



RESEARCH NOTE

Does far-right legislative entry affect minority candidate diversity?

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Abstract

Using a regression discontinuity design, we examine the causal impact of far-right parties' first-time entry into Swedish municipal politics on the inclusion of candidates from groups frequently targeted by their rhetoric, namely immigrants and sexual minorities. Leveraging validated candidate data, we find that far-right entry has a negative effect on the share of immigrant candidates within mainstream parties. However, this average effect masks important differences across parties. Left-wing parties respond by increasing immigrant recruitment, resulting in a net increase in immigrant representation on ballots. In contrast, right-wing parties reduce their share of immigrant candidates, largely due to limited recruitment of new candidates. These findings highlight how far-right legislative presence shapes the recruitment and retention of minority candidates in democratic politics.

Keywords: candidates; diversity in politics; far-right; radical right parties; regression discontinuity; representation

1. Introduction

Far-right parties are on the rise (Kitschelt, 1996; Mudde, 2007; Valentim, 2024). The past decade has seen these actors move from the periphery to the heart of the political mainstream (de Lange, 2012; Akkerman *et al.*, 2016; Mudde, 2019; DeVries and Hobolt, 2020). The institutionalization of the far-right via access to the legislature is not without consequences. There is robust empirical evidence that far-right party success shapes the behavior of mainstream parties (Bale, 2003; Han, 2015; Abou-Chadi, 2016). Both center-right and, to a lesser extent, center-left parties have been shown to adopt various accommodative strategies toward far-right parties (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018; Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Krause *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, there is widespread evidence that far-right legislative entry has an effect on voter attitudes (Giani and Meon, 2021; Gerling and Kellermann, 2022; Gul, 2023), polarization (Bischof and Wagner, 2019), and voter behavior (Romarri, 2020; Valentim, 2024).

In this note, we contribute to the literature on the political consequences of far-right party success by asking: *Does the entry of far-right parties into municipal politics affect the diversity of candidate slates offered by mainstream political parties?* We focus on two groups frequently targeted by far-right rhetoric: immigrants and sexual minorities, specifically lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. We expect that the first-time entry of far-right parties into the municipal legislative arena, and

the resulting legitimization of their discourse, will shape both the behavior of individual minority candidates and the recruitment strategies of mainstream parties.

To test this, we use a regression discontinuity (RD) design that exploits *as-good-as-random* variation in the Sweden Democrats' (SD) first-time entry into municipal councils. We examine the potential causal effect of securing an initial municipal legislative mandate on the composition of candidate slates, focusing on immigrant and sexual-minority candidates.¹ Our analysis draws on a comprehensive dataset combining validated candidacy data from the Swedish administrative register with electoral data on SD vote shares relative to local electoral thresholds. The same dataset includes individual-level information on immigrant background and civil status, the latter of which enables identification of a sexual-minority subset using an established approach (Grahn, 2024, 2025).

Empirically, we find no overall impact of far-right entry on the representation of sexual-minority candidates in mainstream political parties. However, we find a statistically significant negative effect of far-right municipal entry on the representation of immigrant candidates. When unpacking this effect, we note that it conceals substantial variation in how parties respond. Among left-wing parties, the share of immigrant candidates increases, as these parties actively recruit more candidates. Among right-wing parties, by contrast, we observe a decline in immigrant candidate representation, driven primarily by limited recruitment of new candidates, and to a lesser extent by the withdrawal of existing ones. These results suggest that, at least in the short term, the success of far-right parties may boost immigrant representation on the political left while diminishing it on the right. This points to accommodative (Krause *et al.*, 2023) and adversarial (Meguid, 2005; Dennison and Kustov, 2023) reactions to far-right challengers similar to those found in other domains (e.g., policy positions).

Our findings have implications for two distinct bodies of literature. First, we contribute to the rapidly expanding research on the electoral consequences of far-right political success (Ekholm *et al.*, 2022; Dancygier *et al.*, 2024; Loxbo, 2024). Second, our results also inform the broader scholarship on descriptive representation (Dancygier *et al.*, 2015; Lindgren *et al.*, 2022; Grahn and Thisell, 2024; Lajevardi *et al.*, 2024). From a normative perspective, we contribute to a better understanding of how far-right legislative entry affects minority candidate diversity.

2. Far-right legislative entry and candidate diversity in mainstream parties

There is no scholarly consensus on whether the legislative entry of far-right parties affects the inclusion of groups they portray as out-groups or enemies of “ordinary people.” While existing research has debated whether far-right parties themselves can facilitate the descriptive representation of women within their own ranks (Kostadinova and Mikulska, 2017; Caiani *et al.*, 2022; Weeks *et al.*, 2023), we know far less about whether their electoral success influences the candidate diversity within mainstream parties.

Importantly, the first-time legislative entry of far-right parties is conceptually distinct from their rise in public opinion polls. Entry into elected office ensures that far-right discourses, often marked by anti-immigration and anti-LGBT+ rhetoric (Mudde, 2019), are formally introduced into the legislative arena (Valentim and Widmann, 2023). It is reasonable to expect that minority candidates in mainstream parties will respond to the legitimization of these actors, along with the illiberal values and rhetoric they bring. We can envision two distinct types of reactions to far-right legislative entry.

The first reaction is withdrawal or flight (Dinas and Foos, 2017; Loxbo, 2024). Politics is often an adversarial space, inhospitable to minorities and minoritized groups (Dancygier *et al.*, 2015; Spierings and Zaslove, 2017; Allen and Goodman, 2020; Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville, 2022; Lajevardi *et al.*, 2024). Far-right entry may prompt minority candidates and aspirants to reconsider political careers, anticipating exposure to a hardened rhetorical tone and the illiberal policy agendas commonly associated with far-right actors (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014; Muis and Immerzeel, 2017).

¹See Section 3.2 for details on how immigrant background and non-heterosexual identity are measured.

The second possible reaction is mobilization. Far-right electoral breakthroughs may increase political engagement among minority groups, motivating potential candidates to step forward (Immerzeel and Pickup, 2015; Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville, 2022). The success of illiberal parties may heighten the perceived stakes of political participation and serve as a catalyst for political ambition. In other words, rather than retreating, mainstream actors—and minority candidates themselves—may be driven to push back (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2021; Dennison and Kustov, 2023; Valentim and Widmann, 2023).

Beyond these supply-side dynamics, which center on the agency of candidates and aspirants, we also expect far-right entry to influence the recruitment practices of mainstream parties. In most electoral systems, parties serve as gatekeepers to elected office (Gallgher and Marsh, 1988; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Grahn and Thisell, 2024; Lajevardi *et al.*, 2024). Mainstream parties may respond to the challenge posed by far-right rivals by adjusting their recruitment practices. On the one hand, they might choose to maintain or even increase minority representation among their candidates, seeking to project an image of inclusion and diversity that contrasts with the exclusionary positions of the far right.² On the other hand, in line with evidence that mainstream parties often accommodate the practices and policy positions of far-right competitors, they may instead reduce the recruitment of minority candidates to appeal to voters who are sympathetic to anti-immigrant or nativist sentiments. This strategic ambiguity reflects the broader tension between normative commitments to representation and the electoral pressures posed by far-right success.

3. Data and design

3.1. Case of Sweden

Swedish municipal politics offers an ideal setting for examining the effects of far-right legislative entry on minority candidate diversity within mainstream political parties. Sweden employs a semi-closed list proportional representation system at all levels of government. In this system, parties compete in multimember electoral districts using ballots that list multiple candidates (Folke and Rickne, 2016; Grahn and Håkansson, 2025). Seats are first allocated to parties in proportion to their share of the vote and then distributed to candidates primarily based on their position on the party list. In this context, political parties act as gatekeepers to elected office (Folke, 2014). The process of candidate selection is decentralized in Sweden, which means that local party chapters are responsible for recruiting candidates and determining their ballot ranks (Grahn and Thisell, 2024; Grahn and Håkansson, 2025). While most parties can realistically expect to win only a few council seats, they are still required to submit long candidate lists—as if filling the entire municipal council. This task can be particularly challenging outside major urban centers. Combined with the fact that serving as a municipal councilor is not a full-time role, local candidacy in Sweden is shaped as much by the supply of willing aspirants as by party recruitment strategies (Grahn and Thisell, 2024).

We argue that the local level provides a particularly valuable testing ground for studying the effects of far-right legislative entry. Municipal councils in Sweden hold substantial authority over policy areas such as local transport, education, social services, housing, urban planning, and elderly care. They also set local tax rates, approve municipal budgets, and appoint members to various boards and committees. Notably, the SD—a representative example of the contemporary European populist radical right³—first gained a foothold at this level of government. Since then, they have used local platforms to promote their anti-immigration and anti-minority rights agenda (Ekholm *et al.*, 2022; Renstrom *et al.*, 2023; Loxbo, 2024). SD has, for example, led local campaigns to ban the rainbow flag from municipal properties.

²This outcome does not preclude far-right accommodation in terms of policy. Mainstream parties might recruit more minority candidates to sugarcoat a far-right policy turn.

³The SD has been consistently categorized as a populist radical-right party by both the PopuList (V3.0) project (Rooduijn *et al.*, 2023) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Hooghe *et al.*, 2024).

The party first appeared on Sweden's political map in 1991, but it was only after 2002 that SD began making consistent inroads into municipal councils (Renstrom *et al.*, 2023; Loxbo, 2024). Between 2002 and 2010, the party gradually expanded from its regional stronghold in Scania to municipalities across the country. We leverage this staggered pattern of entry in our research design.

3.2. Data

We make use of validated data on the entire population of Sweden, commonly known as Swedish register data (Folke, 2014; Grahn, 2024). Crucially for this study, the register includes verified information on individuals' candidacy status (dating back to 1982), migration background, and civil or family status. The latter has been successfully used in previous research to identify a subset of Sweden's LGB population (Grahn, 2024; Ahlskog *et al.*, 2026). A key advantage of relying on this comprehensive dataset is that it yields estimates that are not subject to the biases typically associated with self-reported data.

We identify all individuals who ran for municipal office between 2002 and 2022. For each election year, we calculate the municipality-specific share of immigrant and LGB candidates within mainstream parties. While small local parties occasionally compete at the municipal and regional levels, they rarely achieve significant representation. We therefore focus our analysis on seven major mainstream parties: the Social Democrats, Moderates, Left Party, Greens, Liberals, Center Party, and Christian Democrats. We also calculate left-right-specific shares of minority candidates by municipality-year to enable analyses of heterogeneous effects.⁴

To identify candidates with an immigrant background, we use validated information about individuals' and their parents' place of birth. Following established practice, we classify as immigrants those born abroad to two foreign-born parents, as well as those born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents (Lajevardi *et al.*, 2024).⁵ To identify a subset of LGB individuals, we adopt the approach developed by Grahn (2024), classifying as non-straight those who are married to a same-sex partner and/or have children with someone of the same sex.

Supplementary Appendix A contains plots showing the over-time development in the share of immigrant and LGB candidates within mainstream parties and the SD (see Supplementary Appendix Figure A1), as well as their access to municipal office (see Supplementary Appendix Figure A2).

3.3. Empirical strategy

Relying on an RD approach, our identification strategy assumes that municipalities where the SD narrowly gained or narrowly missed on municipal representation are, on average, equivalent in all other respects (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2020). Under this assumption, observed changes in the proportion of minority candidates within mainstream parties can be causally attributed to the *as-good-as-random* variation in whether the far right secured its first municipal mandate. This design is widely used to identify the causal effects of far-right party electoral success (Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2018; Romarri, 2020; Valentim, 2024).

In our RD design, the running variable is defined as SD's vote share relative to the minimum vote share required to win one seat in a given municipal council in a given election. Prior to the 2018 election, Swedish municipal elections used *organic* electoral thresholds—that is, thresholds that varied by district size and local vote distributions. As a result, a party with the same vote share in two different municipalities could differ in whether it secured representation.

⁵As this is the first inquiry of its kind, it is important to examine whether far-right entry into municipal councils affects the overall representation of immigrant-origin candidates within mainstream parties. We welcome follow-up research examining the responses of candidates with different migration backgrounds (see Portmann and Stojanovic, 2022; Agerberg, 2024).

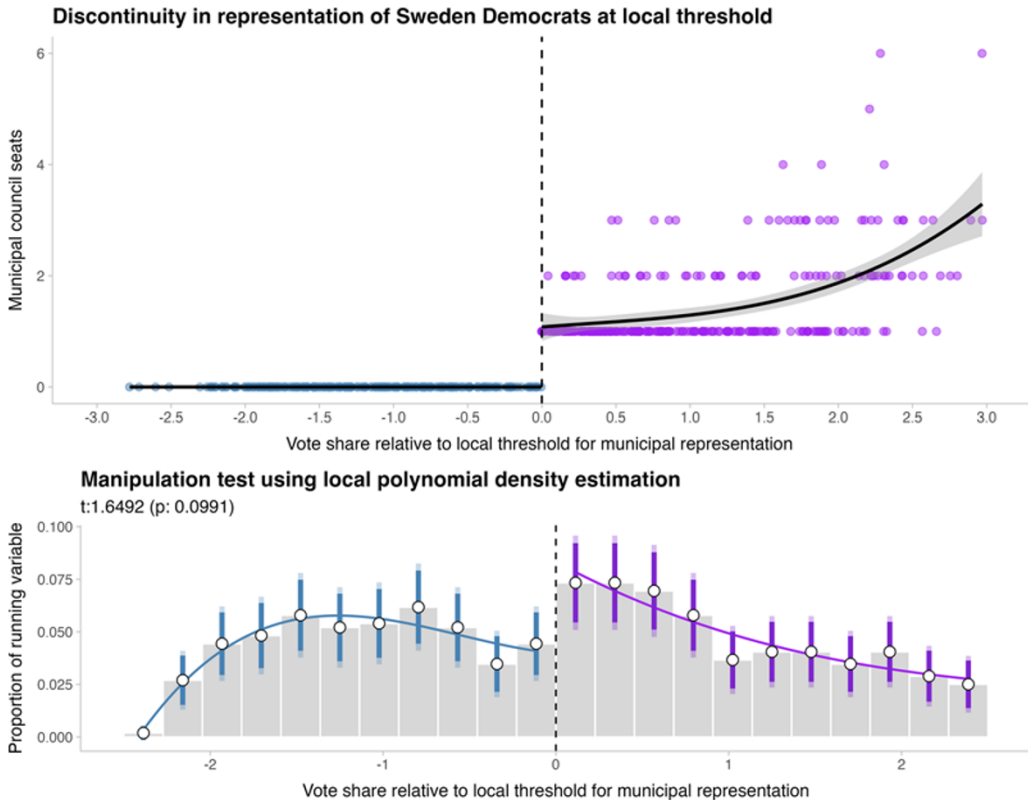


Figure 1. Visual validation of discontinuity in far-right representation.

Following the approach developed by Folke (2014) for proportional representation systems, we calculate SD-specific electoral thresholds based on the minimum vote share needed to gain a mandate in each municipality-year—or in each municipality-district-year, for municipalities subdivided into multiple electoral districts.⁶ The upper panel of Figure 1 visualizes the allocation of municipal seats as a function of this running variable.⁷ The lower panel visualizes the manipulation test (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2018). Although the binned estimates in the lower panel show somewhat more municipalities falling just to the right of the threshold than just to the left, the manipulation test provides no evidence of a statistically distinguishable jump in the density at the cutoff (see also Supplementary Appendix Table A21). This continuity is consistent with the nature of elections: parties cannot observe their final vote shares before ballots are cast, making deliberate bunching at the representation threshold theoretically implausible. Balance tests are reported in Supplementary Appendix E1.

To estimate the causal effect of SD gaining municipal representation at time t , we require a reliable measure of change in candidate diversity. Our main dependent variable is the change in the proportion of relevant minority candidates within mainstream parties between the election in which SD

⁶In cases where SD narrowly won or lost a single mandate in more than one district within a multi-district municipality, we use the closest race as the representative municipality-year value for the running variable.

⁷In some electoral systems, parties can gain representation despite not having achieved the electoral threshold and, in these cases, a fuzzy RDD would be advisable (Dinas *et al.*, 2015). This is not the case in the legislative set-up in Sweden and, as visualized in Figure 1, there are no instances where the SD gained representation despite failing to meet the electoral threshold in the municipality.

gained (or failed to gain) municipal representation (t) and the subsequent election ($t + 1$) in each municipality. By focusing on municipality-specific change scores, we isolate the impact of far-right legislative entry from pre-existing cross-sectional differences in candidate diversity. Our estimand of interest is the local average treatment effect (LATE) using the optimal bandwidth. The RD design is specifically intended to identify causal effects at the cutoff—that is, the *local* effect for observations immediately on either side of the threshold. The LATE captures this estimate and maximizes the as-good-as-random comparison between observations on either side of the threshold. Because our dataset includes multiple election years, we include fixed effects for each election and cluster standard errors by election year to account for unobserved election-specific heterogeneity.

In addition to the main outcome of interest, we also examine whether SD's municipal entry affects minority candidate withdrawal rates, new recruitment patterns, and access to safe candidacy. These outcomes are measured as municipality- and party-ideology-specific changes in minority candidate presence between the time of treatment and the subsequent election. To assess withdrawal rates, we calculate the proportion of minority candidates among all withdrawing candidates at $t + 1$ and compare it to the corresponding proportion at t . To capture new recruitment, we examine the share of minority candidates among all new candidates at $t + 1$, again relative to t . Finally, to evaluate access to safe candidacy, we measure the proportion of minority candidates among those elected at $t + 1$ and compare it to the equivalent proportion at t .

4. Analysis

The estimated LATE for immigrant candidates indicates a statistically significant negative effect of the SD gaining municipal representation on immigrant candidate diversity (see Figure 2, upper panel).⁸ This means that in municipalities where SD gained representation by a narrow margin, there is a significant drop in the share of immigrant candidates compared to municipalities where SD narrowly failed to gain representation. For sexual-minority candidates, the LATE is not distinguishable from zero, indicating a null effect.⁹

We also examine whether the overall negative effect on immigrant candidate diversity and the null effect on LGB candidate representation obscure meaningful ideological asymmetries in party responses. We note that, among right-wing parties, the LATE is negative and significant. In contrast, the LATE for immigrant candidates within left-wing parties is positive and significant.¹⁰ For LGB candidates, we find convincing null effects within both left- and right-wing parties.

In Figure 3, we illustrate the magnitude of the identified effects by visualizing the distribution and mean of the outcome measures by treatment condition and party ideology. Given a baseline change in the share of immigrant candidates among right-wing parties of 0.011, a treatment effect of -0.016 ($p < 0.01$) represents a substantial shift. Similarly, the positive treatment effect of 0.010 ($p < 0.01$) for left-wing parties is considerable, given the baseline level of the same outcome variable: left-wing parties in municipalities where SD gained a seat are twice as likely to increase their share of immigrant candidates compared to similar parties in municipalities where SD narrowly missed representation.

We further validate these findings through robustness and sensitivity checks, presented in Supplementary Appendices E–G. These include placebo tests using arbitrary treatment assignments (Supplementary Appendix E7), an alternative operationalization of the running variable

⁸The results reported in Supplementary Appendix H show that access to safe candidate spots is *unaffected* by the treatment.

⁹The estimation results underlying Figure 2 are also reported in tabular form in Supplementary Appendix B, along with robustness checks using global bandwidths and higher-order polynomials. We note, however, that these specifications come with important caveats: higher-order polynomials and global bandwidths relax the core assumption of *as-good-as-random* assignment close to the threshold (Angrist and Rokkanen, 2015; Gelman and Imbens, 2019).

See Supplementary Appendix B for RD plots and main results in table format.

¹⁰In Supplementary Appendix E2, we assess the sensitivity of the estimated LATE to alternative bandwidths. The negative LATE in the case of immigrant candidates among right-wing candidates is not robust across alternatives, whereas the positive LATE among left-wing candidates is largely stable.

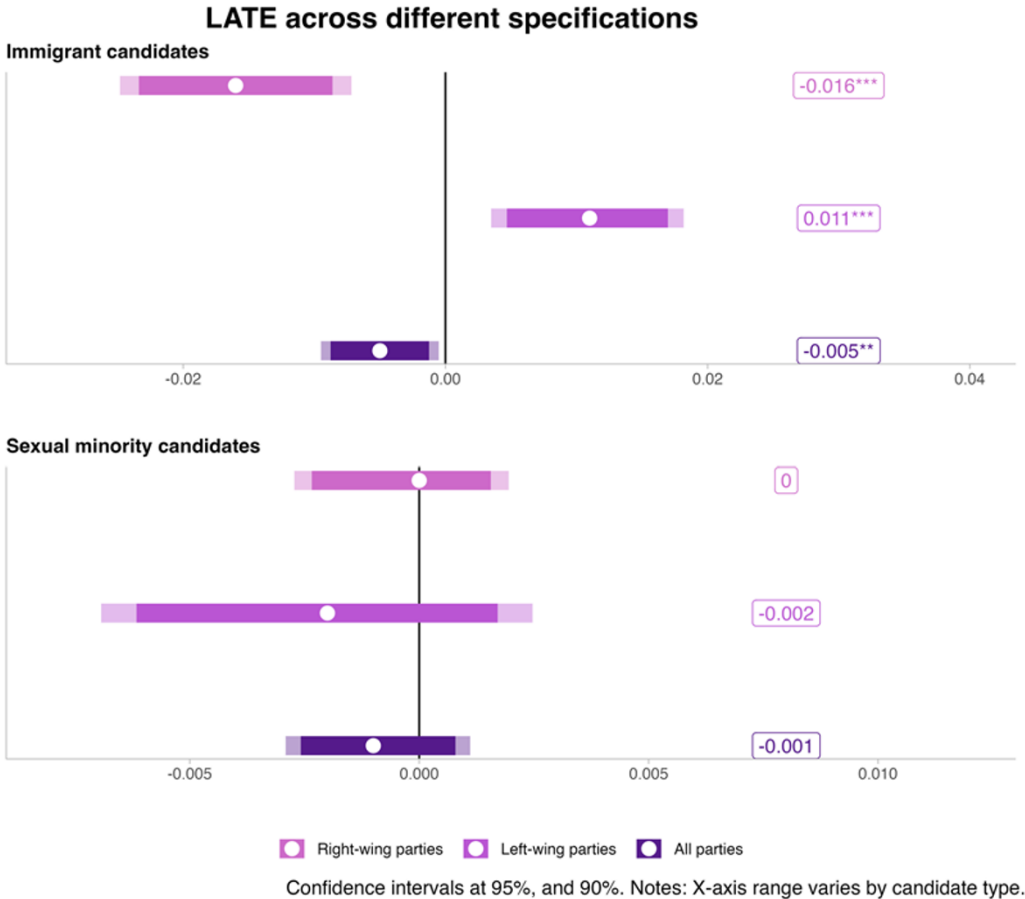


Figure 2. Effect on the diversity of municipal candidate pool.

(Supplementary Appendix F), and controls of municipalities that experience the treatment on multiple occasions (Supplementary Appendix G). These tests support the core findings presented here.

In sum, SD’s legislative entry appears to have a negative effect on the diversity of candidate slates, specifically with respect to immigrant candidates. This effect seems to be driven by right-wing political parties, which see a decline in the share of immigrant candidates in municipalities where SD narrowly won representation in the previous election. The most robust finding, however, is that left-wing parties mitigate the size of the overall effect by increasing their share of immigrant candidates in treated municipalities. These findings align with theoretical expectations that left-leaning parties may be particularly motivated to project an image of inclusivity in response to the far right’s growing success (Meguid, 2005; Krause *et al.*, 2023). The absence of similar patterns for LGB candidates is also intuitive, given that for much of the observation period, SD maintained a homonationalist position that did not target sexual minorities to the same extent as immigrants (Kehl, 2024).

While we identify meaningful changes in immigrant candidate inclusion among both right- and left-wing mainstream parties, our design does not allow us to distinguish whether these effects are driven by supply-side changes or demand-side shifts. In the next section, we explore this ambiguity in more detail.

Distribution of outcome (change in proportion) by treatment

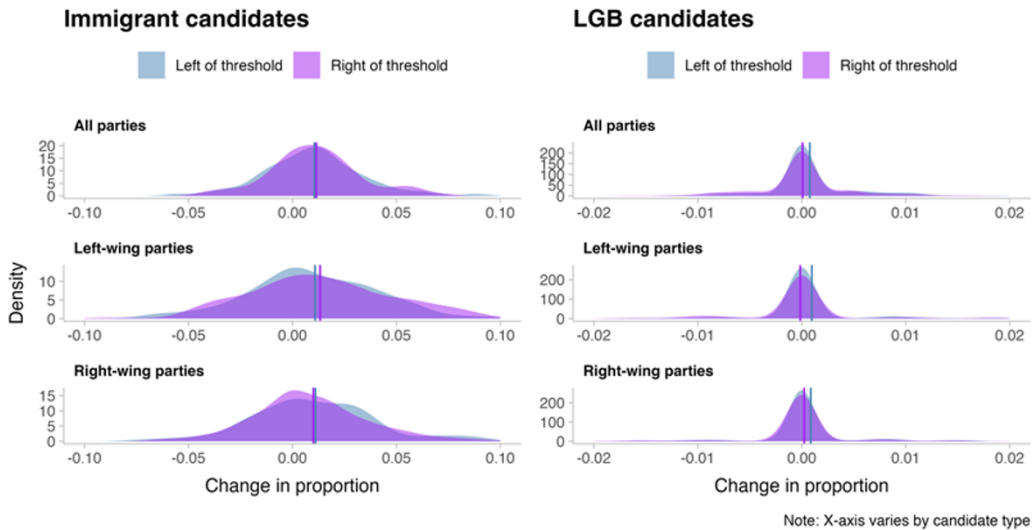


Figure 3. Outcomes by treatment condition.

4.1. Fight, flight, or replacement?

In this section, we investigate whether the patterns observed in Figure 2, particularly the positive effect of SD's municipal entry on immigrant candidate representation within right- and left-wing parties, are driven by changes in minority candidate withdrawal patterns or the emergence of new minority candidates. In Figure 4, we retain the same running variable and estimate the effect of SD's municipal entry on changes in (i) the share of minority candidates who withdrew from the ballot and (ii) the share of newly recruited minority candidates.

Crucially, the analyses show that the increase in immigrant candidate representation within left-wing parties following SD's municipal entry is driven by the emergence of new immigrant candidates. On the right-hand side of the political spectrum, we observe the opposite pattern: a significant drop in the share of new immigrant candidates in treated municipalities, along with a near-significant increase in the share of withdrawing immigrant candidates.

A supply-side interpretation of these patterns is that immigrant, left-leaning political aspirants respond to SD's success by stepping forward, whereas their right-leaning counterparts reconsider or postpone a political career. A corresponding demand-side explanation is that left-wing parties respond to SD's rising popularity by increasing immigrant representation within their ranks. In contrast, right-wing parties may be disincentivized from further diversifying their ballots in order to accommodate their far-right rivals and thereby limit their electoral appeal. These demand-side explanations align with an adversarial response to far-right challengers (Meguid, 2005; Dennison and Kustov, 2023) and with evidence of polarization in minority representation (Weissman, 2025).¹¹

Figure 4 also reinforces the validity of the null results concerning sexual-minority candidate representation reported in Figure 2. Overall, we find no statistically significant effect of SD's municipal entry on either the withdrawal of LGB candidates or the recruitment of new LGB candidates.

¹¹The estimation results underlying Figure 4 are reported in Supplementary Appendices C and D.

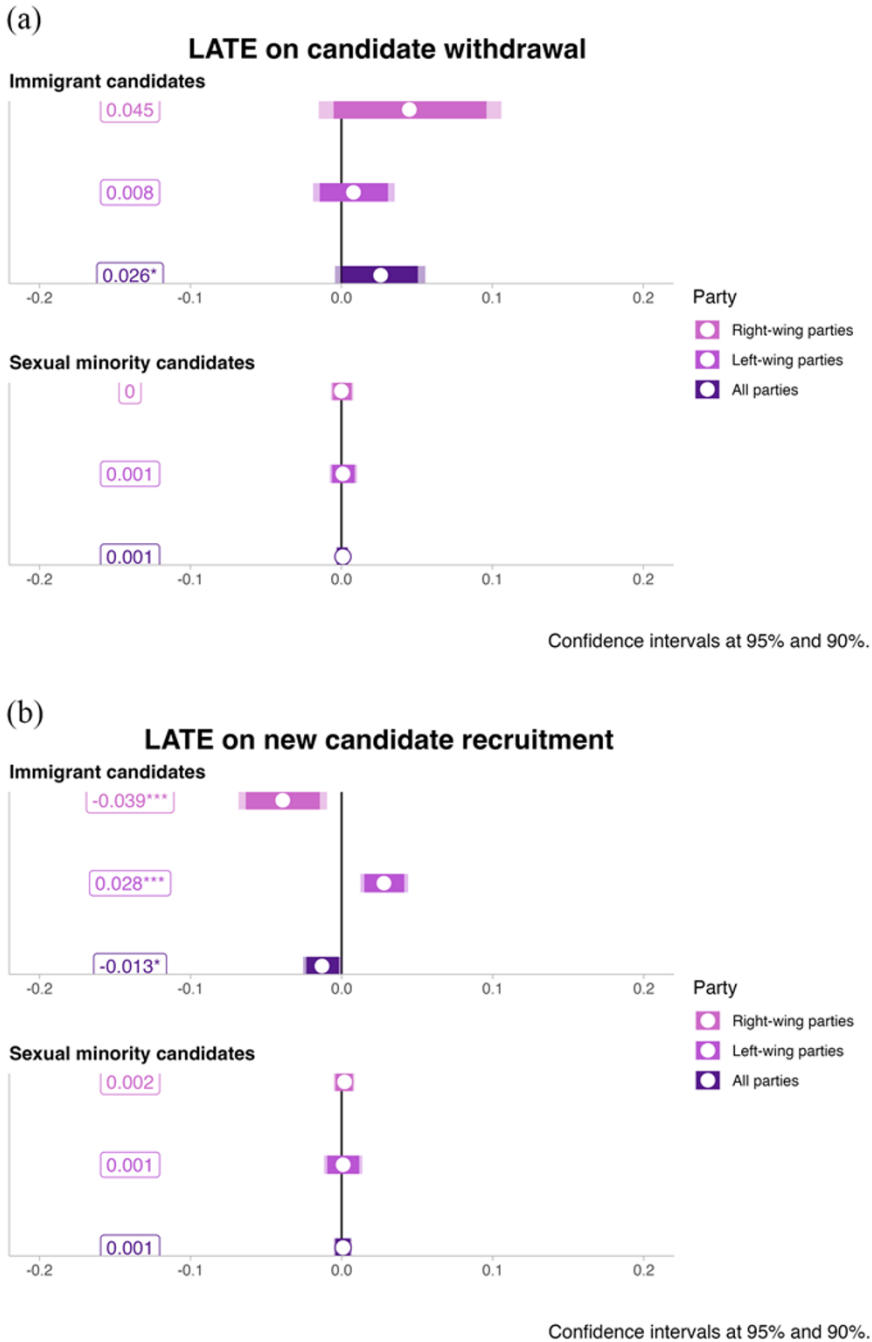


Figure 4. Effect on diverse candidate withdrawal and (new) recruitment.

5. Conclusions

This research note examines the effects of far-right legislative entry at the municipal level on the inclusion of immigrant and sexual-minority candidates within mainstream political parties. We hypothesized that the presence of inflammatory, anti-minority discourse in municipal councils could

shape both the political ambition of minority candidates and the recruitment strategies of mainstream parties. Sweden provided an ideal context for this analysis, given the stable presence and growing popularity of the SD, which heightens the threat the party poses to mainstream parties and individual politicians. As Sweden is a typical Western European country in terms of both its electoral system and patterns of minority representation, these findings may have relevance for other similar contexts.

Understanding whether far-right legislative entry affects minority candidate diversity is normatively important, as changes in descriptive representation carry consequences for democratic responsiveness, legitimacy, and inclusion (Pitkin, 1972; Mansbridge, 2003; Swers, 2005). If far-right success discourages minority political participation, it risks entrenching structural exclusion and weakening the pluralistic foundations of representative democracy.

Does far-right legislative entry reduce minority candidate diversity within mainstream parties? Our findings suggest it has a negative effect on immigrant candidate representation, but no immediate effect on the representation of LGB candidates. We also uncover important and heterogeneous patterns across the ideological spectrum: left-wing parties respond to far-right entry by recruiting more candidates with immigrant backgrounds, offsetting the decline in immigrant representation within right-wing parties. Thus, we observe similar dynamics of accommodation and adversarial responses in candidate recruitment as those documented in other domains, such as policy (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020; Krause *et al.*, 2023). These findings contribute to the growing literature on the causal effects of far-right political success (Bale, 2003; Abou-Chadi, 2016).

This research advances our understanding of how far-right legislative entry affects candidate diversity within mainstream parties and opens important avenues for future work. First, we welcome future research that unpacks the observed effects on immigrant representation by distinguishing between European and non-European migrants, particularly those from Muslim-majority countries. Second, we invite further inquiry into the supply- and demand-side explanations for the identified effects. Third, future research should explore how deeper forms of far-right normalization beyond legislative entry, such as the erosion of the *cordon sanitaire* historically upheld by mainstream parties, may affect the recruitment and retention of minority candidates in democratic politics.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2026.10101>. To obtain replication material for this article, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/F6N2UR>.

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