Pork Barrel Politics in Multiparty Systems: How Government Job Relocations Boost Electoral Support for Incumbent Parties

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Abstract

Does the targeted allocation of public resources yield electoral benefits for incumbents? While conventional wisdom suggests it does, the empirical evidence is mixed. This study examines this phenomenon of pork barrel politics within a multiparty system by analyzing the electoral impact of major job influxes, specifically the relocation of government jobs to local areas, on the electoral performance of the incumbent. Using a difference-in-difference design, we estimate that the incumbent prime minister's party gains approximately 0.43 %-points more votes in districts that benefit from government job relocations compared to those that do not. These findings are robust across alternative specifications. Additionally, a model applying propensity score matching further validate and confirms the results' robustness. Our findings contribute to understanding how localized economic benefits influence voter behavior in multiparty systems and highlight the extent to which parties can leverage on these developments to secure electoral gains.

Introduction

Will parties in a multiparty system receive electoral credit for positive developments in local constituencies? The phenomenon commonly referred to as "pork barrel politics" has long been recognized as a mechanism through which incumbents can increase their vote share (Lattmann 2024; Evans 2011; Spáč 2021). According to conventional wisdom, incumbents who deliver distributive benefits are often rewarded at the ballot box (Mayhew 1974; Rocca 2003). While this mechanism has been evidenced in the U.S and other countries with first-past-the-post electoral systems, to our knowledge, its applicability in multiparty systems remains underexplored. In multiparty systems, the concept of "clarity of responsibility" (Powell & Whitten 1993; Larsen 2021) becomes more complex. When accountability is diffused, voters may struggle to attribute credit or blame to specific parties or representatives, potentially weakening the electoral impact of distributive policies. Nevertheless, legislators often attempt to highlight their individual contributions to local developments, such as job creation, infrastructure projects, or investment inflows, to strengthen their electoral support (Arnold 1990; Weaver 1986). This research note investigates whether voters in a multiparty system reward parties for single-shot, positive events in specific constituencies that are directly attributable to their representatives. Specifically, we examine the electoral impact of relocating government jobs to local areas. Our analysis reveals that constituencies receiving government jobs increased their vote share for the incumbent party with 0.43 %-points. The results are supported by parallel pre-treatment trends and remain robust across multiple specifications and robustness checks.

Pork barrel in multiparty systems

In a well-functioning democracy, voters are expected to hold politicians accountable for their policy choices, thereby ensuring responsibility and accountability within the democratic political system. A crucial condition for electoral accountability is that voters are aware of enacted policies and can identify the political actors responsible for them.

Within a Downsian framework, citizens are viewed as rational actors who support the party they believe will maximize their individual benefits (Downs 1957). The literature has shown that voters engage in retrospective voting, using the economy as a primary indicator for evaluating the performance of the incumbents (de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw 2020; Fiorina 1981). During periods of economic growth, voters tend to reward incumbents, while punishing incumbent running on bad economy (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2000; Kiewiet 1983). Multiple studies stress that retrospective economic voting plays a crucial role in shaping voter

support for parties and candidates during elections and is well-documented in both first-past-the-post electoral systems and proportional representation systems (Duch & Stevenson 2008; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier 2020; Tufte 1978; Bengtsson et al. 2014; Dassonneville & Lewis-Beck 2019).

Although retrospective voting is well-established at the national level, it remains less clear whether this effect exists at the local level. While there is evidence that voters hold local incumbents accountable for local economic conditions (Dassonneville et al. 2016; Larsen et al. 2019), de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw (2020), find that, although retrospective economic voting is clearly observable in federal and state elections, its effects tend to weaken at the local level. Conventional wisdom suggests a direct link exists between distributive benefits and electoral outcomes (Mayhew 1974; Rocca 2003). This implies an expectation that parties and candidates who secure localized gains to their constituencies, those who "bring home the bacon", will be rewarded at the ballot box (Evans 2011). When it comes to the effect on incumbent's support of positive economic shock to local districts, empirical evidence is scarce and mixed (Neumark & Simpson 2015; Lattmann 2024). Research on U.S. military base closures find no consistent support for such a link (Stroup 1998; Emrich 2020; Reilly & Coyne 2024). Both Stroup (1998) and Emrich (2020) report no significant impact of base closures on incumbent electoral support, while Rocca (2003) finds a measurable effect on electoral margins. Similarly, Fowler and Hall (2015) find no evidence that candidates who deliver distributive benefits to their districts are electorally more successful than those who do not. In contrast, Spáč (2021) demonstrates that this dynamic exists in Slovak mayoral elections, where local grants benefit the incumbent's vote share. One of the most recent contributions, Lattmann (2024), examines the effect of centralized funding allocation on electoral support for incumbents in England and finds empirical evidence that pork barrel politic increase vote share for the incumbent. While some studies find no effect and others report a positive one, the literature on the electoral impact of place-based funding remains mixed, challenging the conventional wisdom that electoral gains in specific geographical areas consistently translate into electoral rewards.

Despite the mixed evidence, there is reason to expect the presence of this mechanism. At the EU level, for instance, regions receiving substantial investment subsidies have shown a subsequent decline in voters' euroscepticism, indicating a retrospective voting logic at a local level (Vergioglou 2023). Even in proportional representation systems, typically characterized by weaker personal electoral incentives, there is evidence of local favoritism, with candidates displaying a clear hometown bias (Fiva & Halse 2016). Furthermore, research

reveals that local road investments tend to increase and taxes decrease in election years, suggesting that incumbents engage in political business cycles to secure electoral gains (Ferraresi et al. 2024; Bhatti et al. 2012). These indications of electorally motivated behavior and retrospective logic at the local level suggest that retrospective economic voting may emerge under the right conditions. Stein and Bickers (1994) argue that a direct link between distributional benefits (pork) and electoral outcomes can only be expected if three conditions are met: 1) constituents are aware of the benefits; 2) they attribute the allocation of those benefits to the incumbent; and 3) they remember this connection when voting (Rocca 2003).

The reallocation of government jobs in Denmark provides us with a well-suited case to assess whether voters respond electorally to changes in distributive policy at the district level. It is well-established that allocation can be considered as pork barrel politics (Lattmann 2024). Regional unemployment and housing prices are key factors shaping voters' perceptions of the economy (Ansolabehere et al. 2014; Bisgaard et al. 2016), and the reallocation of government jobs significantly affects both. Norwegian studies show that relocating government jobs influences the local economy (Stein 2019; Trondal & Kiland 2009), but they have not examined the subsequent effect on incumbent electoral support. We thus use the reallocation of government jobs as a case to model the relationship between targeted distributive benefits and electoral outcomes. Referring to Stein and Bickers' (1994) three conditions, we argue that our case offers a highly suitable context for testing the link because: 1) the reallocation was a high salient policy; 2) the responsible government was a single-party administration, strengthening lines of accountability; and 3) the reallocation occurred in two rounds, with the final taking place just one year before the election. This allows us to test the mechanism in a multiparty system. We hypothesize that the government's relocation of government jobs subsequently increased support for the governing incumbent party from the previous election in those geographical areas where the reallocation took place, compared to areas where it did not.

Data and design: Electoral data with a difference-in-difference design

We present a case where, on the one hand, the odds of finding a clear example of retrospective economic voting are challenging. Denmark has a proportional electoral system with a multiparty system, which typically fosters minority coalition government – conditions that tend to obscure lines of responsibility. For instance, a vote cast in one part of the country can help

candidates from the same party get elected in other parts of the country, thereby blurring the mechanism of electoral accountability.

On the other hand, the specific time period under investigation presents an unusual institutional context: Denmark was governed by a minority single-party government led by the Liberal Party. This rare configuration enhanced the clarity of accountability, which is otherwise more diffuse in Danish politics. Moreover, the decision to reallocate government jobs was not a bill directly negotiated and ratified in parliament but rather implemented directly in the specific ministries under supervision of their Liberal Party ministers. Both the single-party government and the clear supervision of the implementation of the reallocation of government jobs make the responsibility of the Liberal Party clearer. This institutional clarity increases the likelihood that voters could attribute the policy to the party and reward it electorally in the districts that benefited from the job relocations, as we have hypothesized.

Our case focuses on the Danish government's decision to relocate approximately 8,000 government jobs (4% of all government jobs in Denmark) from the capital of Copenhagen to about 50 locations across the country between 2015 and 2019. The stated goal was to bring government activities closer to its citizens and to stimulate economic development across the country (Government 2015; Ministry of Finance 2018; 2019a; 2019b).

Figure 1: Map of the reallocation of government jobs
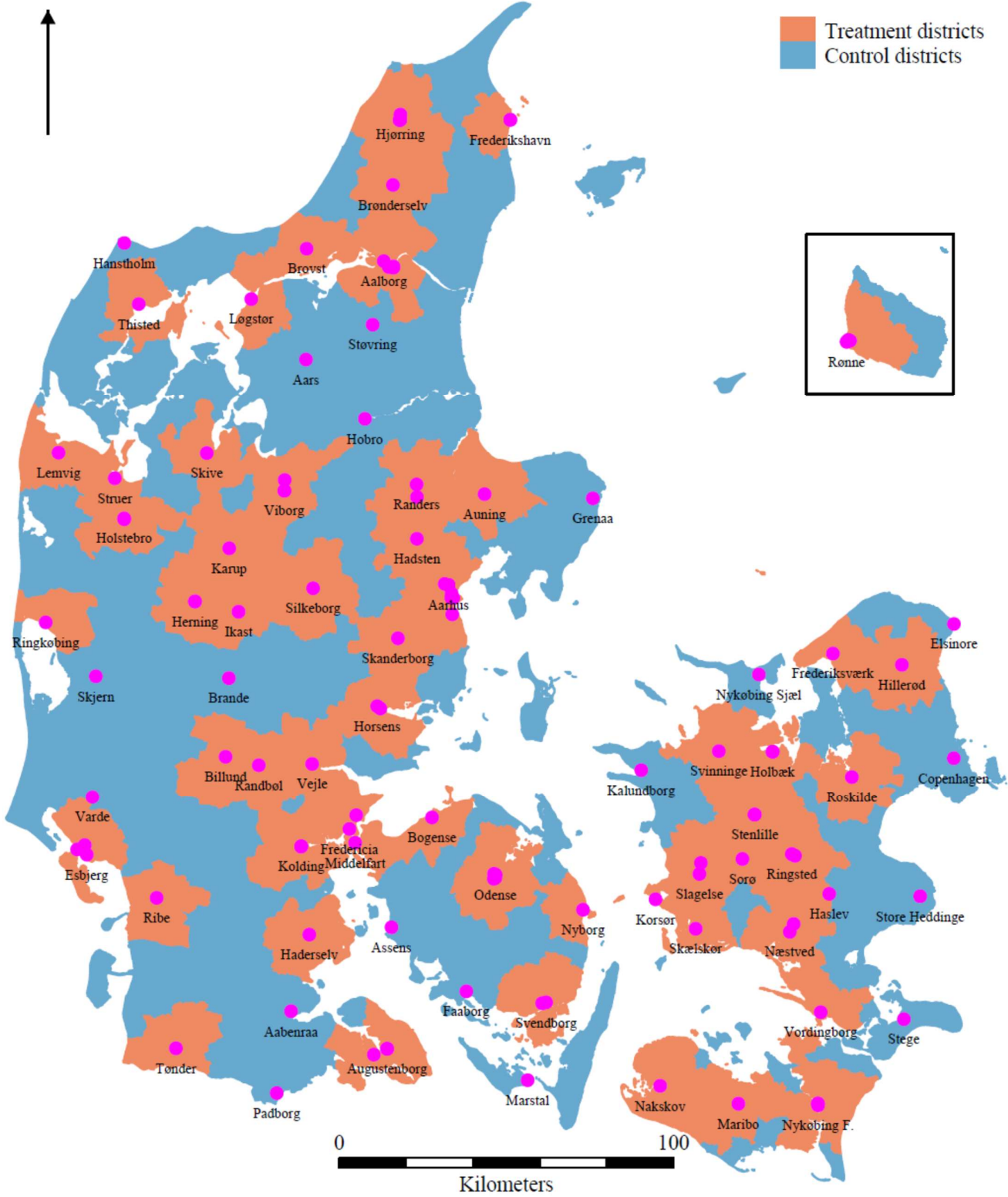
We apply a difference-in-difference design with a one-time intervention to identify the effect of reallocated government jobs. The dependent variable is the Liberal Party's electoral support in each of the 1,384 polling districts across the country in the national elections in 2015 (pre-treatment) and 2019 (post-treatment). The independent variable is the proximity of the reallocated government jobs to each polling district, which allows us to classify districts into treatment and control groups. To estimate the causal effect of receiving a reallocated government job, we compare the changes in electoral outcomes in treated constituencies before and after the reallocation to changes in control constituencies that did not receive any reallocated jobs over the same period. We estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) and follow the standard difference-in-difference approach by relying on the parallel trend assumption, that is, in the absence of treatment, the average vote share for the incumbent in treated districts would have followed the same development as in the untreated districts. To identify the treated districts, we geocode each relocated job using Google Maps and combined it with electoral data from The Danish Election Database (www.valgdatabase.dst.dk), and administrative boundary data (DAGI) from the Danish government's agency for Data Supply and Efficiency (SDFE). We use Stata 18 and the geonear command to calculate the distance from the polling district to the nearest reallocated government job location.

In our main specification, we define polling districts as treated if the reallocation of the nearest workplace is within 12-kilometers radius. Districts located more than 12 kilometers away are classified as untreated and serve as the control group. The 12-kilometer cutpoint is chosen because it allows us to use data from all 1,384 polling districts and results in balanced group sizes: 686 treated and 698 control districts. Additionally, this cutpoint corresponds to the threshold for receiving a tax cut for transportation to the workplace in Denmark. Notably, half of Danish employees commuted less than 10 kilometers to their workplace (Statistics Denmark 2024), suggesting relatively short commuting distances compared to other countries. Figure 1 displays the geographic distribution of treatment and control districts. As we show below, our findings are robust to other choices of cutpoints.

Analysis: Relocation of jobs increase support

A fundamental assumption in difference-in-difference design is the absence of systematic selection into treatment or control groups. To assess this, we examine the Liberal Party's vote share in the national elections of 2007, 2011, and 2015 ensuring that parallel trends existed between the treatment and control group prior to the intervention. Due to administrative reforms that altered constituency boundaries, our first election is 2007. The present of parallel

trends is evaluated in Figure 3 and 4. Figure 3 shows that the vote share trends for the treatment and control groups closely follow each other prior to the intervention. Figure 4 presents the difference-in-difference estimates for different elections comparisons and shows the estimates are insignificant before the intervention. The present of parallel pre-trends suggests that constituencies in the treatment and control group follow the same trend before treatment and shows that there is no selection into treatment and control.

Figure 3: Parallel trend – support for the Liberal Party in treatment and control group over time
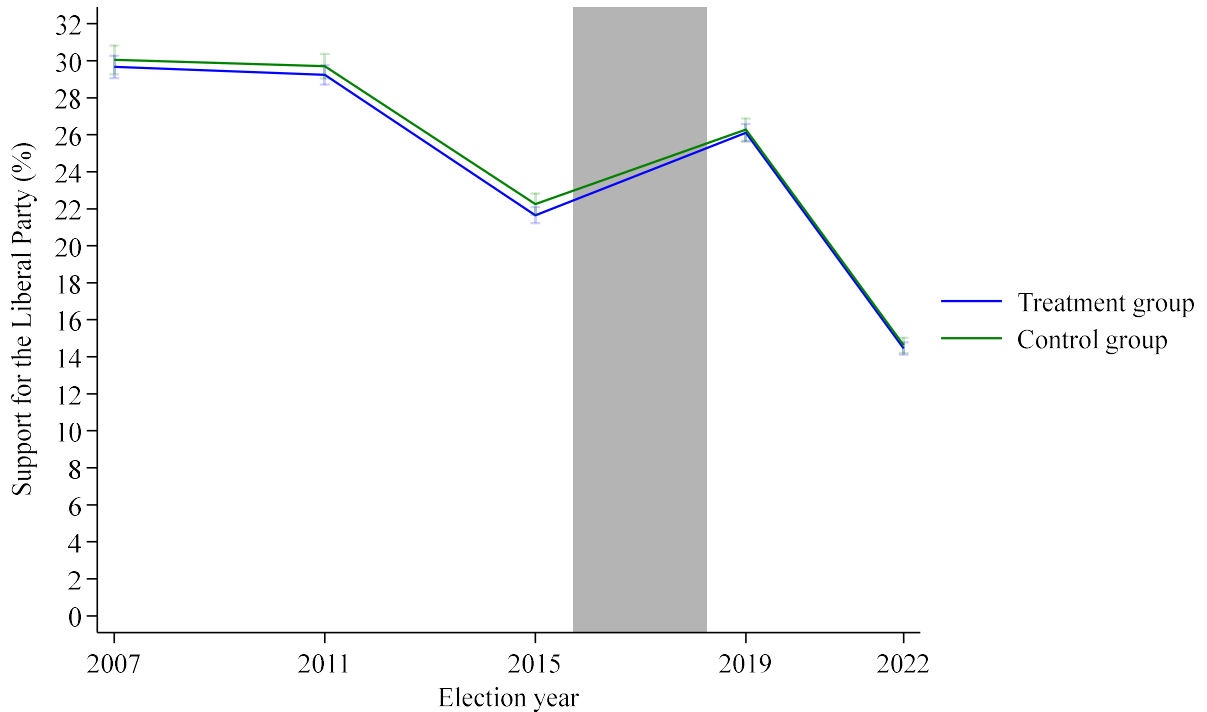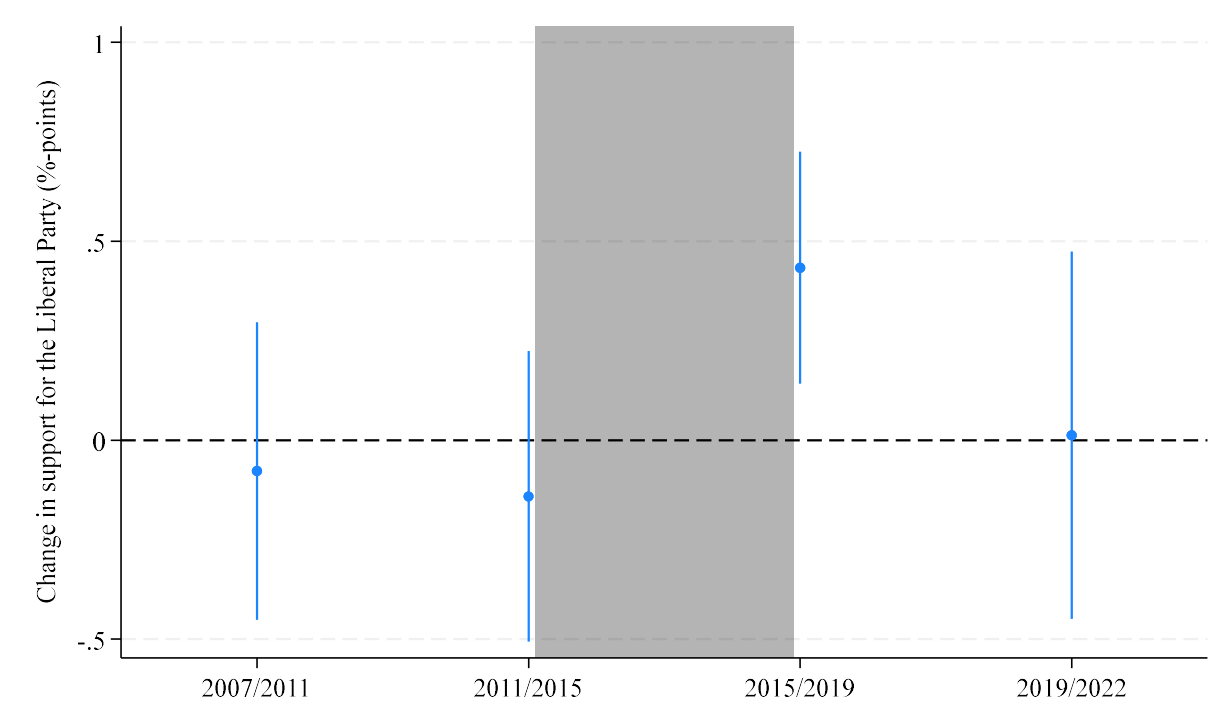

Note: Treatment is a reallocated workplace within 12 km of the polling district. The geographical location of the polling district is in the calculation represented by the geographic centroid of each district. Control is no reallocated workplace within 12 km of the polling district. The grey area symbolizes the treatment window. N=1,384 (686 polling district in treatment and 698 in control group). Percent support is of valid votes within treatment and control group (CI95%).

Figure 4 shows the difference-in-difference estimates, which is the difference between the slopes of the treatment and control group between elections in Figure 3. It indicates that support for the Liberal Party increased by 0.43 %-point (SE=0.149, p<0.004) more in the treatment group compared to the control group between 2015 and 2019 where the reallocation occurred. The vote share for the Liberal Party increased in both the treated and the non-treated constituencies compared to the previous election, while the Liberal Party ended up getting

approximately 15,000 additional votes in treated constituencies compared to the control group. In all the other periods there is no significant difference in the development of support for the Liberal Party.

Figure 4: Difference-in-difference estimate across elections

Note: Treatment is a reallocated workplace within 12 km of the polling district. (CI95%) Standard errors clustered in polling district. Robust standard error clustered at 1,384 polling districts, with fixed effect for consecutive election years and polling districts.

The effect is estimated using fixed effects for constituencies and pre- and post-treatment periods. The regression results are presented in table A1 in the appendix. Given that a parliamentary mandate in the 2019 elections requires just under 20,000 votes, the Liberal Party's increase in vote share effectively translated into approximately one additional mandate for the Liberals. To illustrate the significance of this effect, it is worth noting that in the most recent parliamentary election, a single mandate determined which party could form the government. Since the increase in support occurred in areas affected by job relocations, Liberal candidates in these regions were more likely to be elected than their counterparts in unaffected areas, despite the proportional nature of the electoral system. Figure A1 in the appendix provides a map of the Liberal Party's electoral gains across polling districts.

To better understand the mechanism behind the difference in the Liberal Party's vote share between treated and untreated districts, we examine whether voters in the capital punished the incumbent government. In Figure A3 in the appendix we estimate the findings without the two municipalities where the government jobs were relocated from (the capital: Copenhagen and Frederiksberg, 61 polling districts removed), which makes no difference. This suggests that the observed effect is not driven by voter backlash in the capital. Furthermore, in Figure A4 in the appendix, we test whether the number of jobs relocated influences the electoral effect. When restricting the analysis to only large reallocations (more than 30 jobs), thus excluding more than 1/3 of the polling districts treated, we find no significant effects. This indicates that the Liberal Party benefited electorally even from districts receiving a small number of government jobs. This could suggest that voters reward incumbents based on a sense of being prioritized, rather than on the actual number of jobs allocated. The absent of a dose-effect relationship is consistent with Lattmann (2024), who does not find a larger amount of funding results in more substantial effect on the incumbent's vote share.

Robustness of the finding

Instead of using a 12-kilometer cutpoint to divide the polling district into control and treatment groups, we try to apply various cutpoint from 1 to 30 kilometer. I.e. all polling districts below the cutpoint are in the treatment group, all others are in the control group. Figure 5 shows the difference-in-difference estimates on the secondary axis and the percentage of polling districts in the treatment on the primary axis. The results show that cutpoints between 9-17 kilometers yield significant estimates, with a largest effect observed at 13-kilometers, where support for the Liberal party increases by 0.50 %-points. All other cutpoints produce insignificant estimates, due to imbalanced group size and weak estimates. These findings suggest that the result is robust to different operationalizations of the treatment group.

Figure 5: Different cutpoints for treatment (first point below 1 km vs >1 km increase)
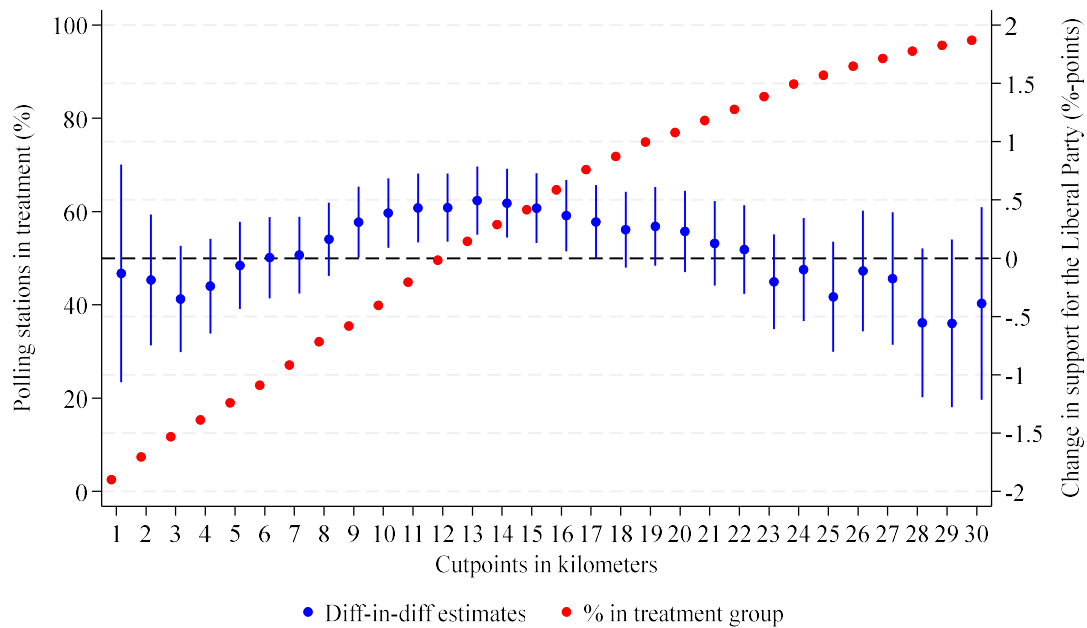
In Figure A2 in the appendix, we also show that the choice of cutpoint is robust to alternative comparison of groups slightly larger than the choice of 12 kilometers.

As shown in Figure 3, the treatment and control group exhibit largely parallel pre-treatment trends, enabling meaningful comparison. However, differences in potential outcome trajectories may still challenge the parallel trends assumption. To address this and adjust for confounders, we apply a propensity score matching estimator as an additional robustness check. Adjusting on gender, educational level, age, number of voters in the constituencies, and voting behavior (Liberal Party vote share in 2011) increases the difference-in-difference estimate a bit (effect size 0.62, SE = 0.22), and the effect remains significant. Figure 6 displays both the matched and unmatched difference-in-difference estimate, while Figure A5 in appendix presents the balance test, after matching our covariates.

Figure 6: Propensity score matching analysis
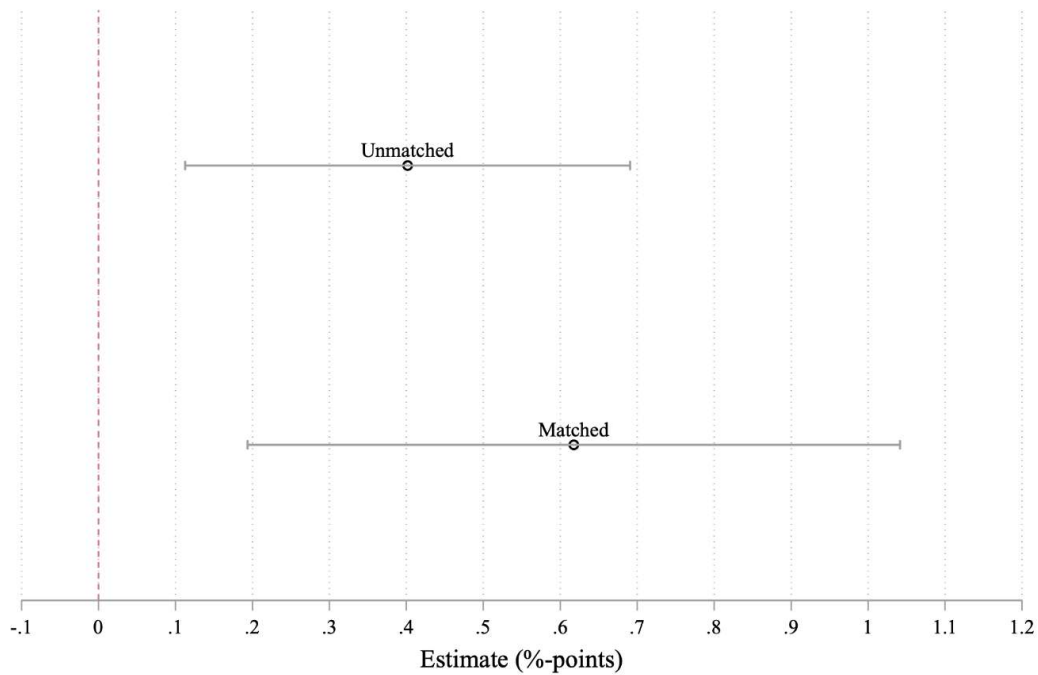
Note: The matching sample includes 1,363 observations due to covariate inclusion (missing), which explains the small discrepancy between the unmatched estimate and the main result.

When we compare the difference-in-difference-estimates across all the other running parties in Figure A6 in the appendix, we find that only the Liberal Party experience significant increase in vote share in the treated districts during the treatment period from 2015 to 2019. This indicates that voters have only rewarded the governing Liberal Party in the affected areas. The fact that no other parties experienced a significant decrease in their vote share in the treated district between 2015 and 2019 suggests that the Liberal Party's gain were diffuse, drawing votes from multiple parties rather than a single party.

Concluding remarks

This study examines whether voters reward governing parties for localized economic gains in a multiparty system with proportional representation. Following the decision by the Liberal Party-led government to reallocate government jobs across Denmark, we find that the party experienced a measurable increase in electoral support in the affected districts. Using a difference-in-difference design, we estimate that the Liberal Party gained approximately 0.43 %-points in vote share – equivalent to around 15,000 votes, or roughly one parliamentary mandate in the 2019 national election.

A concern in our estimation strategy is that we only consider the district close to the reallocated government jobs as treated. Some voters may have supported the decentralization policy without being directly affected, which could violate the no-interference assumption and bias our estimate downward. Nevertheless, the observed effect remains statistically and politically significant. Our findings provide novel evidence that pork barrel politics can function as a vote-buying mechanism even in a multiparty system, where lines of responsibility and accountability are typically more diffuse.

The reallocation of government jobs was a highly salient policy, affecting many constituencies and remaining prominent throughout the electoral term. Combined with the fact that the Liberal Party governed alone, we therefore expect similar effects to occur when policies are salient, and accountability is clear. The specific conditions under which pork barrel politics can be observed in multiparty systems call for further research. Moreover, it may be relevant to examine whether distributive policies generate electoral gains at the local level, even when the responsible actors are situated at the national level, indicating potential spillover effects in voter behavior.

More broadly, our results contribute to the literature on electoral accountability by demonstrating that voters incorporate local economic conditions into their voting decisions, highlighting how democratic accountability functions through voter responses to policy outcomes.

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Figure A1: Change in Liberal Party support (districts level, %-point 2015-2019) with reallocation of government jobs.

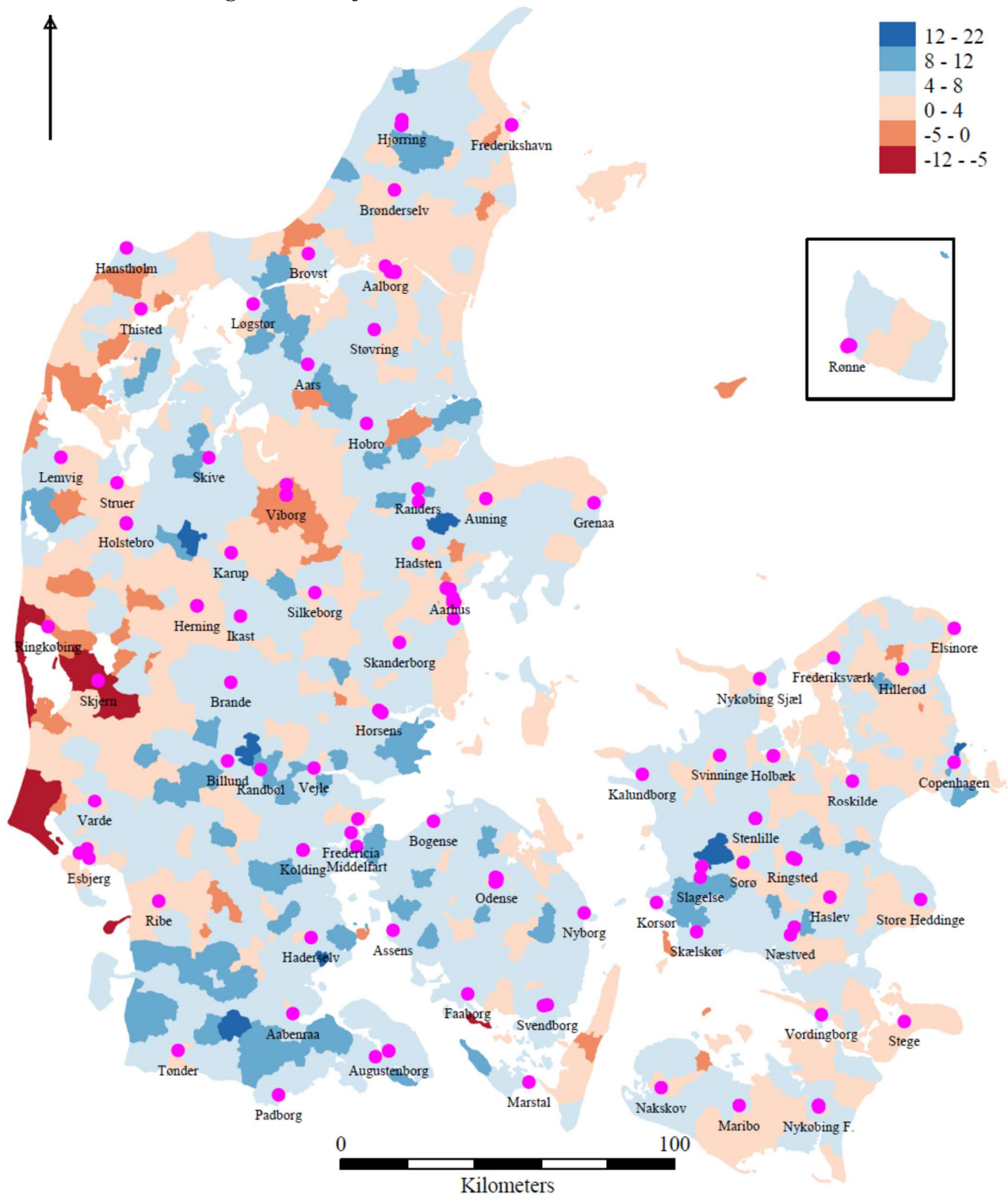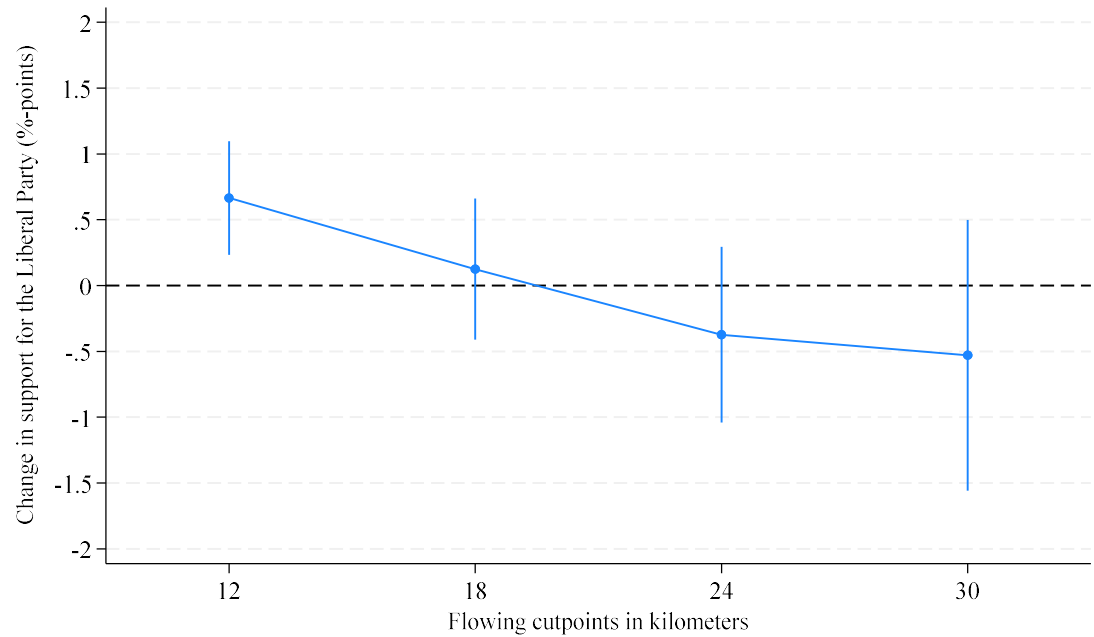Source: The Danish Election database.

Figure A2: With flowing cutpoints for treatment

Note: The first point estimate is 6-12 km (treatment) vs 12-18 km (control). The second point estimate is 12-18 km (treatment) vs. 18-24 km (control). The third point estimate is 18-24 (treatment) vs 24-30 km (control) and the fourth and final is 24-30 km (treatment) vs 30-36 km (control).

Figure A3: With difference cutpoints for treatment (first point below 1 km vs above 1 km increase). Copenhagen and Frederiksberg excluded
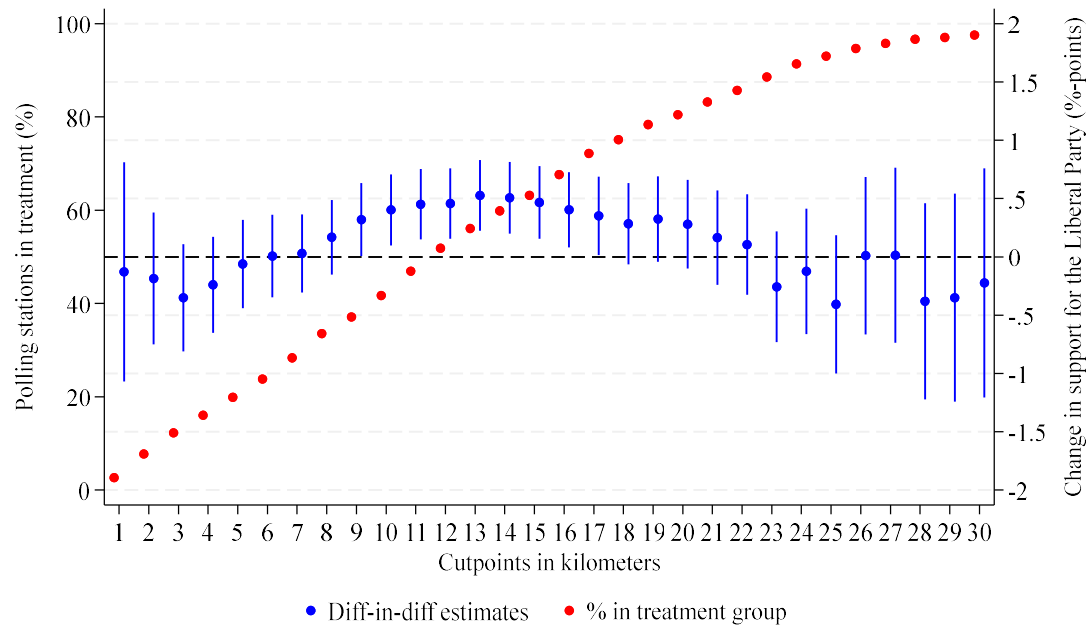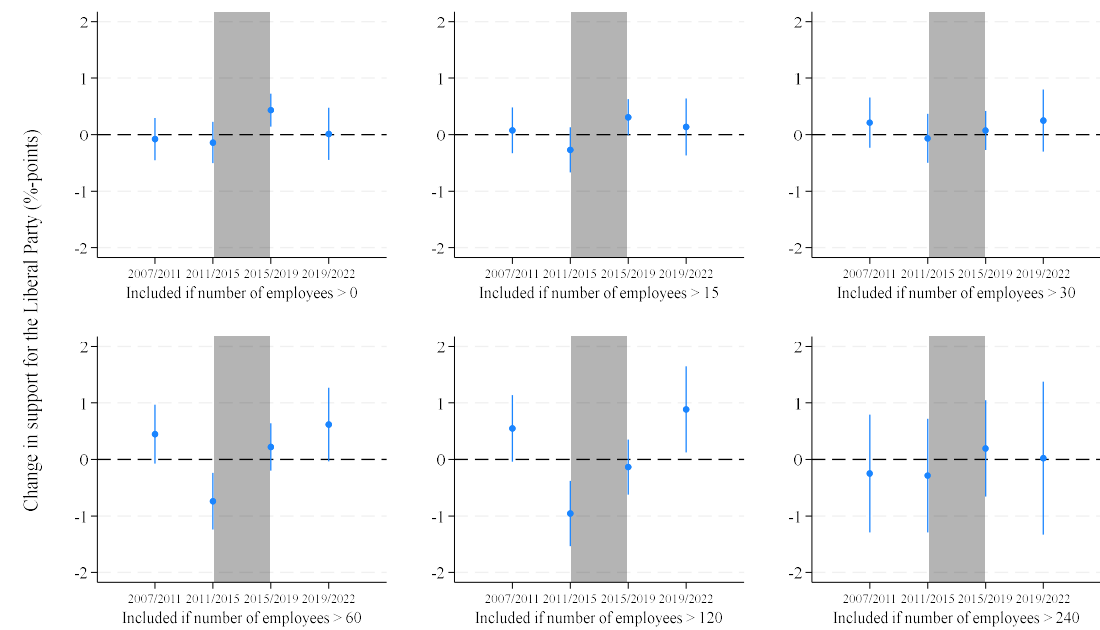
Figure A4: Including different numbers of jobs allocated

Note: Areas with allocated jobs, but under the threshold, are missing. The number of employees is calculated as number of allocated jobs with the treatment radius of 12 km.

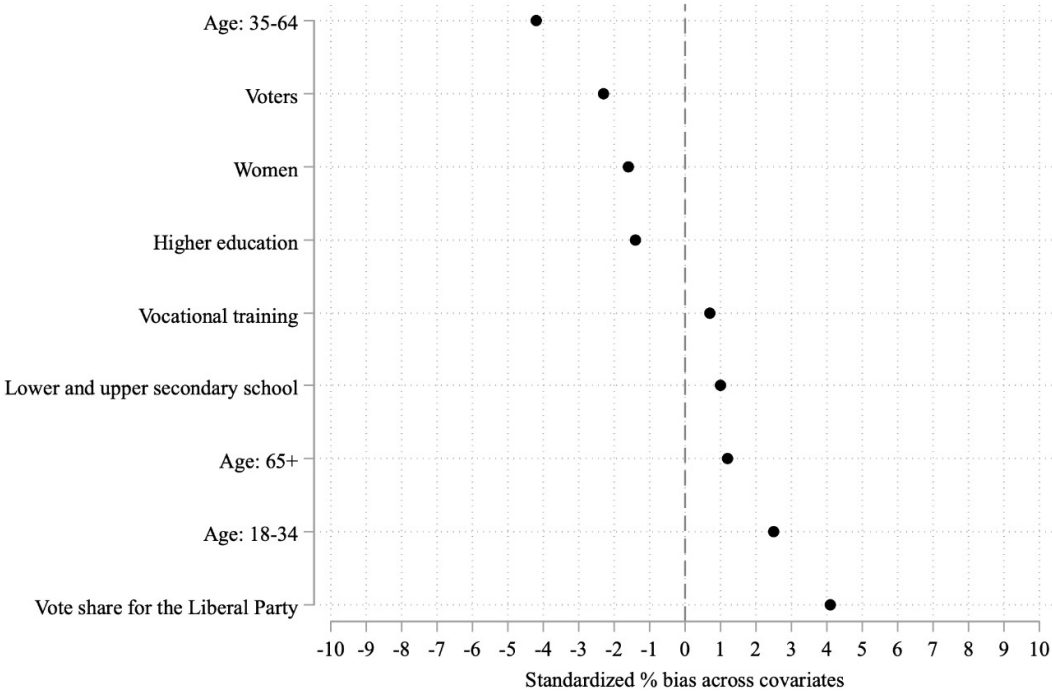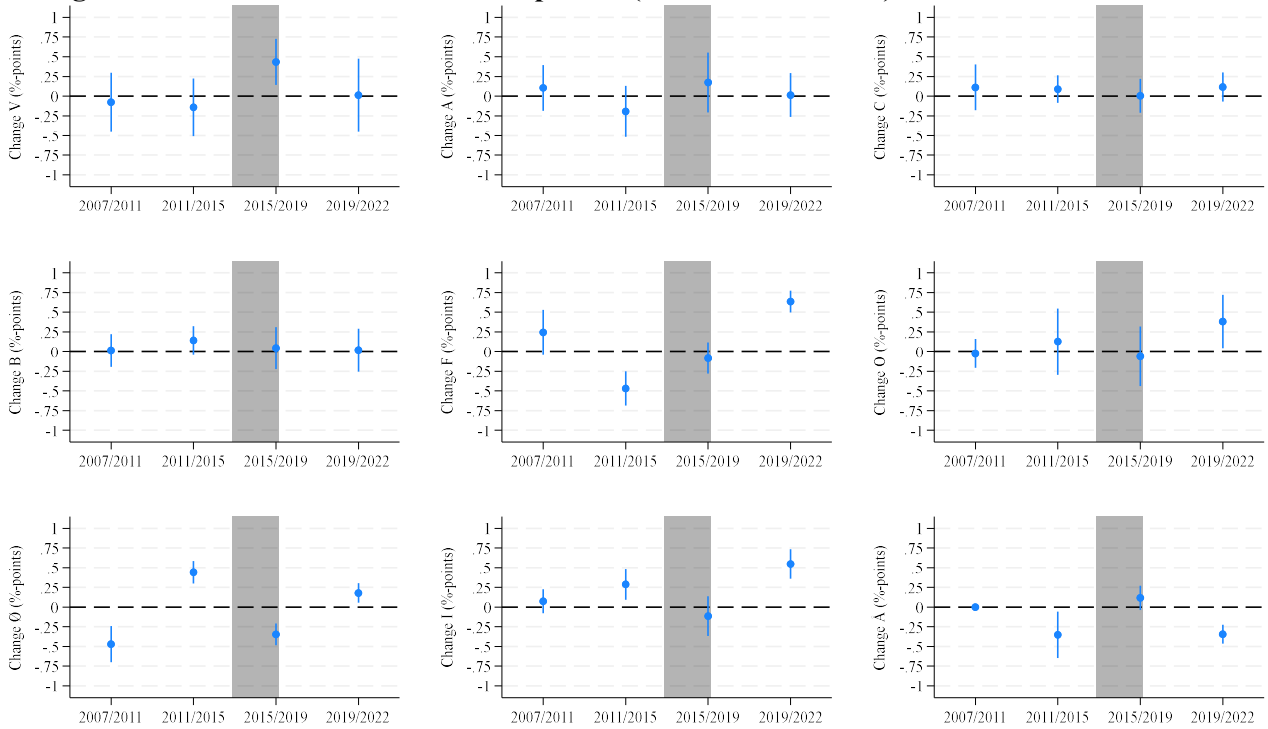**Figure A5: Balance test for propensity scores matching analysis**

Figure A6: Diff-in-Diff-estimates over parties (0-12 km vs >12 km)

Note: The parties are labeled under their running letter on the ballot. V = Liberal Party, A = Social democrats, C = Conservative, B = Social Liberal, F = Socialist Peoples' Party, O = Danish Peoples' Party, Ø = The Red-Green Alliance, I = Liberal Alliance, Å = The Alternative (set to zero in first diff-in-diff as it was established in 2013) The Red-Green Alliance experienced a significant decrease in their vote share in the treated districts. Thus, it appears that they were punished by voters in areas receiving those jobs, but as the parallel trend assumption does not hold for the Red-Green Alliance (as the diff-in-diff-estimates also are significant in the two periods before the treatment) this is too hasty a conclusion.

Table A1: Effect estimated with time trends across consecutive elections

	2007/2011	2011/2015	2015/2019	2019/2022
Average treatment effect (ATT)	-0.08	-0.14	0.43**	0.01
	(0.19)	(0.19)	(0.15)	(0.24)
Constant	-0.35*	-7.45***	4.02***	-11.67***
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.18)
Polling districts	1,384	1,384	1,384	1,384

Robust standard error in parentheses clustered at 1,384 polling districts, with fixed effect for consecutive election years and polling districts. $^+p<0.10$, $^*p<0.05$, $^{**}p<0.01$, $^{***}p<0.001$.