONB and

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<sup>18</sup> A. MABILEAU., *Le système local en France*, Paris : Montchrestien, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, coll. Clefs Politiques, 1994, p53

<sup>19</sup> S. BODY-GENDROT, C. LEFEVRE et al., *Les villes des Etats-Unis*, Paris : Masson, Collection Géographie, 1989, p57

<sup>20</sup> « Démocratie de Proximité », *Assemblée Nationale*, N° 2002-276, February 27 2002

ethnic grassroots associations and other local actors of the civil society, in contrast to CCPNC which is a consultative council composed of one hundred and twenty councilors who are all nominated by the city mayor.

Then, we have established a connection between the two cities' divergences and North-American and French local governmental models : in a Tocquevilian perspective that underlines U.S. characteristics such as local self-government and the fundamental and relatively independent role of associations, we have noticed that local actors in Boston, notably ethnic grassroots organizations, inherit this democratic political tradition. In contrast, Paris City Hall's CCPNC, as a consultative structure that is controlled by the municipality, reflects a French centralized and political organization which is turned towards "representation" as the main national and local source of legitimacy.

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