Received: 17 January 2023 | Revised: 28 October 2023 | Accepted: 30 October 2023

DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12852

AJPS AMERICAN JOURNAL of POLITICAL SCIENCE

ARTICLE

# Emigration and radical right populism

**Rafaela Dancygier**[1] | **Sirus H. Dehdari**[2] | **David D. Laitin**[3] | **Moritz Marbach**[4] | **Kåre Vernby**[2]

[1]Department of Politics and School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, USA

[2]Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

[3]Political Science Department and Immigration Policy Lab, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, USA

[4]Department of Political Science, University College London, London, UK

**Correspondence**
Rafaela Dancygier, Department of Politics and School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, 410 Robertson Hall, Princeton, NJ 08540, USA.
Email: rdancygi@princeton.edu

**Abstract**

An extensive literature links the rise of populist radical right (PRR) parties to immigration. We argue that another demographic trend is also significant: emigration. The departure of citizens due to internal and international emigration is a major phenomenon affecting elections via two complementary mechanisms. Emigration alters the composition of electorates, but also changes the preferences of the left behind. Empirically, we establish a positive correlation between PRR vote shares and net-migration loss at the subnational level across Europe. A more fine-grained panel analysis of precincts in Sweden demonstrates that the departure of citizens raises PRR vote shares in places of emigration and that the Social Democrats are the principal losers from emigration. Elite interviews and newspaper analyses explore how emigration produces material and psychological grievances on which populists capitalize and that established parties do not effectively address. Emigration and the frustrations it generates emerge as important sources of populist success.

Recent years have seen a much-discussed rise in populist radical right (PRR) parties. Rejecting open borders and globalization and often disregarding fundamental tenets of liberal democracy, these parties have particular appeal among voters who oppose immigration and the cultural and economic dislocations it can bring (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Lancaster, 2020). Immigration is clearly salient in radical right campaigns and election coverage (Akkerman, 2015; Dancygier & Margalit, 2020; Gessler & Hunger, 2022; Goodman, 2021). However, when it comes to the effects of local immigration on local PRR vote shares, results are mixed (Andersson & Dehdari, 2021; Cools et al., 2021; Golder, 2016).

Persistent focus on immigration has obscured another significant aspect of demographic change: domestic and international emigration. The permanent departure of locals due to emigration is a major demographic phenomenon with lasting impacts on the places left behind. One of these impacts is electoral. Emigration locales provide fertile ground for PRR parties and pose a significant challenge for traditional parties to retain their core voters.

Two mechanisms link internal and international emigration to PRR success—compositional and preference based. Emigrants are disproportionately young and motivated adults who seek educational and economic opportunities in cosmopolitan surroundings. The population that remains is less educated and more rooted in place (Anelli & Peri, 2017; Lueders, 2022; Maxwell, 2020), attributes linked to PRR voting (De Vries, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2018). As a result, when regions experience substantial out-migration, this *compositional* change can promote PRR success without altering voting behavior. Additionally, emigration can change voter *preferences* and thereby influence voting behavior. The departure of individuals of prime working age who would have supported the

**Verification Materials**: The materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FYVP3W.

local economy, formed families, and contributed to a vibrant communal life makes emigration locales less livable. Emigration can thus adversely affect public and private services, leading to school and business closures and straining the viability of public transport and healthcare systems. Many that remain lack the skills sought after in urban centers and therefore cannot easily move themselves. Additionally, those who remain may suffer psychologically, feeling that emigration devalues the status of their hometowns and communities. This decrease in quality of life gives rise to grievances on which populist parties capitalize, especially if they can convince voters that they have not only been deserted by their fellow citizens, but also by incumbent parties.

We assess the impact of emigration on the vote shares of PRR parties and evaluate both of these mechanisms. We first chart broad outlines, demonstrating a cross-sectional correlation between net-migration loss and PRR vote shares at the subnational level across Europe. To better understand what underlies this dynamic, we turn to Sweden, where fine-grained panel data on local population change are available, allowing us to estimate the effects of local departures on the vote shares of the radical right Sweden Democrats (SD) at the municipality and precinct level over two decades (2002–18). To gain insights into mechanisms, we study a random sample of newspaper articles during the same period ($N = 560$) and analyze citizen satisfaction with public services. Interviews with party elites ($N = 12$) illuminate party responses to emigration and the challenges the Social Democrats face in light of the SD's entry into the electoral arena.

These analyses yield three findings. First, the departure of native Swedes to other Swedish municipalities is an important factor driving SD success. When measuring the number of departures relative to the total population at baseline, our estimates from a panel regression with two-way fixed effects suggest that the departure of 100 people from a municipality increases SD vote shares by about half a percentage point. This effect is substantively large, considering that the SD receive on average 8.3% in a precinct. The effects significantly outpace the impacts of immigration on SD vote shares.

Importantly, emigration effects do not simply reflect economic ones. We demonstrate that the estimated emigration effects are robust to the inclusion of variables measuring local economic decline, and a formal sensitivity analysis reveals that they are also not sensitive to unobserved confounding.

Second, while the compositional mechanism plays some role, the preference-based mechanism is also explanatory. For example, though we observe that the departure of voter types who are unlikely to be supporters of the SD does boost support for the party, precincts whose populations hold steady but are located within municipalities that experience emigration—and associated quality-of-life declines—see a rise in SD vote shares. Indeed, emigration has especially pronounced impacts on SD vote shares where we would expect it to be particularly damaging to public and private infrastructure. Newspaper articles, surveys of citizen satisfaction with public services, and elite interviews further reinforce that emigration produces grievances that populists can exploit and that traditional parties find difficult to counter.

Third, our analyses point to the challenges these demographic changes pose to established party systems (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019). We find that the Social Democrats are the principal losers to radical right populists in emigration locales. Once the incumbent party in much of Sweden, the Social Democrats have failed to respond to the problems of emigration. Newspaper data and elite interviews in turn illustrate the SD's ability to capitalize on this strategic failure.

These findings make several contributions. We advance scholarship on the political effects of emigration. This work has largely focused on international emigration and its effects on political and economic outcomes in autocratic or recently democratized countries (Adida & Girod, 2011; Hirschman, 1993; Horz & Marbach, 2020; Karadja & Prawitz, 2019; Kelemen, 2020; Miller & Peters, 2020; Sellars, 2019). Shifting scope to postindustrial democracies, we show that emigration in the form of internal migration is an important phenomenon in high-income settings and that it can portend political change here as well, undermining liberal democracy where it had long been attained.

In addition, we advance research linking demographic change to populist success. This research has focused on the disruptions caused by immigration, but aside from a few contributions (Anelli & Peri, 2017; Lim, 2023; Patana, 2022) it has neglected the consequences of emigration. Whereas immigration can bolster PRR parties through congestion effects and overburdened public services (Cremaschi et al., 2022; Dancygier, 2010; Hooijer, 2021), we show that opposite forces can do the same. The emptying out of regions can produce frustrations with significant political consequences.

Our research also speaks to the sociopolitical dimensions of regional inequalities (de Lange et al., 2023; Rodden, 2019). Structural transformations have long pushed people out of peripheral regions and into urban centers. The rise of the knowledge economy has led to pressures within cities, and it has also widened regional disparities (Diamond, 2016; Moretti, 2012). Economic shocks arising from globalization intensify these disparities, generating insecurities on which populists thrive (Ballard-Rosa et al., 2021; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Dehdari, 2021). Our paper similarly illuminates political consequences arising

from this polarization, but also shows how these can unfold in the absence of shocks to local employment or incomes.

Our argument complements recent studies that highlight the grievances of residents living in declining peripheries as a source of PRR success (Patana, 2022; Rickardsson, 2021). However, different from this work—which documents a one-election, cross-sectional correlation between PRR vote shares and population decline—our panel analyses can better isolate the effect of emigration on PRR support by comparing changes in precinct-level vote shares with changes in emigration rates covering five general election cycles. Focusing on over-time variation within precincts allows us to separate emigration from other cross-sectional confounders tied to, for example, population density and economic geography. Moreover, by measuring emigration rates directly (vs. total population change), we can distinguish emigration from other components of demographic change that may contribute to the correlation between population decline and PRR support.

Finally, we expand the scope of analysis by paying attention not only to the electoral winners but also to the electoral losers of emigration, tying the success of PRR parties in emigration locales to strategic dilemmas that established parties have faced. Our work suggests that while center-left parties may benefit from urban growth strategies that promote internal migration to cities, these policies generate losses in the periphery. Out-migration thus emerges as a key process in the reconfiguration of political competition in advanced democracies (Gingrich, 2017; Häusermann, 2020).

## EMIGRATION, DEPOPULATION, AND PRR PARTIES

Emigration is a widespread phenomenon that can threaten the sustainability of entire regions. Approximately two-thirds of Europe's 1216 counties (NUTS 3 regions) are projected to have lower populations in 2050 than in 2019.[1] In the United States, more than half of all counties were smaller in 2020 than in 2010, while four-fifths of all metropolitan areas grew during this period.[2] Internal migration plays an outsize role in these uneven population shifts. While most international emigration stems from low-income countries, internal out-migration frequently affects low-income regions in high-income countries. Transitions to postindustrial, service- and innovation-based economies have produced agglomerations in urban centers and hollowed out peripheral regions once dominated by manufacturing and heavy industry (Rickard, 2020).

Both types of emigration deprive sending regions of residents with educational and economic aspirations. Moreover, those who willingly uproot themselves are, by definition, less attached to their places of birth than those who stay behind. They may welcome interactions with strangers abroad or in ethnically mixed cities in their native countries and feel at home in cosmopolitan environments (Lim, 2023; Lueders, 2022). These attributes—educational attainment, economic success, cosmopolitanism—should make emigrants unlikely supporters of radical right parties. These parties' central appeal lies in their xenophobia and nationalism, and this nativism is less pronounced among educated and economically secure voters (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020). By implication, those who remain are more likely to feel close ties to their locality and to be circumspect of outsiders, sentiments that pave the way for PRR voting. Finally, if emigration is disproportionately female, this will also benefit PRR parties, whose support base skews male (Fitzgerald, 2018; Maxwell, 2020).[3]

Given these systematic differences, emigration can alter the *composition* of electorates such that relative support for PRR parties rises in emigration locales. This change in electoral support occurs without voters changing their preferences or parties changing their messages. It simply arises due to compositional shifts. Others have identified emigration's compositional effects on politics, but have focused on different outcomes. For example, emigration of disloyal citizens is considered a "safety valve" for autocrats seeking regime stability (Kapur, 2014; Miller & Peters, 2020). Within the EU, it can facilitate the drift toward authoritarianism (Kelemen, 2020). Emigration can also change the quality of democracy. Lueders (2022) shows that the local rootedness of nonmigrants leads to the localization of politics in places experiencing out-migration and to the nationalization of politics in places receiving unmoored migrants.

Additionally, emigration can change voter *preferences*.[4] If economically active citizens leave en masse, the tax base will shrink and with it the availability of public services and private businesses. Even when national transfers compensate, reduced demand strains the viability of goods and services, and can impact nearly all areas of public life ranging from

[1] See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210430-2.

[2] See https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/more-than-half-of-united-states-counties-were-smaller-in-2020-than-in-2010.html.

[3] Note that Cantoni and Pons (2022) show that turnout and partisanship may change postmove in the United States and attribute much of this change to state-level electoral contexts and voting laws, which are less relevant in Sweden/Europe. Maxwell's (2020) analysis of Swiss voters finds limited evidence of contextual effects.

[4] See also Lim (2023) who argues that the left behind worry about the sustainability of their local communities' values and traditions. Lim's analysis covers larger geographic regions (NUTS 2 and NUTS 3), making it more challenging to identify the effects of emigration and to distinguish between mechanisms.

essential services to cultural offerings: The number of schools and hospitals shrinks, theaters and libraries close, restaurants and shops shut down, rail and bus lines are discontinued, and civic associations suffer (Kröhnert et al., 2004).

Emigration can thus make places less livable. This deterioration affects citizens directly, and it can further prompt reactions such as disappointment and feelings of inadequacy. Faced with the fact that many of their neighbors choose to leave for seemingly more attractive destinations, communities may experience a collective loss of status and self-esteem. Emigration effectively degrades their hometowns. Moreover, if departures lead to the closure of gathering spots, residents are deprived of spaces that could otherwise maintain community spirit.[5] Prior work has attributed individual-level status loss and social marginalization to radical right voting (Gidron & Hall, 2020). We theorize that emigration can also trigger these feelings at the community level.[6] In short, emigration can have psychological repercussions, which are compounded by material ones.

This argument suggests scope conditions to economic theories of rural-to-urban migration and recent work on historical international migration (Boustan & Tabellini, 2018; Karadja & Prawitz, 2019). In these models, when workers leave rural areas, the bargaining power of those left behind strengthens. Emigration then fosters unionization, strikes, and welfare expenditures (Karadja & Prawitz, 2019). In contrast, we report a quality of life decline following emigration. The key to this difference is the urban skills-premium of the knowledge economy. Historically, low-skill workers emigrated, boosting the bargaining power of the remaining low-skill workers. Today, deindustrialized knowledge economies lead to the departure of high-skill workers who receive higher wages in cities. Meanwhile, the "earnings escalator" afforded to less-educated workers who once migrated to vibrant urban areas has disappeared (Autor, 2020), leaving them with few exit options and reduced bargaining power.

As emigration no longer increases the leverage of the leftbehind, its political impact has changed. While economic and political elites may find it easier to neglect the left behind, political outsiders can appeal to this constituency by blaming incumbents for the deteriorating quality of life. In this way, emigration-based PRR voting may be understood as a protest vote against the political establishment. But unlike generalized dissatisfaction with elite politics, voters who are exposed to the consequences of emigration voice their discontent about specific failures in their localities for which they hold incumbents to account. Populist parties can further fuel this discontent (cf. Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016) by reminding voters that established parties have abandoned them, along with their neighbors. In spreading this message, they play up their populist (more so than their radical right) credentials. As the only true and legitimate representative of "the people," populist parties maintain they are best equipped to understand the concerns of ordinary citizens (Canovan, 1999). When established parties have indeed disregarded the concerns of citizens dealing with the repercussions of emigration, such appeals may become credible to those left behind. Further, when pointing out the political elite's shortcomings in areas of out-migration, PRR parties need not stoke resentment against cities. The challenges surrounding emigration, including the political elite's shortcomings in meeting them, then open up new territories for PRR parties whose core message nationally and in cities centers around the ills of immigration.

Note that our focus on emigration-induced quality-of-life concerns complements but also differs from accounts linking regional economic transformations—import competition and deindustrialization, for example (Baccini & Weymouth, 2021; Colantone & Stanig, 2018)—to populism or that connect immigrant-native competition over public services to radical right voting (Cavaillé & Ferwerda, 2023; Cremaschi et al., 2022; Dancygier, 2010). We examine the effects of local departures on PRR parties net of unemployment, income inequality, and immigration, and investigate how compositional changes in electorates and grievances these shifts unleash contribute to the success of these parties.

## CROSS-NATIONAL EVIDENCE

Dynamics of demographic change vary widely across regions. Figure 1 displays the rate of total population change between 2001 and 2011 across 112,028 municipalities in 32 European countries.[7] In some parts of Europe, the population is growing at levels above 2% annually, while others witness declines of a similar magnitude. This total population change is due to births, deaths, immigration, and emigration. Where the population declines by 2% or more annually, it is likely that emigration is a significant driver.

Are PRR parties more successful in places with more emigration? To answer this question, we correlate local vote shares with net-migration rates relying on cross-national data assembled by Dijkstra et al. (2020).

[5] This part of our argument lines up with Bolet's (2021) study linking PRR voting to pub closures.

[6] See also Ansell et al. (2022) who argue that living in areas that are shut out of housing booms can trigger feelings of status loss and lead to far-right voting.

[7] The population counts come from census tabulations compiled by Gløersen and Lüer (2013). We informally refer to the geographic units as municipalities noting that names for local administrative units (LAUs) differ across countries.

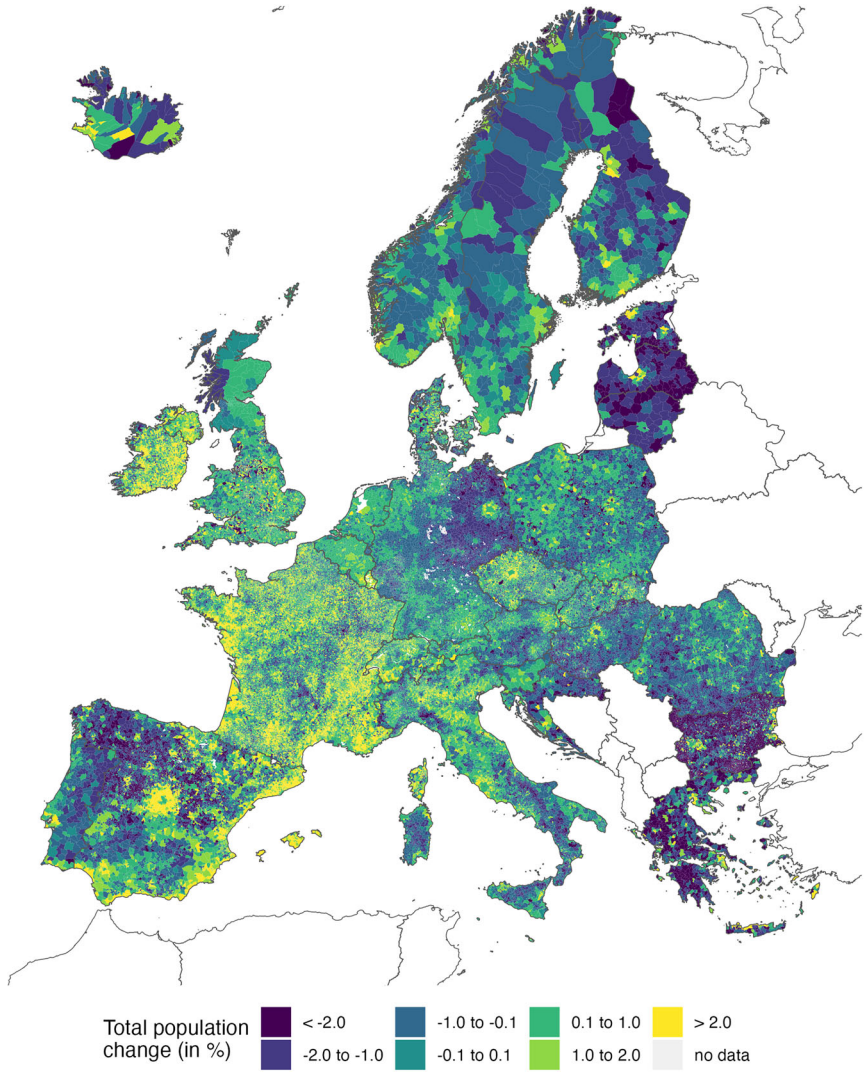


**FIGURE 1** Population change in Europe, 2001–2011. *Note*: Annualized change in the total population size between 2001 and 2011 (standardized by the average population size between 2 years) across 112,028 municipalities in 32 countries in Europe.

Their data include constituency-level radical right party vote shares for national elections in the mid 2010s across 28 European countries. In their data, a party is classified as radical right when it scores 8 or above on a 0–10 left–right scale in the CHES expert survey (Jolly et al., 2022). The net-migration data come from Eurostat and are measured at the county rather than the constituency level.[8]

Figure 2 displays a scatter plot of radical right vote shares and the average annual net-migration rate in the previous decade. Observations to the left of zero on the *x*-axis represent places where on average more people move away than arrive; observations to the right are places registering more people arriving than leaving. On average, as the net loss increases, vote shares for radical right parties rise. We also observe a weak positive correlation between net-migration gains and radical right parties, suggesting that these parties benefit from different types of demographic change. As the sample includes observations from places without radical right party candidates (for which the vote share is 0), the observed correlation combines a demand- and supply-side effect of net migration on radical right party support.[9]

These patterns suggest the relevance of emigration for PRR support, but the analysis faces limitations. First, many countries do not publish data on the components of subnational population change. By focusing on regions with low net-migration, we may exclude places where immigration is large enough to offset emigration-induced losses. Second, the level of aggregation may be too high; voters might notice how population change affects their municipality, but could have little sense about changes elsewhere in their county. Third, aggregate measures prevent us from saying anything about who is leaving. Fourth, relying on cross-national data limits our ability to iso-

[8] By county we mean the lowest administrative subdivision for statistical purposes (NUTS 3 level).

[9] Tables SM.2 and SM.3 on pp. 2–3 in the Supplemental Materials (SM) report corroborating regressions adjusting for potential confounders including economic trends.

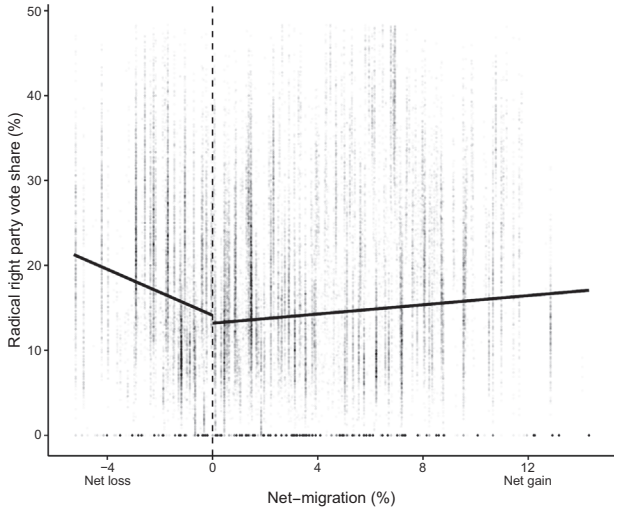


**FIGURE 2** Relationship between net-migration rate and the vote share of radical right parties. *Note*: Scatter plot and fitted linear regressions of the county-average annual net-migration rate between 2000 and 2016 and the vote share of radical right parties in elections during the mid 2010s. To increase readability, we clip values larger (smaller) than the 99% (1%) percentile.

late the effect of emigration on PRR vote shares from confounders. To remedy these inferential challenges, we turn to the Swedish case.

## EMIGRATION AND VOTING IN SWEDEN

We situate our study in Sweden for reasons of data quality and representativeness. First, we can exploit administrative registry data provided by Statistics Sweden. The *Total Population Register* includes all legal residents and allows us to consistently track individuals' place of residence across years. Using yearly information on the municipality of residence, we create moving status indicators for all legal residents, based on residence information between consecutive general elections (covering 2002–2018). We combine these data with general election outcomes across Swedish precincts.

Second, key trends in Sweden resemble those in other advanced democracies. Sweden is a popular destination for immigrants from outside and inside the EU. In 2020, almost 20% of the population was foreign-born, up from 11% in 2000. As Figure 1 illustrates, this rise coincides with substantial demographic change across municipalities. The data underlying Figure 1 indicate that 51% of all Swedish municipalities experienced some population decline. Sweden is thus a typical case in Europe where, on average, about half of the municipalities in a given country experience population decline (see Table SM.1, p. 1). Thirty-six percent of Swedish municipalities register small population declines (between −1 and −0.1% annually), while 8% are shrinking by more than 1 but less than 2%. However, different from countries experiencing substantial population drops, there are no municipalities that shrink by more than 2% annually. These population changes are tied to economic developments. Similar to many other Western countries, Sweden was hit hard by the Great Recession. The unemployment rate rose from 6.1% in 2007 to 8.6% in 2010. Numerous manufacturing plants closed or downsized, many of them located in mid-sized industrial towns (Lindgren & Vernby, 2016).

The SD entered the Swedish Parliament in 2010 against this backdrop of rising immigration and economic restructuring, running on an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and ant-iestablishment platform. Formed in 1988, the party initially had links to racist and neo-Nazi movements. Over the last two decades, it worked to moderate its profile to resemble other European nativist and populist parties.[10] Whether these shifts represent a real change is disputed (Erlingsson et al., 2014), but they did help the party raise its vote share from less than 2% in 2002 to more than 17% in 2018. In the 2022 election, the SD won 20.5% of the vote and were informally included in the governing coalition. Although the breakthrough of a PRR party thus occurred comparatively late, these developments resemble those in several other European countries (Leander, 2022; Rydgren & Van der Meiden, 2019).

## DATA

Our main dependent variable is the precinct-level vote share for the SD. Sweden's roughly 5800 election precincts are the smallest geographical units (averaging around 1200 eligible voters) with published aggregated election results. Approximately 80% of all precinct boundaries remain unchanged between elections. To construct a full precinct-level panel, we follow previous work (Dehdari, 2021) and harmonize precinct boundaries with the geography of 2018 using population-grid weights (see SM Section B.1, p. 4, for details).

To construct our main independent variable, the emigration rate on the municipality level, we use registry data from Statistics Sweden for the entire resident population.[11] By comparing the municipality of residence between two elections for each individual, we compute the number of residents in a municipality that moved to another municipality or left the country between two successive elections allowing us to calculate the per 100 capita emigration rate. We then calculate a complementary immigration-rate measure

[10] According to an expert survey (Meijers & Zaslove, 2020), on four variables associated with populism—Manichean world view, native population as indivisible, support for immigration, and ideology of nativism—the SD is about two standard deviations more populist than the average European party.
[11] Sweden has 290 municipalities featuring an average population of close to 33,000 during our study period.

by counting the number of individuals moving into a municipality (from abroad or internally).

We also create emigration rates for sub-groups (Swedish and foreign-born persons, citizens and noncitizens, high and low-income earners), a series of municipality-level covariates (unemployment rate, median income and the Gini coefficient, gender ratios, and age composition), and precinct-level emigration rates. We detail the construction of these variables in the SM (see section B.1 and Table SM.4, pp. 4–5.) Tables SM.5 and SM.6 (pp. 6–7), respectively, present municipality-level and precinct-level descriptive statistics for all variables pooled across all five elections. We find that, on average, municipality-level per capita arrivals have slightly exceeded departures (14.26 vs. 12.90). The mean share received by the SD is 8.13% with a range of 0 to 50%. Only the Social Democrats (S) and the Conservative Party (M) attained higher mean vote shares.

# RESULTS

## Baseline specification

Our analyses leverage over-time variation in emigration rates and party vote shares. Our main OLS specification mimics a difference-in-differences (DiD) specification comparing changes in precinct-level vote shares with changes in emigration rates. Focusing on over-time variation within precincts allows us to isolate the emigration effect from other cross-sectional confounders connected to economic geography and population. Some areas have persistently high out- and in-migration for structural reasons that, unlike the SD vote share, do not change much over time. One such example are university towns, where students and employees circulate in and out. The rooted local population is unlikely to consider these flows as signs of decline.

Let $y_{it}$ be the vote share (in %) of the SD in precinct $i$ in election $t$. Our main specification with precinct ($\alpha_i$) and year ($\alpha_t$) fixed effects takes the following form:

$$y_{it} = \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \delta D_{m[i]t} + \varepsilon_{it}. \quad (1)$$

Different from a standard DiD design, our main variable of interest is continuous ($D_{m[i]t}$) and measures the number of departures from municipality $m$ between the election in $t-1$ and $t$ per 100 capita in $t-1$. The coefficient $\delta$ estimates the effect of 100 additional departures on the votes for the SD. We cluster standard errors at the municipality level ($N_m = 290$).

To address the main concern that both other municipality-level trends covarying with emigration rates and the trend in SD support confound our estimates, we estimate versions of our baseline specification that include additional time-varying covariates ($\mathbf{X}_{it}$). The first set captures economic trends in a municipality (the unemployment rate, median income and the Gini coefficient) and the second set measures other sources of demographic change including shifts in gender ratios, immigration rates, and age composition. We present models with and without these controls as some of these measures might introduce posttreatment bias. In addition, we conduct a formal sensitivity analysis.

**TABLE 1** Departures and the Sweden Democrats' vote share.

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Departures | −0.09 | 0.41* | 0.38** | 0.42** | 0.44** |
| | (0.07) | (0.20) | (0.14) | (0.12) | (0.12) |
| Unemployment | | | 0.47** | 0.22* | 0.21* |
| | | | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.10) |
| Gini | | | −0.97** | −0.80** | −0.79** |
| | | | (0.21) | (0.17) | (0.17) |
| Income | | | −0.17** | −0.13** | −0.13** |
| | | | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Arrivals | | | | | 0.04 |
| | | | | | (0.07) |
| Precinct FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Year FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (demographic) | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Number of observations | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 |
| $R^2$ | .00 | .88 | .91 | .92 | .92 |

*Note*: Departures per 100 capita since the last election and the Sweden Democrats' vote share (%), 2002–2018. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. The Sweden Democrats' vote share is measured at the precinct level. Departures and covariates are measured at the municipality level. Demographic controls include the share of inhabitants in 10-year age brackets (5–14, 14–24, 25–34,…, 95+) and the share of men. Full results are available in Table SM.8, p. 11.
$^{\dagger}p < .1$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

## Main results

Table 1 reports estimates from the baseline specification. The departure of 100 people from the municipality (1% of the population) increases the SD vote share by about half a percentage point. The SD receive on average 8.3% in a precinct during the elections in our sample (standard deviation = 7.6; see Table SM.6, p. 7). The estimated effect is substantively large, corresponding to an increase of about 5% at the sample mean. The estimates are largely insensitive to adding the previously mentioned controls.

To be sure, the inclusion of time-varying controls may not be enough to adjust for all time-varying confounding. In the SM, we therefore present additional specifications (Tables SM.9 and SM.10, p. 12) in which we allow for differential time trends in groups of municipalities with similar levels of departures or similar levels of unemployment in 2002 (the baseline

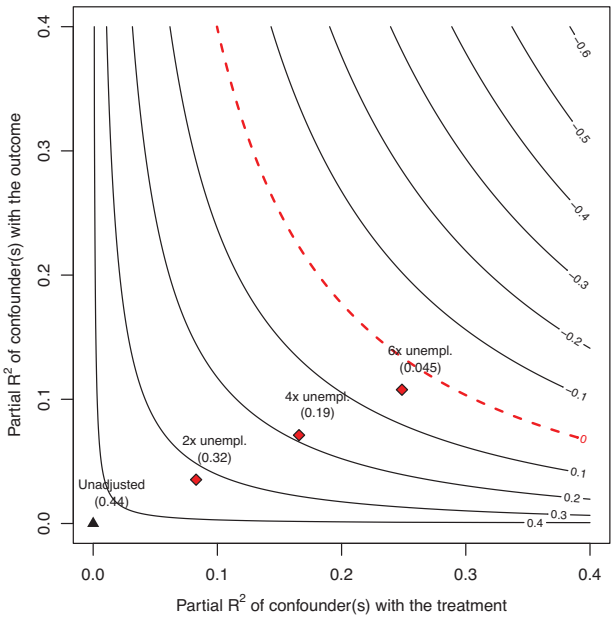


**FIGURE 3** Sensitivity analysis to unobserved confounders. *Note*: Sensitivity analysis to unobserved confounders following Cinelli and Hazlett (2020). Each contour line shows the departure effect we would have obtained in a regression that includes an unobserved confounder with a hypothetical strength. The strength of a confounder is a function of the residual variation of the departure variable (*x*-axis) and the residual variation of vote share for the Sweden Democrats (*y*-axis) explained by the hypothetical confounder. The adjusted estimates (in red) are based on adding a confounder that is 2, 4, or 6 times as strong as the unemployment variable.

year). We also present a specification in which we include an interaction between a linear time trend and municipality fixed effects (Table SM.11, p. 13) and include the lag of the dependent variable as an independent variable (Table SM.21, p. 20). Our results are robust across these alternative specifications.

Furthermore, a formal sensitivity analysis following Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) reveals that an unobserved confounder would have to be unusually potent. Only an unobserved confounder that explains more than 18.9% of the residual variance of both the treatment and the outcome in our regression would be strong enough to bring the point estimate to 0 ($RV = 18.9\%$). About half of residual variation would be sufficient to bring the estimate to a range where it is no longer statistically different from 0 ($RV_{\alpha=0.05} = 9\%$). Benchmarking against the observed confounders, this means that the unobserved confounder would have to be six times stronger than the observed unemployment covariate (see Figure 3).

In Figure 4, we show the estimates for a corresponding time-to-event specification for the baseline specification in Table 1, col. 2 (see Figure SM.1, p. 10, for the estimates from the remaining specifications). While our main independent variable is continuous and varies smoothly, the specification is similar to that

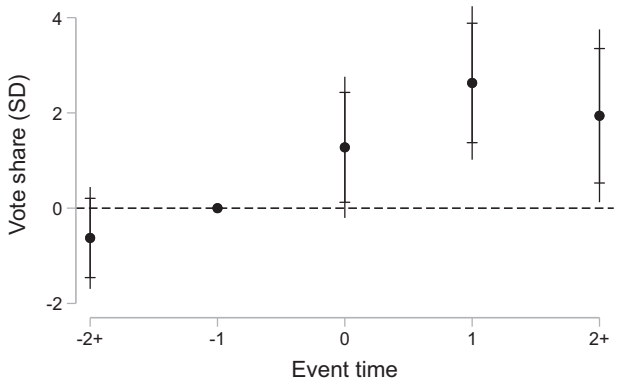


**FIGURE 4** The cumulative effect of the number of departures per 100 capita on the Sweden Democrats' vote share (%). *Note*: Event-study plot following the suggestions by Freyaldenhoven et al. (2021). Estimates display the cumulative effect of a one-unit change in the number of departures per 100 capita on the vote share for the Sweden Democrats (measured in %) in the contemporaneous election (0), the elections thereafter (1–2) as well as the elections preceding the one-unit change (−2+) all relative to the effect in election before the one-unit change (−1).

of an event-study specification in a DiD design with staggered adoption (Freyaldenhoven et al., 2021). The specification serves two purposes. First, we wish to rule out that the vote share for the SD in an election is affected by future departures. Second, we want to evaluate if departures have only a contemporaneous effect on vote shares or if there is a persistent effect on subsequent elections. The results show that there is no evidence that future departures affect current election vote shares and that there is no evidence that the effect is reverting back to zero quickly.[12]

If the SD benefit from emigration, who loses? In Tables SM.12 and SM.13 (pp. 13–14), we break down the results by the two main left-right electoral blocs during the period under study. Our analyses demonstrate that the gains by the SD come at the expense of parties on the left.[13] When we disaggregate by party in Table 2, it becomes clear that the SD gains in places of emigration mainly come at the expense of the Social Democrats. Note that municipality-level departures do not affect precinct-level turnout (see Table SM.14, p. 14).

## MECHANISMS

Why do the SD win votes in places experiencing substantial emigration? We first turn to a series of regressions to test the plausibility of the compositional and the preference mechanisms,

[12] Notice that the estimates in this time-to-event specification are larger than in the baseline specification as they are based on the variation in the middle of the panel (2010/2014) where the effect magnitude happens to be larger.
[13] Analyses show that the positive Green Party effect is solely driven by university towns, capturing a different dynamic.

**TABLE 2** Departures and the vote share for parties other than the SD .

| | MP | V | S | L | C | KD | M |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Without covariates** | | | | | | | |
| Departures | 0.21** | 0.04 | −0.73** | −0.20† | 0.02 | −0.00 | 0.30* |
| | (0.06) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.12) | (0.13) | (0.07) | (0.13) |
| Precinct FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Year FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (economic) | No | No | No | No | No | No | No |
| Covariates (demographic) | No | No | No | No | No | No | No |
| Number of observations | 29,710 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,711 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 |
| $R^2$ | .87 | .86 | .93 | .88 | .88 | .87 | .93 |
| **With covariates** | | | | | | | |
| Departures | 0.19** | −0.10* | −0.70** | −0.13 | −0.04 | −0.07 | 0.52** |
| | (0.06) | (0.04) | (0.12) | (0.10) | (0.09) | (0.06) | (0.14) |
| Arrivivals | 0.10† | −0.17** | −0.05 | −0.08 | −0.02 | 0.12** | −0.17* |
| | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.10) | (0.06) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.06) |
| Precinct FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Year FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (economic) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (demographic) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Number of observations | 29,710 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,711 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 |
| $R^2$ | .88 | .88 | .94 | .90 | .91 | .89 | .94 |

*Note*: Departures per 100 capita since the last election and the vote share (%) for parties other than the SD, 2002-2018. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Parties' vote shares are measured at the precinct level. Departures and covariates are measured at the municipality level. See Table 1 for covariates included in bottom panel. MP = Green Party; V = Left Party; S = Social Democratic Party; L = Liberal Party; C = Centre Party; KD = Christian Democrats; M = Moderate Party.
†$p < .1$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

complementing our precinct-level analysis with individual-level survey data. Together, these suggest that the compositional mechanism cannot be the sole driver, and they point in the direction of changing voter preferences in reaction to out-migration playing a significant role.

## Regression analyses evaluating the compositional and preference mechanisms

While SD gains come largely at the expense of leftist parties, we see a moderate increase for parties on the right, casting some doubt on the compositional explanation. To shed further light on the plausibility of the compositional mechanism, we examine voter preferences of movers and stayers. Ideally, we would like to match neighborhood-level departures to voter preferences among those individuals who remain, both before and after departures are realized. Unfortunately, a large enough panel survey spanning the necessary time frame is not available. We therefore use a repeated cross-sectional survey carried out twice a year from 2017 to 2020 with more than 4500 unique respondents per year to estimate the difference in the propensity to vote for the SD between stayers and movers.

We matched each respondent's municipality of residence at the time of the survey as well as four years prior, which means we can measure each respondent's moving status in a manner similar to our departure measure used in the above baseline results. We regress a binary variable taking the value 1 for respondents who state they vote for the SD on a binary variable indicating whether the respondent changed municipalities in the last four years.

Table 3 presents the estimates for the SD and the seven other parties in the national parliament. The negative coefficient in column 1 means that movers are less likely to vote for the SD than are stayers. Specifically, the share of movers voting for the SD is 2.62 percentage points lower than the share of stayers who do. For all other parties, and for the Other category (comprising blank votes, undecided voters, and voters of minor or local parties) this estimate is either positive or statistically indistinguishable from zero, except for the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats.

The results for the SD are in line with the compositional mechanism: If stayers are more likely to vote for the SD than are movers, a larger share of

**TABLE 3** Difference in average support for each party between movers and stayers.

| | SD | S | MP | V | L | C | KD | M | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mover | −2.62** | −6.35** | 1.99** | 3.86** | 0.32 | 1.07 | −1.28** | 2.31** | 0.69 |
| | (0.84) | (1.02) | (0.59) | (0.81) | (0.50) | (0.72) | (0.50) | (1.03) | (0.96) |
| Number of observations | 18,714 | 18,714 | 18,714 | 18,714 | 18,714 | 18,714 | 18,714 | 18,714 | 18,714 |
| $R^2$ | .01 | .01 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .01 | .00 | .01 |

*Note*: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. For example, in the first column, the outcome is a binary variable taking the value 1 if the respondent named the Sweden Democrats as "the party that they would vote for if the election was held today," 0 otherwise. Mover is a binary variable taking the value 1 if the respondent changed municipality of residence in the last 4 years (based on register data), 0 otherwise. Respondents were surveyed in 2017–2020. SD = Sweden Democrats; MP = Green Party; V = Left Party; S = Social Democratic Party; L = Liberal Party; C = Centre Party; KD = Christian Democrats; M = Moderate Party.
$^{\dagger}p < .1$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

the remaining electorate in places of out-migration are SD voters. However, the results for two other parties, in particular for the Social Democrats, are not. If stayers are disproportionately Social Democrats, the compositional mechanism predicts that emigration benefits the Social Democrats in a given municipality. Yet, Table 2 indicates that they lose votes in places of emigration. This suggests that the SD may exploit disaffection among Social Democratic voters who have no exit option, and thus a preference mechanism may exist alongside a compositional one.

We next return to the precinct-level data to gain insights into how emigration benefits radical right populists. We first examine whether income drives out-migration effects. High-income earners are less likely to support the SD (Dal Bó et al., 2023; Oskarson & Demker, 2015). All else equal, their removal from local electorates should boost SD vote shares. Table SM.15 (page 15) indicates that the departure of high-income residents, but not that of low-income ones, is associated with SD vote gains. This evidence is suggestive of a compositional effect, though we also note some ambiguity as the loss of high earners deprives localities of tax revenue and purchasing power, with knock-on effects on public and private services.

A complementary hypothesis to the compositional mechanism, but one that introduces preferences about the composition of the electorate, is that the SD wins votes when non-citizens leave. Voters may attribute leaving non-citizens (who cannot vote in national elections, and are predominantly immigrants) to the SD's creation of an environment that is hostile to immigrants and reward the party for it. If so, we would expect departures of noncitizens to correlate with SD vote gains. However, in Table 4, we show that only the departure of citizens is associated with a significant vote increase for the SD, suggesting that voters do not reward the SD for driving out immigrants. A similar pattern emerges when we focus on departures of Swedish-born vs. foreign-born residents (see Table SM.16, p. 15).

Next, we add a variable measuring per-capita departures from the precinct to our baseline specification, which only includes municipality-level departures. If the estimated effects were only driven by departing left-leaning voters, we would expect that municipality departures have no independent effect after controlling for precinct-level departures. That is not what we observe. Even in precincts with the same levels of departures, municipality departures matter and have an independent effect (see Table 5). After adding all available controls (col. 5), municipality departures have an effect that is almost as large as the effect we detected in our baseline specification reported in Table 1.

In the SM, we probe these results further by interacting the per-capita departures (from the municipality) with the per-capita departures from the precinct. We use a binning specification (Hainmueller et al., 2019), which is more efficient compared to running three regressions on subsets of the data for precincts

**TABLE 4** Departures of citizens and noncitizens and the Sweden Democrats' vote share.

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Departures (citizens) | −0.82** | 0.92** | 0.61** | 0.49** | 0.52** |
| | (0.09) | (0.15) | (0.15) | (0.11) | (0.12) |
| Deparures (noncitizens) | 2.57** | −0.97 | −0.46 | 0.16 | 0.16 |
| | (0.59) | (0.65) | (0.38) | (0.30) | (0.30) |
| Arrivals (citizens) | | | | | 0.06 |
| | | | | | (0.11) |
| Arrivals (noncitizens) | | | | | 0.05 |
| | | | | | (0.10) |
| Precinct FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Year FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (economic) | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (demographic) | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Number of observations | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 | 29,713 |
| $R^2$ | .10 | .88 | .91 | .92 | .92 |

*Note*: Departures per 100 capita (by citizenship status) since the last election and the Sweden Democrats' vote share (%), 2002-2018. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. The Sweden Democrats' vote share is measured at the precinct level. Departures (for both citizens and noncitizens) and covariates are measured at the municipality level. See Table 1 for additional covariates.
$^{\dagger}p < .1$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

**TABLE 5** Municipal- and precinct-level departures and arrivals and the Sweden Democrats' vote share.

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Departures (municipality) | 0.01 | 0.32 | 0.30* | 0.35** | 0.37** |
| | (0.07) | (0.20) | (0.13) | (0.11) | (0.12) |
| Departures (precinct) | −0.09** | 0.08** | 0.08** | 0.07** | 0.07** |
| | (0.01) | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| Arrivals (municipality) | | | | | 0.04 |
| | | | | | (0.07) |
| Arrivals (precinct) | | | | | 0.00 |
| | | | | | (0.00) |
| Precinct FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Year FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (economic) | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (demographic) | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Number of observations | 29,712 | 29,712 | 29,712 | 29,712 | 29,712 |
| $R^2$ | .01 | .88 | .91 | .92 | .92 |

*Note*: Municipal- and precinct-level departures and arrivals per 100 capita since the last election and the Sweden Democrats' vote share (%), 2002-2018. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. The Sweden Democrats' vote share is measured at the precinct level. Municipal- and precinct-level departures and arrivals are included. Covariates are measured at the municipality level. See Table 1 for additional covariates.
$^{\dagger}p < .1$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

**TABLE 6** Departures and the perceived quality of local public goods and services.

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| $\text{Departures}_{t-1}$ | −0.22 | −0.40** | −0.52** | −0.57** | −0.57** |
| | (0.20) | (0.15) | (0.15) | (0.17) | (0.17) |
| Unemployment | | | 0.12 | 0.11 | 0.11 |
| | | | (0.08) | (0.10) | (0.10) |
| Gini | | | 0.63** | 0.28 | 0.28 |
| | | | (0.14) | (0.18) | (0.18) |
| Income | | | 0.03* | −0.02 | −0.02 |
| | | | (0.01) | (0.02) | (0.02) |
| $\text{Arrivals}_{t-1}$ | | | | 0.08 | 0.08 |
| | | | | (0.13) | (0.13) |
| Municipality FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Year FE | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Covariates (demographic) | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Number of observations | 1278 | 1278 | 1278 | 1278 | 1278 |
| $R^2$ | .01 | .20 | .23 | .26 | .26 |

*Note*: Departures per 100 capita during the previous year and the quality of local public goods and services, 2006–2018. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. All variables are measured at the municipality level. See Table 1 for additional covariates.
$^{\dagger}p < .1$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.

with few, some, and many departures. We find that even in precincts with very few departures, there is a sizable effect of municipality-level departures that exceeds the baseline estimates (see Table SM.17, p. 16). We would not observe these results if compositional changes were the sole factor driving the emigration effect.

Finally, if postemigration service deterioration prompts voters to change their preferences in favor of the SD, the effects of departures should be more pronounced in areas with low population density or declining populations, where it is particularly difficult to sustain services and amenities (cf. Erlingsson et al., 2023). As expected, effects are concentrated in municipalities with low to medium population density (see Table SM.18, p. 17), and are also much more pronounced in municipalities that previously lost population (see Table SM.19, p. 18). Both of these results are consistent with a service-based preference mechanism.

Overall these results corroborate that the compositional explanation is insufficient. In places with high out-migration, the SD gains votes beyond what would be expected from a compositional effect. Furthermore, they gain in places with low—but not high—population density where the breakdown of services is especially likely. These results suggest that the preference mechanism is a critical complement to the compositional one.

## Exploring the preference mechanism in surveys and newspaper coverage

We next turn to direct measures of preferences to assess whether emigration indeed influences how residents perceive public services. We draw on annual surveys (2006–2018) by Statistics Sweden, covering over 90% of municipalities. Each municipality participated, on average, five times, with 800–1600 respondents per survey. Respondents rate the quality of local services in 13 areas on a 10-point scale (see Section B.1 in the SM for details, pp. 5, 8–9), with scores published at the municipality level. We average these scores to create a Quality Index, which we regress on departures.[14]

Table 6 mirrors our Table 1 baseline specification (though using municipality-level fixed effects). It shows a robust negative relationship between departures and residents' satisfaction with local services, substantiating the preference mechanism.

These results confirm that citizen satisfaction with local services decreases with out-migration. Another important question is whether the connections between emigration, quality of life declines, and party politics that we posit are in fact saliently discussed and thus plausibly important elements shaping electoral behavior. We searched local, regional, and

[14] To increase comparability with our main results, municipalities are weighted by their number of precincts. Results without weights are substantively similar.

**TABLE 7** Topics in newspaper coverage about out-migration, 2000–2020.

| | Proportion of articles | Percent of statements | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Quality of public services** | 0.59 | | |
| Schools/childcare | 0.31 | 16 | |
| Transportation | 0.18 | 9 | |
| Health care | 0.15 | 7 | 48 |
| Internet speed | 0.07 | 4 | |
| Other | 0.24 | 12 | |
| **Availability of proper housing** | 0.17 | | 9 |
| **Lack of jobs** | 0.48 | | 24 |
| **Shops and stores closing** | 0.17 | | |
| Essential | 0.11 | 6 | 10 |
| Nonessential | 0.09 | 5 | |
| **Arrival of immigrants** | 0.09 | | 5 |
| **High gas prices or carbon tax** | 0.07 | | 3 |
| | | | 100 |

*Note*: Proportion of articles and the share of statements describing changes associated with out-migration at the local level in Sweden. $N = 366$ articles.

national newspaper articles (from 2000 to 2020) to provide concrete narratives on developments associated with local out-migration. We used the website *Retriever* for full-text searches in almost all Swedish newspapers and found 4970 newspaper articles focusing on local out-migration in a political context.[15] Figure SM.2 (p. 21) shows the distribution of articles over time; on average, we identified about 20 articles per month (median: 16).

We next drew a random sample of these articles ($N = 100$) and checked if they discussed local out-migration (or depopulation) in a political context in Sweden. Sixty-two articles did so, and next the Swedish members of our team read those articles carefully. Among the 62, 44 mentioned specific changes associated with out-migration, which we classified into 11 categories (see Table 7). We then drew a second random sample ($N = 700$), which we coded based on this scheme.

Table 7 reports the results from an analysis pooling the samples. In total 366 articles discussed local out-migration (or depopulation) in a political context in Sweden. The first column shows the proportion of articles among those mentioning certain types of local-level changes linked to out-migration (articles may mention multiple changes, so proportions do not add up to 1). On average, articles mention 2.4 (median: 2) categories. The other two columns report overall percentages of each category.

[15] The search string consisted of party names and the terms emigration and depopulation; see Figure SM.2 (p. 21) for details.

A substantial share of articles (59%) notes a decline in the quality of public services. Specific examples include the closure of schools, fewer options for public transportation, the departure of physicians and the closing of hospitals, and a lack of high-speed internet. Job availability is also an important concern. With respect to housing, articles frequently refer to the need to relax zoning restrictions, such that homes can be built on lakefronts and other scenic locations, to attract middle-class families that may otherwise opt for locating in urban settings. The quality and affordability of existing housing is another theme. The arrival of immigrants was not a central topic.

Articles also frequently link out-migration's negative repercussions to the growth in support for the SD. After the 2018 election, one journalist wrote that "Voting for the SD can partly be seen as a protest against the deterioration of public goods and services—schools and health care—in the wake of emigration" (Petersson, 2018). After the 2014 election, another remarked that "None of the established parties manage to channel the powerlessness and discontent in the parts of the country" that experience the quality-of-life declines produced by emigration (Akinder, 2014). In short, outside observers and locals have clearly identified what we have termed the preference-based mechanism as underpinning the relationship between out-migration and radical right voting.

## Party strategy

Our analyses indicate that emigration-based grievances boost the radical right SD at the expense of the Social Democrats. In this final section, we probe whether party actors recognize these links and consider them, as we have, partly the result of party strategies that arise in deindustrialized democracies. We focused on interviewing officials from the SD and Social Democrats as these two parties are the main electoral winners and losers, respectively, from out-migration.[16] We aimed to interview at least one person from each party in each of the following positions (current or former): national party official with responsibility for rural affairs, local politician in depopulating regions, and party official with responsibility for election analysis.[17] Interviews ($N = 12$) were semistructured and contained nine thematic questions (see Table SM.23, p. 24). We also asked interviewees for recommendations of party officials with relevant perspectives, and we continued this snowball process until we reached data saturation.

[16] Using 2010–2019 CHES data, we find that the SD is is more likely than all other major parties—except the agrarian Center Party—to support rural issues.

[17] For more details on interview methodology, see SM section D, p. 22.

The interviews highlight the role of party strategy in helping generate the material and psychological preference mechanisms. Several point to decades of political neglect of rural areas, which out-migration compounds due in part to Sweden's proportional electoral system that does not work in favor of sparsely populated areas. A Social Democratic former mayor notes: "When the population declines in the Northern parts of Sweden, and people move to Stockholm or other big cities, so do the parliamentary seats." According to a party official working in rural affairs "The route to power does not lie in sparsely populated areas. The harsh reality is that about a million people live north of Gävle, so even if all of them vote for you, you will not have a majority in parliament." The electoral system, in combination with the Social Democratic development strategy built on structural adjustment and urbanization, has not benefited rural areas. The same party official says that "From the 1970s and onwards, the focus has been on jobs and growth, and to accomplish this rural areas have been bled of their resources … also when it comes to human capital." The Social Democratic officials whom we interviewed recognized that their growth strategies directly contributed to the emptying out of the periphery and that they have further sapped the political clout of those who remain.

Interviewees agree that emigration is noticeable, not least because of its impact on the local economy, public finances, and the provision of goods and services. In the words of the SD party secretary: "People notice it [emigration] … Local services deteriorate … the local store closes … the small school is shut down." A Social Democrat describes the adverse processes that out-migration sets in motion in similar terms. Once depopulation triggers cutbacks and fiscal strain "there is this negative spiral where [affected localities] have difficulties attracting skilled workers."

Interviewees also emphasize psychological effects. An SD local politician noted that emigration "is not good for self-esteem." The Social Democrats' former Minister of rural affairs quotes a Social Democratic mayor whose municipality shrank from 15,000 to 6000 inhabitants, as saying that emigration leads to "collective depression." A Social Democratic mayor in a depopulating municipality in mid-Sweden spoke of the psychological pressures of not meeting standards of success set by the outside: "We like it here. But then someone comes from the outside and says that you're a failure if you live here … so we are struggling against the public perception of what constitutes a successful individual. We constantly have to work on the psychology of the municipality's inhabitants." Another Social Democrat downplays emigration's material impact and instead speaks of "a feeling of bitterness, everything revolves around Malmö, Gothenburg and Stockholm." In short, elites recognize that emigration leads to a collectively experienced status loss.

Voter behavior and party strategies have responded to these developments. A former Social Democratic minister explains that "People have for a long time felt abandoned and this has caused my party [and] other established parties to lose. Above all, it is the right-wing populists, such as the Sweden Democrats, who have captured these voters." When discussing the poor rural road conditions, he quips "Every time someone hits a pothole, the Sweden Democrats gain five votes." The party secretary of the SD similarly comments: "The Social Democrats have been a very large party in many parts of the country … and if those who live [in depopulating regions] feel that things are deteriorating … of course the Social Democrats lose votes." A Social Democrat responsible for the 2014 postelection analysis offers this insight: "It was clear that the Social Democrats, together with some other parties, had not been prioritizing smaller and more rural localities, and that the Sweden Democrats had consciously been visiting these places, and this produced results."

Our interviews thus underscore that the SD capitalized on the incumbent party's failure to address the concerns of voters contending with out-migration. But they also indicate that the Social Democrats recognize that their abandonment provided an opening for right-wing populists that the party is now trying to close. The previously mentioned minister of rural affairs speaks of a growing awareness of these issues during the latest Social Democratic government, which came to power in 2014, mentioning large-scale subsidies to grocery stores and gas stations and the expansion of high-speed Internet access. However, he also acknowledges that "it takes time to regain the confidence of voters. It can't be done during one or two terms of office. The political price you pay for disappointing people is very high."

Overall the interviews reveal that elites believe the preference mechanism—both material and psychological—underlies the relationship between out-migration and vote gains by PRR candidates and that they are devising strategies accordingly.

## CONCLUSION

This paper advances our understanding of PRR success on several fronts by merging two political and demographic currents in contemporary democracies: populism and emigration.

First, while a large body of research links the rise of radical right populists to immigration, we shift focus to emigration. We argue that large-scale departures of citizens to other domestic municipalities or internationally are an important source of PRR gains.

To substantiate our argument, we analyze cross-national data as well as longitudinal, precinct-level within-country election results, along with individual-level surveys and newspaper articles.

Second, we formulate two mechanisms that constitute the emigration effect, contrasting changes in the *composition* of electorates with changes in electorate *preferences*. Our longitudinal data enable us to explore these mechanisms with a fine-toothed comb and to isolate the emigration effect from other confounders. While we find that the compositional mechanism affects PRR success to some degree, our evidence also indicates that changed preferences are a powerful driver of populist voting. Future research should further refine the measurement of these mechanisms. Relatedly, a useful next step would be to examine what type of emigration-induced service cuts have particularly large effects. Vote choices are informed by perceived realities, and media coverage and elite assessments helped us establish the connections that individuals draw—if any—between out-migration and PRR voting. Yet, some of these perceptions will fit objective reality better than others (Herrera, 2005).

Third, beyond PRR fortunes, we examine effects on the party system as a whole. Our results indicate that the once hegemonic Social Democrats are the losers of the shift toward populist voting in places exposed to out-migration. We then interrogate newspaper coverage and the perspectives of leading party officials to understand why this is so. While more suggestive, these sources reveal the material and psychological sources of PRR voting: The urban growth strategy pursued for many decades by mainstream parties has contributed to an emptying out of the periphery. Today's deindustrialized knowledge economy leaves many of those who remain with few exit options. Emigration decreases the political leverage of voters in towns affected by out-migration who feel a loss of public services, a subsequent sense of political abandonment as well as an experience of "collective depression." They are therefore attractive targets for the SD, a party that bears no responsibility for this livability crisis.

One implication of our account is that the local protest route for PRR success suggests an uncertain future for these parties. The forces driving out-migration are not easily reversed. As SD politicians move into ruling coalitions in municipalities facing further decline, their appeal may well weaken (Cohen, 2020).

Another emerging theme is the PRR's ideological flexibility. In courting disaffected voters in the periphery, the SD—and more generally parties that style themselves as radical right populists nationwide, running on nativism and nationalism—are adjusting to local conditions, emphasizing issues that are not particularly right-wing. This suggests a normalization away from radical right positioning that is distinct from the normalization that occurs via the legitimization of far-right positions by mainstream actors (Wodak, 2020). It also illustrates the ideologically "thin" nature of today's populists (Mudde, 2004), who opportunistically layer their populism onto a host of disparate grievances and different aspects of demographic change.

Finally, our study exposes dilemmas faced by mainstream parties. These parties, including Sweden's Social Democrats, have tried to counter the far-right threat by moving to the right on immigration (Meguid, 2008; Spoon & Klüver, 2020). Immigration restrictions have the advantage of being relatively easy to implement, but the disadvantage of being ideologically compromising (Chou et al., 2021). Focusing on the structural causes of emigration in the periphery presents fewer ideological costs, but achieving policy success is challenging. Nonetheless, a return to their roots as proponents of public goods providers beyond urban centers may have greater electoral returns for center-left parties than a repositioning as anti-immigration hawks.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For very helpful research assistance, we thank Joe Noonan, Fredrik Strelert, Nicolas Kipfer Schwebel, and Vasco Yasenov. We are grateful to seminar and conference participants at the University of Amsterdam, the University of Rochester, Yale University, Stockholm University, Uppsala Center for Labor Studies, Institute for Housing and Urban Research (Uppsala University), Harvard University, Princeton University, Karlstad University, Oslo University, University of Gothenburg, CUNEF University, the Max Planck Online Workshop in Comparative Political Economy, the REDEM Workshop in Stockholm, the Workshop on Socio-Economic Transformations, Group-Based Threats and Political Behaviour in Post-Industrialised Societies in Zurich, EPSA 2022, APSA 2022, and the Stanford and Zurich branches of the Immigration Policy Lab. We would also like to thank Diane Bolet, Dominik Hangartner, Marc Hvidkjær, Johannes Lindvall, and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the National Science Foundation, "Asylum Seekers and Refugee Integration in Europe" (grant number SES-1627339), ERC (grant number 683214), the Swedish Research Council (grant number 2021-008282), and the Jan Wallander and Tom Hedelius Foundation (grant number W18-0002).

## REFERENCES

Adida, Claire L., and Desha M. Girod. 2011. "Do Migrants Improve Their Hometowns? Remittances and Access to Public Services in Mexico, 1995-2000." *Comparative Political Studies* 44(1): 3–27.

Akinder, Peter. 2014. "Dags för valanaly(s)." *Östran* September 23: 2.
Akkerman, Tjitske. 2015. "Immigration Policy and Electoral Competition in Western Europe: A Fine-Grained Analysis of Party Positions over the Past Two Decades." *Party Politics* 21(1): 54–67.
Andersson, Henrik, and Sirus H. Dehdari. 2021. "Workplace Contact and Support for Anti-Immigration Parties." *American Political Science Review* 115(4): 1159–74.
Anelli, Massimo, and Giovanni Peri. 2017. "Does Emigration Delay Political Change? Evidence from Italy during the Great Recession." *Economic Policy* 32(91): 551–96.
Ansell, Ben, Frederik Hjorth, Jacob Nyrup, and Martin Vinæs Larsen. 2022. "Sheltering Populists? House Prices and the Support for Populist Parties." *Journal of Politics* 84(3): 1420–36.
Autor, David. 2020. "The Faltering Escalator of Urban Opportunity." Securing Our Economic Future, The Aspen Institute.
Baccini, Leonardo, and Stephen Weymouth. 2021. "Gone for Good: Deindustrialization, White Voter Backlash, and US Presidential Voting." *American Political Science Review* 115(2): 550–67.
Ballard-Rosa, Cameron, Mashail A. Malik, Stephanie J. Rickard, and Kenneth Scheve. 2021. "The Economic Origins of Authoritarian Values: Evidence from Local Trade Shocks in the United Kingdom." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(13): 2321–53.
Berman, Sheri, and Maria Snegovaya. 2019. "Populism and the Decline of Social Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 30(2): 5–19.
Bolet, Diane. 2021. "Drinking Alone: Local Socio-Cultural Degradation and Radical Right Support—The Case of British Pub Closures." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(9): 1653–92.
Boustan, Leah, and Marco Tabellini. 2018. "Black Out-Migration and Southern Political Realignment." Technical report Working Paper, Harvard Business School.
Canovan, Margaret. 1999. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies* 47(1): 2–16.
Cantoni, Enrico, and Vincent Pons. 2022. "Does Context Outweigh Individual Characteristics in Driving Voting Behavior? Evidence from Relocations within the United States." *American Economic Review* 112(4): 1226–72.
Cavaillé, Charlotte, and Jeremy Ferwerda. 2023. "How Distributional Conflict over In-Kind Benefits Generates Support for Far-Right Parties." *Journal of Politics* 85(1): 19–33.
Chou, Winston, Rafaela Dancygier, Naoki Egami, and Amaney A. Jamal. 2021. "Competing for Loyalists? How Party Positioning Affects Populist Radical Right Voting." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(12): 2226–60.
Cinelli, Carlos, and Chad Hazlett. 2020. "Making Sense of Sensitivity: Extending Omitted Variable Bias." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series B* 82(1): 39–67.
Cohen, Denis. 2020. "Between Strategy and Protest: How Policy Demand, Political Dissatisfaction and Strategic Incentives Matter for Far-Right Voting." *Political Science Research and Methods* 8(4): 662–76.
Colantone, Italo, and Piero Stanig. 2018. "The Trade Origins of Economic Nationalism: Import Competition and Voting Behavior in Western Europe." *American Journal of Political Science* 62(4): 936–53.
Cools, Sara, Henning Finseraas, and Ole Rogeberg. 2021. "Local Immigration and Support for Anti-Immigration Parties: A Meta-Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(4): 988–1006.
Cremaschi, Simone, Paula Rettl, Marco Cappelluti, and Catherine De Vries. 2022. "Geographies of Discontent: How Public Service Deprivation Increased Far-Right Support in Italy." OSF Preprints. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/5s2cu.
Dal Bó, Ernesto, Frederico Finan, Olle Folke, Torsten Persson, and Johanna Rickne. 2023. "Economic and Social Outsiders but Political Insiders: Sweden's Populist Radical Right." *Review of Economic Studies* 90(2): 675–706.
Dancygier, Rafaela M. 2010. *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Dancygier, Rafaela, and Yotam Margalit. 2020. "The Evolution of the Immigration Debate: Evidence from a New Dataset of Party Positions over the Last Half-Century." *Comparative Political Studies* 53(5): 734–74.
de Lange, Sarah, Wouter van der Brug, and Eelco Harteveld. 2023. "Regional Resentment in the Netherlands: A Rural or Peripheral Phenomenon?" *Regional Studies* 57(3): 403–15.
De Vries, Catherine E. 2018. "The Cosmopolitan-Parochial Divide: Changing Patterns of Party and Electoral Competition in the Netherlands and Beyond." *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(11): 1541–65.
Dehdari, Sirus H. 2021. "Economic Distress and Support for Radical Right Parties—Evidence from Sweden." *Comparative Political Studies* 55(2): 191–221.
Diamond, Rebecca. 2016. "The Determinants and Welfare Implications of US Workers' Diverging Location Choices by Skill: 1980–2000." *American Economic Review* 106(3): 479–524.
Dijkstra, Lewis, Hugo Poelman, and Andrés Rodríguez-Pose. 2020. "The Geography of EU Discontent." *Regional Studies* 54(6): 737–53.
Erlingsson, Gissur Ó, Kåre Vernby, and Richard Öhrvall. 2014. "The Single-Issue Party Thesis and the Sweden Democrats." *Acta Politica* 49(2): 196–216.
Erlingsson, Gissur Ó, Richard Öhrvall, and Susanne Wallman Lundåsen. 2023. "Geographical Tensions within Municipalities? Evidence from Swedish Local Governments." *Rural Sociology* 88(4): 1033–68.
Fitzgerald, Jennifer. 2018. *Close to Home: Local Ties and Voting Radical Right in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Freyaldenhoven, Simon, Christian Hansen, Jorge Pérez Pérez, and Jesse M. Shapiro. 2021. "Visualization, Identification, and Estimation in the Linear Panel Event-Study Design." Working Paper 29170 National Bureau of Economic Research.
Gessler, Theresa, and Sophia Hunger. 2022. "How the Refugee Crisis and Radical Right Parties Shape Party Competition on Immigration." *Political Science Research and Methods* 10(3): 524–44.
Gidron, Noam, and Peter A. Hall. 2020. "Populism as a Problem of Social Integration." *Comparative Political Studies* 53(7): 1027–59.
Gingrich, Jane. 2017. "A New Progressive Coalition? The European Left in a Time of Change." *Political Quarterly* 88(1): 39–51.
Gløersen, Erik, and Christian Lüer. 2013. "Population Data Collection for European Local Administrative Units from 1960 Onwards." Spatial Foresight Final Report.
Golder, Matt. 2016. "Far Right Parties in Europe." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19: 477–97.
Goodman, Sara Wallace. 2021. "Immigration Threat, Partisanship, and Democratic Citizenship: Evidence from the US, UK, and Germany." *Comparative Political Studies* 54(11): 2052–83.
Hainmueller, Jens, Jonathan Mummolo, and Xu Yiqing. 2019. "How Much Should We Trust Estimates from Multiplicative Interaction Models? Simple Tools to Improve Empirical Practice." *Political Analysis* 27(2): 163–92.
Halikiopoulou, Daphne, and Tim Vlandas. 2019. "What Is New and What Is Nationalist about Europe's New Nationalism? Explaining the Rise of the Far Right in Europe." *Nations and Nationalism* 25(2): 409–34.
Häusermann, Silja. 2020. "Dualization and Electoral Realignment." *Political Science Research and Methods* 8(2): 380–85.
Herrera, Yoshiko M. 2005. *Imagined Economies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hirschman, Albert O. 1993. "Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History." *World Politics* 45(2): 173–202.
Hooghe, Marc, and Ruth Dassonneville. 2018. "A Spiral of Distrust: A Panel Study on the Relation Between Political Distrust and Protest Voting in Belgium." *Government and Opposition* 53(1): 104–30.

Hooijer, Gerda. 2021. "'They Take Our Houses': Benefit Competition and the Erosion of Support for Immigrants' Social Rights." *British Journal of Political Science* 51(4): 1381–401.
Horz, Carlo, and Moritz Marbach. 2020. "Economic Opportunities, Emigration and Exit Prisoners." *British Journal of Political Science* 52(1): 21–40.
Ivarsflaten, Elisabeth. 2008. "What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases." *Comparative Political Studies* 41(1): 3–23.
Jolly, Seth, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova. 2022. "Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999–2019." *Electoral Studies* 75: 102420. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0261379421001323
Kapur, Devesh. 2014. "Political Effects of International Migration." *Annual Review of Political Science* 17: 479–502.
Karadja, Mounir, and Erik Prawitz. 2019. "Exit, Voice, and Political Change: Evidence from Swedish Mass Migration to the United States." *Journal of Political Economy* 127(4): 1864–925.
Kelemen, R. Daniel. 2020. "The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium." *Journal of European Public Policy* 27(3): 481–99.
Kröhnert, Steffen, Nienke van Olst, and Reiner Klingolz. 2004. *Deutschland 2020: Die Demographische Zukunft Der Nation*. Berlin: Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung and Entwicklung.
Lancaster, Caroline Marie. 2020. "Not So Radical After All: Ideological Diversity Among Radical Right Supporters and Its Implications." *Political Studies* 68(3): 600–616.
Leander, Cornelia. 2022. "Assessing Pariah Party Status: Concept Operationalization and the Case of the Sweden Democrats." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 45(3): 326–47.
Lim, Junghyun. 2023. "The Electoral Consequences of International Migration in Sending Countries: Evidence from Central and Eastern Europe." *Comparative Political Studies* 56(1): 36–64.
Lindgren, Karl-Oskar, and Kåre Vernby. 2016. "The Electoral Impact of the Financial Crisis: Evidence Using District-Level Data." *Electoral Studies* 44: 214–24.
Lueders, Hans. 2022. "Rooted at Home: How Domestic Migration Separates Voters Into National and Local Electorates." Available at SSRN https://ssrn.com/abstract=3891174 or https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3891174
Maxwell, Rahsaan. 2020. "Geographic Divides and Cosmopolitanism: Evidence from Switzerland." *Comparative Political Studies* 53(13): 2061–90.
Meguid, Bonnie M. 2008. *Party Competition between Unequals: Strategies and Electoral Fortunes in Western Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Meijers, Maurits, and Andrej Zaslove. 2020. "Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey 2018 (POPPA)." Harvard Dataverse, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B, V2, UNF:6:yluUOQd+XF9eaKPExGQAEA== [fileUNF].
Miller, Michael K., and Margaret E. Peters. 2020. "Restraining the Huddled Masses: Migration Policy and Autocratic Survival." *British Journal of Political Science* 50(2): 403–33.
Moretti, Enrico. 2012. *The New Geography of Jobs*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
Mudde, Cas. 2004. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 541–63.
Oskarson, Maria, and Marie Demker. 2015. "Room for Realignment: The Working-Class Sympathy for Sweden Democrats." *Government and Opposition* 50(4): 629–51.
Patana, Pauliina. 2022. "Residential Constraints and the Political Geography of the Populist Radical Right: Evidence from France." *Perspectives on Politics* 20(3): 842–59.
Petersson, Claes. 2018. "Sveriges 'Rostbälte'—De Nedlagda Pappersbrukens Land." *Kvällsposten* September 15: 20–21.
Rickard, Stephanie J. 2020. "Economic Geography, Politics, and Policy." *Annual Review of Political Science* 23: 187–202.
Rickardsson, Jonna. 2021. "The Urban–Rural Divide in Radical Right Populist Support: The Role of Resident's Characteristics, Urbanization Trends and Public Service Supply." *Annals of Regional Science* 67(1): 211–42.
Rodden, Jonathan. 2019. *Why Cities Lose: Political Geography and the Representation of the Left*. New York: Basic Books.
Rooduijn, Matthijs, Wouter Van Der Brug, and Sarah L. De Lange. 2016. "Expressing or Fuelling Discontent? The Relationship between Populist Voting and Political Discontent." *Electoral Studies* 43: 32–40.
Rydgren, Jens, and Sara Van der Meiden. 2019. "The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism." *European Political Science* 18(3): 439–55.
Sellars, Emily A. 2019. "Emigration and Collective Action." *Journal of Politics* 81(4): 1210–22.
Sobolewska, Maria, and Robert Ford. 2020. *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Spoon, Jae-Jae, and Heike Klüver. 2020. "Responding to Far Right Challengers: Does Accommodation Pay Off?" *Journal of European Public Policy* 27(2): 273–91.
Wodak, Ruth. 2020. *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Dancygier, Rafaela, Sirus H. Dehdari, David D. Laitin, Moritz Marbach, and Kåre Vernby. 2025. "Emigration and radical right populism." *American Journal of Political Science* 69: 252–67. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12852