

Voting Patterns in Malmö's 2022 Local Election: Diversity, Language Proficiency, Trust and Belonging

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Abstract *This study maps electoral turnout in the superdiverse city of Malmö, Sweden. It examines the extent to which sociodemographic characteristics, together with sociopsychological and attitudinal factors—including language proficiency, sense of belonging to the city, and trust in others—relate to political participation in Swedish local elections. Key results indicate that turnout is higher among older voters, women, the highly educated, and Swedish citizens; that for immigrants, it varies by region of birth, and increases with years of residence. Moreover, differences in turnout by religious identification are observed, with nativity status playing a key moderating role. The results further show higher levels of trust among voters towards people of other backgrounds, while non-voters report lower social distance towards neighbours of other ethnicities and religions, implying inconsistent patterns across these two measures. Finally, voters report a stronger sense of belonging to the city and higher levels of language proficiency than non-voters.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, the southern Swedish city of Malmö has undergone a major economic and socio-demographic overhaul. Following a severe crisis in the early 1990s, the city shifted away from its traditional industrial base, pivoting towards a service- and knowledge-driven economy that continues to evolve today. Demographically, Malmö has transformed into a “majority-minority” city, where residents with foreign backgrounds—immigrants and their children—comprise more than 50 percent of the population. The city is now characterised by superdiversity, a notion that draws attention not only to a largely migrant-driven diversification in ethnicity, religion, and language, but also to the diversification of social, legal, and economic variables including differential immigration statuses, patterns of spatial distribution, and the complex ways in which these interact.¹

An important but sometimes neglected aspect of superdiversity is the challenge of ensuring that the interests of widely varying groups are incorporated

into the political system through representation. As uneven electoral turnout may produce precisely such gaps, higher electoral turnout rates and more balanced participation across different groups are expected to lead to healthier democratic governance.² Knowledge about who votes and what affects political participation is therefore crucial.

In response to this need, the present study provides insight into who voted in the 2022 Swedish municipal election in Malmö, using data from the *Malmö Diversity and Inclusion Survey*. Our analysis focuses on two dimensions: electoral turnout by sociodemographic characteristics, and the relationship between turnout and sociopsychological and attitudinal factors related to superdiversity. Specifically, we address three questions: (1) to what extent do sociodemographic factors—including religious identification and religiosity—describe differential levels of electoral turnout? (2) Do higher levels of self-assessed linguistic proficiency and sense of belonging play a role in voting behaviour? (3) How do voters’ attitudes towards people with similar and different characteristics from themselves affect their interaction with the political system?

Since 1976, all residents regardless of nationality have had the right to vote in Swedish local elections after three years of residence (and without a waiting time for Nordic and European Union (EU) citizens, since 1998). Focusing on local elections therefore allows for the inclusion of residents without citizenship in the analysis, which is particularly relevant in the case of a superdiverse city such as Malmö.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC BASES OF ELECTORAL TURNOUT

Several sociodemographic characteristics have consistently been shown to affect electoral turnout in general, including age and education.³ Research demonstrates a curvilinear relationship between age and turnout, with participation typically falling rapidly after first-time voting, rising progressively with age, and tailing off amongst the oldest generations.⁴ Higher levels of education are also associated with higher turnout.⁵ Regarding gender, studies indicate that it is generally not a significant predictor of turnout, but when it is, it tends to show slightly higher turnout among women—a finding mirrored in Sweden.⁶

Turning specifically to immigrants' electoral turnout, existing research suggests a range of explanatory factors for the differences in turnout rates, such as ethnic and cultural backgrounds; prior exposure to democracy; social bonds in the host country; experiences of discrimination; and the acquisition of citizenship in the new home country.⁷ Previous studies of electoral turnout in Sweden show that immigrants vote less than native-born citizens, and that immigrants who have acquired citizenship vote more than non-citizens. Longer residence time, language acquisition, country of origin and reason for migration also matter. Refugees vote to a larger extent than other admission groups.⁸ Political participation tends to increase with integration and across generations, but citizenship remains the most decisive factor since it gives access to national elections.

RELIGION-RELATED CHARACTERISTICS

Religion constitutes a relevant dimension in the study of electoral turnout as it may shape civic norms, community networks, identities, sense of belonging—all of which are expected to affect political participation. Thus far, however religion has received comparatively limited attention in research on electoral turnout in Sweden.⁹

In international studies, religion and religiosity have typically been measured along three dimensions, with a fourth dimension occasionally

included: (1) religious affiliation or identification, which also includes people considering religion an important part of personal identity without necessarily being a believer or a formal member; (2) religious belief, typically in something transcendent; (3) religious attendance; and (4) private religious practice. Studies have largely focused on the third dimension, with the second dimension, belief, often being accounted for implicitly. Extensive (primarily U.S.-based and Christian-centered) research has consistently pointed at a positive association between attendance and political participation among both the majority population and racial minorities.¹⁰ This is often attributed to two key mechanisms: the acquisition of political resources through religious attendance and direct political mobilisation facilitated by places of worship.¹¹ European studies show more mixed results in terms of the effects of attendance, depending on country, religious tradition, and minority status; similar heterogeneity is observed for religious identification and private religiosity.¹² The mixed effects of private religiosity, studies suggest, can be traced to different religious approaches, while prayer or scripture reading may generate prosocial and civic motivations, beliefs emphasising strict doctrine or the idea that how matters unfold are determined by God may lead individuals to feel less empowered and entitled to seek to impact social and political concerns.¹³

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE AND THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON ELECTORAL TURNOUT

In this section, attention is directed towards socio-psychological and attitudinal factors that may play a role in electoral turnout. These include language proficiency, sense of belonging and orientations towards similar and dissimilar others.

There has long been an assumption that homophily—the tendency of people to trust and seek out others with similar traits—whether based on a single trait or a combination of traits such as age, ethnicity, gender and political viewpoints, forms the basis of social networks.¹⁴ However, there

is a danger that networks based on such similarity—whilst producing ‘bonding’ social capital with strong inward-looking ties within structurally similar others—can come at the expense of ‘bridging’ social capital, or outward-looking ties across diverse groups. The latter depends on heterophily—the tendency to trust and engage with people who are different.¹⁵ Examining heterophily and homophily through measures of intergroup trust and attitudes towards neighbours allows us to explore which similarity- and difference-based social ties nevertheless persist despite assumed superdiversity—and by extension, how and if they structure political participation.

What makes a person experience a sense of belonging may involve a broad range of subjective, social, and political dimensions. Following Putnam, belonging can emerge from patterns of social relations and trust between individuals and groups. Through these networks, it is assumed that individuals develop a sense of belonging, and the trust and tolerance embedded in these relationships can generate significant social, emotional, and civic benefits.

In thinking about belonging, Yuval-Davies divides the notion of belonging into three interconnected yet separate analytical levels: social locations, capturing people’s structural positions in society, such as class, age, gender, and ethnicity; identifications and emotional attachments to groups and collectives—the subjective sense of being part of a community and feeling included; and finally, ethical and political values including how these are valued and judged.¹⁶ Arguably, a sense of belonging to a specific space, such as a city or neighborhood, depends on all these complex social, political, and emotional factors but also on emotional attachments to “place,” both in terms of an imagined community, following Anderson,¹⁷ and as a physical environment.¹⁸

While belonging is a personal feeling of being “at home” in a group or society, the politics of belonging refers to the power structures, institutions, and ideologies that regulate membership and define boundaries.¹⁹ In measuring self-reported belonging

to a city, we approach belonging as a category that might reflect this array of dimensions and dynamics in respondents’ experiences—even the imprints of the discursive boundary-setting practices that the politics of belonging is concerned with.

Language plays a role in people’s political engagement not only in terms of their degree of common identity with their neighbours, but also in more practical terms. Though Swedish municipalities often produce information material and outreach in more than one language (and English and easy-reading Swedish guides to elections are available via the Swedish electoral authority’s website, for those who can find it), speaking no or poor levels of the local language makes it more difficult for voters to inform themselves of electoral processes, procedures and rights and to talk to acquaintances and neighbors from different linguistic backgrounds.²⁰

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In our analysis we examined how the factors discussed above related to voting in the 2022 local elections, aiming to shed light on patterns of political engagement in Malmö. Table 1 shows that the demographic indicators largely mirror findings from earlier studies of electoral turnout. Older individuals and women have higher turnout than younger individuals and men, and those with higher educational attainment vote at higher rates. Turnout also varies by region of birth. Swedish-, Nordic- and American-born people exhibit higher voting participation than those born in other regions. In addition, citizens vote at substantially higher rates than non-citizens, and there is a clear increase in voting participation with longer stays in the country (see Figure 2). These results are based on register information and align with findings from other Swedish electoral research.

With regard to religion, our study shows substantial differences in terms of turnout between groups based on self-reported religious identification among the population as a whole. Christians vote two percentage points less than those reporting no religion, Muslims vote

substantially less (20 percentage points), and adherents of other religions about 14 percentage points less (Table 1). However, when separating the sample into native-born and foreign-born, this pattern changes markedly. Among the category of Swedish-born, Christians voted at a marginally higher rate than those identifying with no religion. More importantly, among the foreign-born, the turnout difference between Christians and Muslims and people identifying with “Other religion” largely disappears, with foreign-born Christians voting at marginally lower rates (67 percent), “Other religion” at (62 percent) and Muslims at 69 percent (Figure 1). The substantial gap observed in the overall population is therefore driven primarily by differences among the native-born rather than religious identification alone, with nativity moderating the relationship between religious identification and turnout.

Our data also demonstrate that religious identification for a substantial share of people is disconnected from religiosity in terms of belief. In each group, roughly 40 percent of Christians, 70 percent of Muslims, and a smaller share of people identifying with “Other religion”, consider themselves to be believers, showing that religious identification in many cases reflects nominal affiliation (identifying with religion by name) rather than belief. Regarding the relationship between believers and voting, our analysis reveals that people identifying as believers vote 11 percentage points less than those who do not. Even after adding controls, identifying as a believer independently remains significantly negatively associated with turnout.

Table 1: Voter turnout in selected demographic and social categories

Categories (register)	Voting participation
Age 21–29	83
Age 30–39	83
Age 40–65	89
Age 66+	90
Males	85
Females	87
Primary schooling or less education	73
Secondary education	82
University education	90
Born in Sweden	93
Born in another Nordic country	74
Born in EU country (non-Nordic)	66
Born in another European country (non-Nordic and EU)	67
Born in Africa	61
Born in Asia	70
Born in Americas	81
Non-citizen	47
Citizen	89
Self-identified categories	
No religious affiliation	90
Christian	88
Muslim	70
Other religious affiliation	76
Not Believing	89
Believing	78
Only speaking Swedish at home	94
Only speaking English at home	64
Only speaking Arabic at home	73
Speaking Swedish and other language at home	78
Speaking other languages at home	64

Turnout also varies by home language environment. Voting participation is highest among respondents who speak only Swedish at home, lower among those from mixed-language households (another language and Swedish), and lowest among those who only speak other languages than Swedish. In terms of language proficiency, stronger Swedish language skills are observed among voters than among non-voters (Table 2). Table 2 also shows the (not unexpected) result that voters indicated a stronger sense of belonging to the city than non-voters.

Figure 1: Voter turnout by religious identification and native/foreign-born status

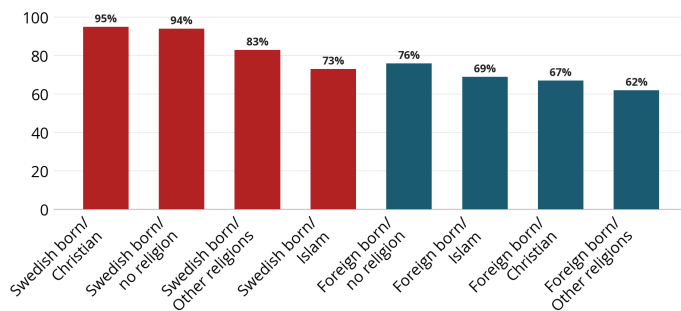
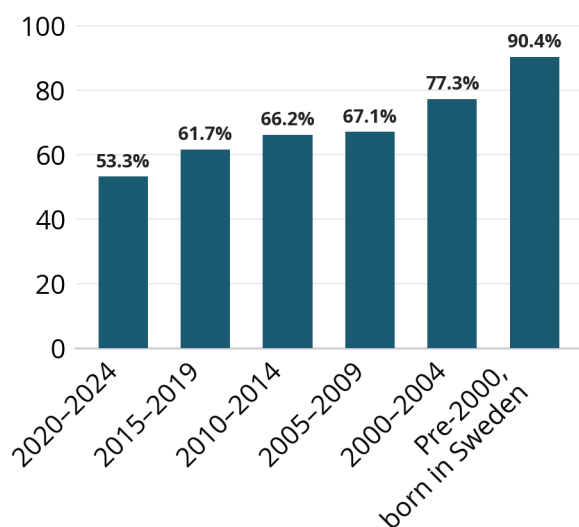


Figure 2: Voter turnout by year of arrival



Our analysis furthermore examined how living in a superdiverse city such as Malmö affected people's tolerance towards having neighbours with different characteristics from themselves, and whether, in turn, that made a difference to voting behaviour. We used questions from the Malmö Diversity and Inclusion Survey that focused on the extent to which people trust others with different language, different religion or different ethnicity. Similarly, we examined responses to questions about how voters would feel about having a neighbour of different ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or gender. The results for these attitudinal factors are depicted in Table 2 and show that higher levels of trust in others with a different ethnicity, language, or religion are seen among voters than among non-voters. Finally, the indicator measuring attitudes towards other groups in the respondent's neighbourhood suggests that voters tend to report slightly more

negative attitudes and thus stronger social distance towards other ethnicities and religions than non-voters. For social distance regarding sexuality and gender, the pattern is reversed: voters report slightly more positive attitudes, i.e. lower social distance towards these groups, than non-voters, reflecting greater openness to these diversity markers.

Table 2: Language, belonging, heterophily and homophily (scaled 1-5)

	Not voted	Voted
Swedish proficiency (index)	4.202	4.803
Speaking Swedish	4.198	4.808
Reading Swedish	4.335	4.848
Writing Swedish	4.061	4.749
Belonging city (index)	3.407	3.703
Neighbourhood	3.337	3.660
City district	3.201	3.624
City	3.605	3.879
Trust in others (index)	3.136	3.259
Other language	3.093	3.285
Other religion	3.143	3.205
Other ethnicity	3.164	3.284
Attitude towards neighbours of (index)	3.885	3.915
Other Ethnicity	4.000	3.886
Other Religion	3.947	3.818
Other Sexual orientation	3.882	4.084
Other Gender orientation	3.830	3.932

DISCUSSION

The sociodemographic results, based on both register and survey data, generally align with patterns identified in previous Swedish research. More substantive insights emerge from the survey-based indicators related to religious identification, religion, language proficiency, belonging to the city and trust and social attitudes.

Turning to religion and turnout, the results may reflect several mechanisms. Turnout differences among native-born individuals likely reflect patterns of social integration and community mobilisation, whereas shared barriers and selective migration patterns reduce variation by religious identification

among the foreign-born, making foreign-born status a stronger predictor of turnout than religious identification. Turning to the dimension of belief, it may be that some believers hold introverted or highly doctrinal forms of faith, or embrace ideas such as divine predetermination, which can reduce the perceived efficacy or necessity of civic participation; they may feel socially or politically marginalised, particularly in minority religious communities; or self-identification as a believer could correlate with less exposure to social networks and mobilisation channels that typically encourage voting. For future studies, the inclusion of measures of religious practice, intensity, and attendance would allow us to disentangle the effects of private versus socially engaged religiosity on voting. Separating believers into attenders and non-attenders could reveal whether the negative association is driven mainly by those practicing privately, or by religious attendance, or if it persists across both groups, providing a clearer picture of how different forms of religious identification shape political engagement.

Regarding heterophily and homophily, the results show mixed findings: there are higher levels of trust of people with other linguistic, religious or ethnic backgrounds amongst those who voted, while non-voters report lower social distance towards neighbours of other ethnicities and religions, but slightly less positive attitudes towards having neighbours with other sexual or gender orientations. Future studies need to try to disentangle the inverse patterns.

Reconnecting with the results on belonging, while non-voters report lower levels, which may suggest feelings of exclusion from the broader social and political community, future research needs to address what determines the sense of belonging and, in turn, its relation to political participation.

As for the role of Swedish language, turnout is higher among individuals with greater exposure to Swedish in the home environment, and Swedish proficiency is positively associated with voting. These findings may be partly explained by a greater ability to follow political news and political debates

in the media. Moreover, it is plausible that Swedish proficiency affects the sense of belonging in the city, which in turn is also positively associated with voting and may mediate turnout. However, given the complexity of social networks and identities in superdiverse cities, future research could examine whether proficiency in the majority language is crucial for bridging social networks, or whether multilingual connections can facilitate cross-group interactions independently of the majority language. An important direction for future studies is to consider the indicators above simultaneously to better understand what is more important for electoral turnout and the possible different causal pathways within the context of superdiversity.

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This article is accompanied by an [illustration](#) that conveys its main message. The illustration was created by Idun Lindblad, BA student in Visual Communication at Malmö University, in collaboration with the authors.

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APPENDIX

In all cases, the original survey questions (which had different scale directions) were recoded to create 5-point ascending scales, with 'no opinion' treated as the midpoint of the scale. The mean scores for voters and non-voters are indicated in table 2, together with index scores as detailed below.

Swedish proficiency scale is based on the mean of three questions indicating on scale 1-5 speaking, reading and writing abilities (with 5 as the highest score) Respondents who gave 'No answer' are excluded from the sample.

Belonging to city scale is based on the mean of three questions indicating on scale 1-5 if people feel they belong to neighborhood, city-district and city as a whole [*Vilken tillhörighet känner du till... ditt bostadsområde?/... din stadsdel?... staden du bor i?*], with 5 indicating the highest sense of belonging.

Trust in others scale is based on the mean of three questions indicating on scale 1-5 if people trust others with different language, different religion and different ethnicity [*Hur mycket litar du på följande grupper av personer? Personer som pratar ett annat språk än du/Personer med en annan religion än din/Personer med annan etnisk eller kulturell bakgrund än din*]

View of neighbours scale is based on the mean of three questions indicating on scale 1-5 how people would feel if they had neighbours with different language, religion, or ethnicity [*Vad skulle du tycka om att ha någon från följande grupper som din granne? En person som har en annan religion än din/En person med en annan etnisk- eller kulturell bakgrund än din/ En person med annan sexuell läggning/En person med annan könsidentitet*]. In all cases, 5 indicates the most positive view.

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