

# Politics in My Backyard:

## People's Reactions to Changes in Local Political Priorities



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**Politics in My Backyard:**  
People's Reactions to Changes in  
Local Political Priorities

PhD Dissertation

Politica

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ISBN: 978-87-7335-301-1

Cover: Svend Siune

Print: Fællestrykkeriet, Aarhus University

Layout: Annette Bruun Andersen

Submitted August 31, 2022

The public defense takes place November 18, 2022

Published November 2022

Forlaget Politica

c/o Department of Political Science

Aarhus BSS, Aarhus University

Bartholins Allé 7

DK-8000 Aarhus C

Denmark

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# Acknowledgements

Over the past three years, I have had the privilege to write the PhD dissertation you are holding. I have been allowed to delve into a subject I care about, where I have called the shots, and could make my own mistakes. Any errors you may find in this final product are thus also mine. That said, I have been so fortunate to share this endeavor with colleagues, friends, and family who have encouraged and challenged me along the way. That has greatly improved this final product and made the journey much more enjoyable. For that, I am sincerely grateful.

First of all, I would like to thank my brilliant supervisors Kim Man-nemar Sønderskov and Søren Serritzlew. You have been a fantastic team to work with. When I needed advice, academic or otherwise, you were there. At times, I have felt a little dizzy when I left our meetings, as your advice comes fast and precise but it is always helpful. When I doubted myself, you were ready with encouragements. I am happy that I can continue on a project with Kim.

Beyond my supervisors, I have probably pestered my office mates the most. Thanks for answering my many peculiar inquiries. Matilde, it is always fun to experience the speed with which you can shift between deep sarcasm and genuine interest and fascination with a subject. I think your ability to keep calm has made sure I never felt stressed during the process. Thanks for telling me to go home and take it easy the day I started. Eduardo, your optimistic perspective has made it a joy to share your company over the last half year. Sometimes it feels like you have more confidence in my project than I do.

When I moved to Aarhus to start the project, I knew my limited social network in the city would be a challenge. However, it is so much easier to settle in when you get to share your daily life with such fun and inspiring people as I have found in the PhD group. I share many good memories with Anders Barslund Grøn, Andreas Videbæk Jensen, Ane Edslev Jacobsen, Anna Christine Hjuler Dorf, Anne Kirstine Rønn, Amalie Trangebæk, Ashraf Rachid, Aske Halling, Aske Horneman Kragh Cryer, Clara Siboni Lund, Danielle May, Daniel Møller Eriksen, Emily Rose Tangsgaard, Ida Braad Albek, Ida Nørregaard Nielsen, Jake Lehrle-Fry, Jannik Fenger, Jens Jørund Tyssedal, Jesper Rasmussen, Karl Magnus Møller,

Karoline Larsen Kolstad, Kristian Vrede Skaaning Frederiksen, Laurits Florang Aarslew, Lasse Egendal Leipziger, Lea Pradella, Liv Frank, Mads Pieter van Luttervelt, Mathias Bukh Vestergaard, Mathias Kruse, Mathias Rask Jeppesen, Mathias Rask Østergaard-Nielsen, Mathilde Albertsen Winsløw, Matias Engdal Christensen, Nanna Vestergaard Ahrensberg, Nikolaj K. Andersen, Rasmus Jensen Schjødt, Rikke Overvad Kolding, Sarah Yde Junge, Simone Sommer Degn, Steffen Selmer Andersen, Tobias Risse, Valentin Daur, William Burchardt Egendal and the rest of you whom I have undoubtedly missed. Whether it is small everyday things such as coffee breaks or walks around the lake, or the longer trips with smoked beer in dark halls in Bamberg, you have made me feel at home.

A special thanks should also go to the section on Political Behaviour and Institutions. Thanks for reading my work and giving thorough comments. It has been inspiring to be a part of a group that does such amazing work. I look forward to continuing to be a part of the community and hopefully giving a little more back.

I would also like to thank Daniel Hopkins at the University of Pennsylvania. Hosting me in Philadelphia in the Autumn of 2021 at a time when travel restrictions, mask mandates, and daily symptom surveys still were in place was a challenge. However, you made me feel welcome and a part of the department. I am immensely grateful for your generous comments and for putting your contacts at my disposal. You made the stay more than worthwhile.

Thanks to Frederik Hjorth at the University of Copenhagen for listening to my initial attempts to formulate a project, providing helpful feedback, and encouraging me to apply. Being new to academia, such encouragement goes a long way.

A thank should also go to the department's incredible administrative staff. Thanks to Ruth for making sure I never had to give much thought to finances, thanks to Annette and the rest of the language revision team for making sure that my clumsy sentences make sense, and thanks to the rest of you for always making administrative tasks as easy as you do. You are truly great to have as colleagues.

Thanks to my friends back in Copenhagen. To Tyge, Sabi, David, Line, Simon, Marlene, Johan, Anna, and Jacob. While you may doubt the prudence of moving to Aarhus, coming back and visiting you has always been great. I hope you will someday see the light and follow suit.

Finally thanks to my family. Thanks to Troels, Inge, and Ida for taking my mind off my project and letting me enjoy my Tuesday evenings in your company. Thanks to Kirstine, Albert, and Solveig. Your company



never fails to bring me laughter. And to my mum and dad for listening to my long escapades and trying to understand what their son has gotten himself into. I never question your support no matter how obscure my interests may become.

Niels Nyholt  
Aarhus, August 2022



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Changes in local political priorities constitute some of the most prominent experiences people have with political decisions. Closure of schools and hospitals or cutbacks in funding for other local services are often met with strong public reactions such as increased political mobilization, demonstrations, and, at times, threats towards elected politicians (Ebbesen 1998; Tob 2009; Nuamah and Ogorzalek 2021; Aldrich 2008). When things go well, and new public institutions are opened, politicians and other notables may swing by the local area at ribbon-cutting ceremonies and claim some of the splendor (Central Denmark Region 2022). Politicians are quick to make local appeals and promote their own local credentials. By providing local electorates with services that satisfy their day-to-day demands, politicians hope to gain the favor of local electorates (Stratmann 2013; Klingensmith 2019).

In addition, recent qualitative studies of public opinion formation in peripheral regions have shown that residents' place-based identities are inherent to how they make sense of politics (Cramer 2016; Cramer Walsh 2012). People rely on their identity as residents of a particular place to understand who has access to power, who gets their fair share of resources, and how different values and lifestyles are valued in society.

However, it is a demanding process to incorporate local information into one's opinion formation. If changes in local political priorities are to influence political behavior, people first have to receive the relevant information. If they are not mindful of their local context, there is little reason to expect them to respond to it (Newman et al. 2015; Baybeck and McClurg 2005). Even though people may think that they follow changes in local political priorities, previous studies have suggested that people are not that attentive to their local context (Hopkins 2010) and, for example, misconceive local unemployment levels, the ethnic and racial composition, and the partisan leaning of their neighborhoods (Wong 2007; Wong et al. 2012).

However, even if people are attentive to changes in local political priorities, they still need to link their local experiences with their political

behavior. What political conclusions do people draw from their local experiences? According to a long-standing argument, political behavior is becoming increasingly nationalized (Stokes 1967; Katz 1973; Claggett, Flanigan, and Zingale 1984; Vertz, Frendreis, and Gibson 1987; Bartels 1998; Caramani 2004; Hopkins 2018), i.e. people direct less attention towards local politics and use similar (national) criteria to pick political candidates across electoral contests (Hopkins 2018, 34). Hopkins (2018) argues that as parties present more homogeneous entities across electoral districts, and as media attention has shifted towards national events, people disregard their local context and select local candidates based on their national affiliation and national media frames. People may thus rely on information from national media rather than their own local experiences.

This discrepancy is at the core of this dissertation. On the one hand, people seem to rely heavily on their local identities when interpreting politics, and local appeals and changes in local political priorities seem to be some of the most prominent experiences people have with politics. Meanwhile, the literature suggests that there are considerable hurdles for voters to link their local experiences to political behavior. To reconcile these disparate observations, I study whether citizens adjust their political behavior when they face changes in local political priorities. The guiding research question of this dissertation has thus been:

- **Do people’s experiences with changes in local political priorities and appeals affect their political behavior?**

Following Dalton and Klingemann (2007), I understand *political behavior* to encompass ordinary citizens’ political attitudes and behaviors. Responses to changes in local political priorities can manifest in many different ways. Understanding how people’s political behavior is affected by changes in local political priorities is important for at least two reasons.

First, local political priorities hold the potential to establish a link between residents’ local experiences and elected politicians’ decisions. For residents, they constitute a prime opportunity to evaluate incumbents’ performance based on their actual behavior in office. Studying the effects of local political priorities on people’s political behavior thus allows me to establish the extent to which residents hold politicians accountable for their behavior in office. I therefore focus on the effect of changes in local political priorities on residents’ trust in politicians and support for incumbent politicians.

Second, following the rise of right-wing populist movements across many western democracies, scholars have highlighted how these move-

ments have been particularly successful in local communities that have gone through a prolonged downturn (Kriesi et al. 2006; Hartevelt et al. 2021; Hansen and Stubager 2017a). Residents of rural or deindustrializing areas have increasingly turned to right-wing populist movements as they have seen local economic foundations crumble and as their values and lifestyles have been challenged (Colantone and Stanig 2018b; Gidron and Hall 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Changing political priorities could be one way to alleviate some of this hardship (Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, and Bowler 2019; Colantone and Stanig 2018b; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Therefore, I also focus on the effects of changes in local political priorities on residents' support for right-wing populist parties, populist attitudes, and place-based resentment.

I understand *changes in local political priorities* as decisions with geographically bounded effects made by political bodies. How changes in local political priorities affect citizens thus depends on people's own spatial location. An example is the closure in 2011 and the planned reopening in 2022 of a hospital in Nakskov, Denmark. Nakskov is a medium-sized town at the western end of the island of Lolland. As part of a national strategy by the Danish government to create new "super hospitals," the regional government decided on a new hospital structure in march 2010 (Region Zealand 2010). The plan changed the spatial distribution of resources in the region and made way for the new super hospital in Køge in the east. As part of the plan, four small hospitals, including the hospital in Nakskov, were closed and transformed into health centers. Since then, political priorities have changed, and in May 2022, most parties in parliament agreed on a reform of the health-care system. As part of the plan, the government proposed to establish 25 new so-called "local hospitals"<sup>1</sup>. While these new entities do not have beds for hospitalization, they are supposed to constitute a forward post for the remaining hospitals capable of conducting some outpatient procedures (The Danish Government 2022).

Changes in local political priorities such as this obviously affect the residents' material interests. On the one hand, the closure affects the accessibility of public services available to residents in the local area. After the closure, the nearest hospital for residents of western Lolland was 55 km (about 34 miles) away on the neighboring island of Falster. Health care thus became less accessible in the local area. However, once residents of western Lolland got to the hospital, they were met by more specialized personnel. At least that was the argument for closing the hospital in Nakskov. By gathering health services at fewer locations, doctors and

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<sup>1</sup>"Nærhospitaler", translated by the author.

nurses could specialize and thereby improve the quality of health care (Region Zealand 2010). I return to this point in the conclusion.

Changes in local political priorities also affect the broader local economy. When politicians decide on something, they need someone to implement their decisions. Therefore, political priorities are usually associated with jobs. To local economies, such public jobs can constitute a stable base that is less sensitive to fluctuations in the broader economy (Wuthnow 2018, 34). In addition, as public employees settle in a local area, they improve the prospects for local businesses by spending some of their wages on their wares. This creates a virtuous cycle, as more people settle in an area as it becomes more attractive. Local cutbacks, on the other hand, diminish the pool of available jobs and thus the future prospects in a local area.

However, theories that emphasize material gains do not capture all potential consequences of these policies. Even when changes in local political priorities do not affect residents directly, they still signal how politicians in power evaluate the relative importance of the local area. Changes in local political priorities can have a substantial symbolic meaning to residents of the local area. The hospital in Nakskov was built in 1912 and employed more than 460 people in its heyday (Gade 2010). Besides servicing the citizens, the hospital marked the prestige of the town as a prominent industrial center. Locally it could thus be regarded as a symbol of the town's glory days. With the closure of the hospital, those days are definitively in the past.

Changing the geographical distribution of public resources is a commonly used policy tool. Initiatives such as localized responses to natural disasters (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011), closure of welfare institutions (Lindbom 2014; Nuamah and Ogorzalek 2021), placement of institutions with adverse local effects such as wind turbines, nuclear power plants, dams, or airports (Stokes 2016; Aldrich 2008), and spatial variation in austerity shocks (Fetzer 2019) are all examples of changes in local political priorities. In Denmark, the empirical setting of this dissertation, the geographic distribution of public resources has been altered extensively by consecutive waves of policy initiatives over the preceding decades. The first wave consisted of a range of public sector reforms that took effect around 2007. At the center of these reforms was a reorganization of local government, which replaced the 13 counties with five regional governments and reduced the total number of municipalities from 271 to 98. The wave also included the aforementioned strategy of building "super hospitals" as well as reforms of the police and judicial system (The Danish Government 2004; The Danish Government and Danish Regions

2008). A central motivation was to create professionally and economically sustainable entities (Strukturkommissionen 2004). Gathering public institutions at fewer locations was supposed to improve the quality of public services by enabling professional development and reduce costs by enabling economies of scale (354). These benefits have to some extent been validated by later studies (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2014; Blom-Hansen et al. 2016).

The second wave of changes in local political priorities began in 2015 and has shifted public resources from the major cities (especially Copenhagen) toward rural areas and provincial towns. These initiatives include the relocation of administrative jobs from a range of public agencies, a new equalization system between municipalities, new education places at localities spread across the country, and the new local hospitals (The Danish Government 2015, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022). These initiatives have been motivated by a desire to create a Denmark "in better balance" as one government put it (The Danish Government 2018, 3). By prioritizing development in rural and peripheral areas, shifting governments have aimed to decrease regional disparities and foster a more coherent society. This is not a uniquely Danish phenomenon; similar efforts to prioritize the development of rural and declining communities also can be found in the UK (UK Government 2022), Italy (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale 2021), and the US (The White House 2022).

## 1.1 Outline of the dissertation

This dissertation consists of the present summary as well as three single-authored articles. The summary can be read independently and presents the dissertation's overall argument. As such, there will be some overlap between the summary and the three original articles. I use the shorthand, Paper A, Paper B, and Paper C to refer to the articles throughout the summary. I present the full article names and their publication status at the time of writing in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: The three articles of the dissertation

Paper	Title	Status
A	Why Do Voters Prefer Local Candidates? Evidence from Danish Conjoint Survey Experiment	<i>Invited to revise and resubmit Political Behavior</i>
B	Left Behind: Voter's Reactions to Policies with Adverse Local Effects	<i>Under review</i>
C	Getting Your Fair Share: People's Reaction To Changes In Local Political Priorities	<i>Working paper</i>

In Paper A, I delve into the mechanism that motivates voters to respond to local appeals. Voters' preference for candidates who live close by has often been referred to as "friends-and-neighbors" voting (Key 1949; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1983). However, it extends beyond political candidates' close acquaintances, which gives rise to the question: Why do voters prefer local candidates? To disentangle the appeal of political candidates who live in people's local areas, I conducted a conjoint experiment in which I presented respondents with political candidates who are described with different local appeals. Some are described as spending most of their time trying to improve local conditions (behavioral localism); others are described as conforming to local social norms (symbolic localism). As the cues are randomly attributed, I can unpack the implicit assumptions voters make about candidates from their local area that make these candidates so universally appealing. Do voters privilege local candidates because of in-group favoritism or because they expect them to procure tangible benefits for their local area?

In Paper B and C, I explore how changes in different types of local political priorities affect different aspects of citizens' political behavior.

In Paper B, I utilize data on 315 school closures and 30 hospital closures in Denmark from 2005-2019 to estimate the electoral consequences of policies with adverse local effects. These discrete events enable me to study whether voters can navigate the multiple levels of government. Can voters attribute blame for policies with adverse local effects to the appropriate governmental level and hold the incumbents directly accountable?

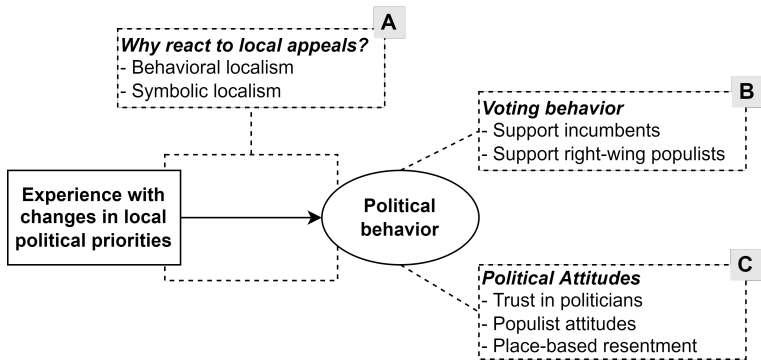


Furthermore, I test whether right-wing populist parties can take advantage of the closures and mobilize dissatisfied voters.

Finally, Paper C tests the attitudinal effects of changes in local political priorities. By relying on data from the highly granular and accurate Danish registries, I can measure the objective changes in public expenditures on public employees in people's local areas. This enables me to test whether changes in local expenditures on public employees affect residents' trust in politicians, populist attitudes, or place-based resentment. Further tests allow me focus on the extent to which changes in expenditures on public employees in people's local areas track residents' subjective perceptions.

Figure 1.1 gives an overview of the overall project and how the three articles fit together. At the center of the project is the identification of the effect of changes in local political priorities on residents' political behavior. That includes the effect on both voting behavior (Paper B) and political attitudes (Paper C). This is complemented by the findings from Paper A, which unpack the underlying mechanism and explain why voters respond to local appeals. The present summary outlines this argu-

Figure 1.1: Project overview



ment. I describe the theoretical argument of the dissertation, in Chapter 2. Building on theories of context effects, local appeals, and support for right-wing populist parties, I hypothesize that changes in local political priorities are positively associated with support for incumbent politicians and inversely related to support for populist messages.

In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I lay out the empirical approach foundation of the three papers. I discuss the methodological challenges of working with a "treatment" that is inherently politicized. Changes in local political priorities rarely occur at random but are the result of an elaborate

political process. This introduces selection issues, which complicates the identification of people's response to changes in local political priorities. I go on to discuss how the designs of the papers handle this challenge in different ways and complement each other. In Chapter 4, I provide details on how I have used geographic information from administrative registries to track the spatial impact of changes in political priorities and link it to various data on people's political behavior.

I summarize the main findings of the dissertation in Chapter 5 where I draw on the independent analysis from each paper to explain why voters respond to local appeals and the extent to which residents' support for incumbents or the appeal of populist messages is affected by changes in local political priorities.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the empirical findings across the three papers and discusses the implications for the prospects of local accountability and the appeal of populist messages in declining communities. Furthermore, I reflect on the prospects for generalizing the findings of the dissertation to a broader context, and I point to potential research avenues, including the potential for compositional effects on local populations of changes in local political priorities.

## Chapter 2

### Theory

In this chapter, I outline and synthesize the theoretical argument of the three papers of the dissertation. By drawing on insights from the literature on context effects, I theorize how people's experiences with local appeals and changes in local political priorities affect their political behavior. The chapter is organized around two central conditions for local contexts to affect residents' political behavior. People's political behavior can be affected by aspects of their local context if a) residents are aware of that specific aspect of their local area, and b) residents link that aspect of their local area with electoral politics.

In the first part of the chapter, I thus draw on the main theoretical arguments in the literature on context effects and review how people's local areas both shape the availability of information, structure experiences and intertwine with people's material interests and group identities. I also present some of the main reasons voters may respond to local appeals. In the second part of the chapter, I draw on theories on the support for incumbents and right-wing populist parties to theorize how people may link their experiences with changes in local political priorities to politics.

### 2.1 How do local contexts affect political behavior?

The study of contextual influences on people's political behavior can at least be traced back to Key's (1949) *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. Here Key presents findings of racial threat, as turnout among white southerners is highest in the counties with the largest African American population. This finding has since been replicated in quasi-experimental setups (Enos 2016). While most studies in this tradition have focused on demographic aspects of people's surroundings such as the ethnic or racial composition of neighborhoods (see eg. Oliver and Wong 2003; Hopkins 2010; Cho and Baer 2011; Enos 2014; Dinesen and Sønderskov

2015; Enos 2017), other studies have focused on disparate aspects from local weather (Egan and Mullin 2012) to offshoring of local businesses (Rickard 2022). Common for these studies is that they link people's political behavior to some aspect of their immediate surroundings. While focusing on different aspects of people's local surroundings, this line of research argues, at least implicitly, that people's geographical location is important to their political behavior. So the question is: How does the local context affect people's political attitudes?

### 2.1.1 Local contexts structure available information

The first mechanism highlighted in the literature is that people's place of residence influences what information is available to them (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987, 1995; Baybeck and McClurg 2005). On the one hand, people may make their own casual observations of their local surroundings (Baybeck and McClurg 2005). That is you may find that certain areas are more ethnically diverse than others, or you may notice the long grass on the unkempt lawns by the closed school. On the other hand, people get information about their local area from local acquaintances through social interactions (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1987). The neighbor may tell you about an incident at the grocery store with some young troublemakers, or when you turn up to the local sports match, your acquaintances tell you that they have lost their jobs due to a slowdown in the construction industry. While people have some discretion regarding who they talk to, their place of residence structures their possibilities. Their neighbors, coworkers, and acquaintances from the sports club all live within a reasonable range. While the rise of information technology has limited the extent to which distances constrain the available information (Cairncross 1998), people still go about their daily lives in specific geographic communities, which both limits and enables certain interactions (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995).

In most studies of contextual effects, it is assumed that residents obtain information about the studied aspect of their local area. They receive "the treatment" as Newman et al. (2015) put it. While the local context can influence their health without people necessarily noticing it<sup>1</sup>, it is harder to conceive of a mechanism whereby the local context should influence people's political attitudes without them being aware of that aspect of their local surroundings (Newman et al. 2015; Baybeck and McClurg 2005).

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. through air pollution (Wong et al. 2012, 1154)

However, people are not necessarily that knowledgeable about their local surroundings. Some studies show that people have a hard time correctly estimating the racial and ethnic composition, local unemployment, and the partisan leaning of their local area (Wong 2007; Wong et al. 2012). Other studies show that residents are reasonably knowledgeable about ethnic diversity and unemployment (Newman et al. 2015; Baybeck and McClurg 2005). For example, Danes have been found to be reasonably knowledgeable about the former (Hjorth 2020, 16). Furthermore, people's subjective perceptions of their local surroundings are important mediators of the effect of objective circumstances on residents' political attitudes (Newman et al. 2015).

Following these arguments, I theorize in Paper B and Paper C that residents in a local area will notice changes in local political priorities, either through their own casual observations, social interactions with their local acquaintances, or local media coverage (Moskowitz 2021). Decisions by electoral bodies, such as municipal councils, to close or open public institutions are covered extensively in local media. Furthermore, it is often a point of conversation in the local area, as some residents are users of the institution. Finally, when the institution finally is closed or opened, the buildings are a constant reminder of the decision to change local expenditures.

### 2.1.2 Local contexts anchor residents' interpretations

A second mechanism, which has been less developed in the literature on context effects, is that people's local context may anchor residents' interpretations of the information that is available to them. As argued by Zaller (1992, 6), "Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it". The first mechanism through which people's local context may influence their political behavior relates to the first part of this "marriage", i.e. the available information. The second mechanism I develop across the three papers of the dissertation deals with the second part. Living in specific areas can anchor people's interests and identities and thus how they interpret commonly available information.

People's material interests are intertwined with the well-being of their local area. This is most evident for homeowners, who have invested heavily in the continued prosperity of their local area. Previous studies have shown that people are more politically engaged when they own property in a local area (Hall and Yoder 2022; Fischel 2001). However, even people who do not own their own house benefit from the continued improve-

ment of their local area. That also means that voters can be expected to act in relation to their local area per rational theories of electoral choice, according to which voters act in self-interest and seek political candidates who maximize their well-being (see eg. Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Downs 1957).

Following this perspective, voters will view political candidates favorably if they prioritize their local area, as it implicitly improves their well-being. Political candidates can make local appeals to such a locally oriented self-interest by signaling their *behavioral localism*, which can be defined as "the extent to which the politician acts in line with the interests and wishes of the voters themselves and others in their locality" (Campbell et al. 2019, 938). By signaling that they will work to improve local conditions, they implicitly signal that they will work for the voters' interests.

Likewise, people's social identities may be intertwined with their local area. A social identity can be conceived as "those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 40). One category is place of residence (Cuba and Hummon 1993; Wong 2010). As people reside in an area, they come to feel that being from a particular place is an important part of who they are. Social identities, such as partisanship, are important to people's political behavior (Achen and Bartels 2016). However, even less politically salient identities have been shown to promote psychological tendencies to favor members of people's own in-group and disadvantage members of out-groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 38).

In addition to appealing to voters' material interests by professing their commitment to bettering local conditions, political candidates can appeal to residents' place-based identities. To do so, they do not necessarily have to procure actual benefits for their local area but can rely on residents' in-group favoritism by signaling their own attachment to the area (Collignon and Sajuria 2018; Schulte-Cloos and Bauer 2021). In Paper A, I label such signals the candidates' *symbolic localism*, which I define as the extent to which a politician conforms to norms and values of the voters and others in their locality. Signaling attachment to a local area to your constituents is a well-known strategy that resembles Fenno's (1978) description of parliamentarians' "home styles". Fenno describes how candidates dress, speak, eat, and act in certain ways that conform to local norms to get their constituents to view them as part of the local in-group.

While voters may identify with their local area, group identities may become so important to people's way of understanding politics that they rise to the level of group consciousness (Miller et al. 1981), i.e. a group identity that has been infused with a sense of distributive injustice (Cramer 2016, 12). It is thus not only identification with a group but also an awareness of the group's position in society and a commitment to bettering the group's position (Miller et al. 1981, 495). A prominent example is "rural consciousness" as described in Cramer's seminal study of rural residents of Wisconsin, United States (Cramer 2016). This perspective on politics is based on identifying with a particular place.

Cramer identifies three elements in rural consciousness. The first element relates to residents' perception of the distribution of resources (76). Residents feel that their local area is being skipped over, and that they are working hard without any prospects of bettering their position. The second element revolves around the residents' perception of a cultural divide in values between cities and rural areas (12). People have fundamentally different lifestyles and values, and they perceive city-dwellers to be lazy and impervious to common sense. Finally, the third element concerns residents' perception of their access to power and influence (65). Again, they feel that their concerns and worries are being ignored by decision-makers. This can partly be thought of as a low level of political efficacy.

In this dissertation, I primarily use the term "place-based resentment" instead of "rural consciousness". It also refers to a group consciousness but is abstracted from the rural context where Cramer originally developed the concept (Munis 2020). Many aspects of group consciousness that Cramer describes as rural consciousness appear in other declining communities, for instance rural Louisiana, Youngstown, Ohio, suburbs of London, United Kingdom (Hochschild 2016; Gest 2016; Wuthnow 2018). Studies from both the United States and Denmark have since developed measures to tap place-based resentment, and it is empirically much more prevalent in rural than in urban areas in both countries (Munis 2020; Hansen and Hjorth 2021).

Based on this, I can expect residents to react to local appeals due to in-group favoritism or material interest. I unpack this mechanism further in Paper A, where I test how voters react to various signals about candidates' local attachment. Irrespective of the underlying mechanism, I expect voters to look favorably on increases and object to decreases in local public expenditures. Either because increased local expenditures improve local conditions or because it signals the social status of the local area.

## 2.2 Linking changes in local political priorities to political behavior

One thing is to "receive the treatment" and be cognizant of changes in local political priorities and link it to one's predispositions; it is quite another to draw political implications from those changes. Linking local developments to politics is not straightforward. Hopkins (2010) thus argues that residents rely on frames from the news media. Frames provide residents with a way to think about local developments and link them to politics (Hopkins 2010, 43). He thus finds that voters' attitudes towards immigrants are more related to the local change in the share of immigrants when immigration is salient in national news media. Similarly, one may expect that voters have a hard time making sense of changes in local political priorities if they are not provided with some way of thinking about it. Rural development has been a salient issue in Danish news media for some of the studied period, which may have provided people with a way of thinking about changes in local political priorities (Winther and Svendsen 2012). However, changes in local political priorities only pertain to specific areas and are therefore usually not covered in national media. Residents are thus often left to make sense of developments on their own.

I have focused on two different ways voters may link changes in local political priorities to electoral politics. In the following, I first theorize about the effect of changes in local political priorities on residents' support for incumbents. I then draw on current research on the appeal of right-wing populist parties and populist messages to argue that changes in local political priorities are inversely related to the appeal of such messages.

### 2.2.1 Supplying pork to constituents

The most obvious link voters may make between changes in local political priorities and their political behavior is to adjust their support for incumbents. It is inherently easier to ascribe responsibility for changes in local political priorities than for many other local developments, because they are decided by an electoral body and thus directly linked to specific political decision-makers.

A long tradition of studies in the United States explores how incumbent congressional representatives can improve their electoral fortunes by securing increased federal spending for their electoral districts (Ferjohn 1974; Feldman and Jondrow 1984; Stein and Bickers 1994; Levitt



and Snyder 1997; Stratmann 2013; Klingensmith 2019). These studies usually rely on retrospective voting models, according to which people base their vote on incumbents' performance in the preceding election period (Ferejohn 1986; Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). If people experienced that incumbents did well, they keep them (Downs 1957; Kinder and Kiewiet 1979). While empirical results in this literature are somewhat inconclusive, they all theorize that incumbents benefit from securing federal funds for their local area. More funds are viewed as a local good whether they go to improved infrastructure, subsidies for certain services, or new public jobs. However, not all changes in local political priorities constitute a benefit to the local area. Previous studies have explored how voters mobilize in response to various policies with adverse local effects, e.g., placement of large projects that harm local conditions, such as nuclear power plants, airports, dams, wind turbines (Stokes 2016; Aldrich 2008), or closing prized public services such as schools and hospitals (Lindbom 2014; Nuamah and Ogorzalek 2021; Møller, Kjær, and Larsen 2021). In these cases, local priorities worsen local circumstances.

Nevertheless, in all cases, changes in local political priorities signal that politicians in power have been able and willing to procure public resources for a local area. Whether voters respond out of self-interest or out-group attachments, changes in local priorities signal provide valuable information about incumbents. Either they hurt local interests and are not worth keeping, or they improved local conditions and should be rewarded.

However, different governmental layers are responsible for and have jurisdictions over certain issues and areas. When voters link specific changes in local political priorities to specific incumbents, they have to navigate the multiple levels of government. While multiple levels of government allow voters to pursue their interests through different avenues and allow decisions to be taken close to citizens (Downs 1999, 94), they also enable politicians to obscure the responsibility of their own unpopular decisions and to claim credit for policies they had nothing to do with (Arceneaux 2006, 732). It thus complicates the electorate's job. However, changes in local political priorities still constitute one of the clearest opportunities for voters to hold politicians accountable for their decisions.

I therefore hypothesize in Paper B and Paper C that residents' perceptions of incumbents are positively associated with changes in local political priorities.

### 2.2.2 Champions of the left behind

I theorize in Paper B and Paper C that changes in local political priorities are inversely related to the appeal of populist messages and residents' support for right-wing populist parties. However, changes in local political priorities are not inherently linked to these parties. In contrast to mainstream parties, they are rarely responsible for their implementation, and even though they often promote the preservation of local communities (Fitzgerald 2018, 25), it is not a central feature of the party family's political platform (Mudde 2007). In the following, I first clarify my understanding of right-wing populist parties and populist attitudes. I then review some of the central explanations in the literature for the demand for right-wing populist parties and the appeal of populist arguments. Based on these explanations, I theorize why residents may link changes in local political priorities to support for right-wing populist parties.

Support for populism can manifest in voting behavior and in political attitudes. Populism can be defined as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (23). As such, it does not necessarily connote affiliation with right or left economic policies but can rather be a vehicle for both (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, 150). Similar theories have thus often been argued to explain support for both right- and left-wing populist parties (see eg. Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, and Utych 2021; Burgoon et al. 2019). However, the main thrust in this literature focuses on the right-wing variant (Berman 2021), and in the Danish case, populist messages are primarily associated with parties on the right (Bächler and Hopmann 2017). Therefore, I also focus on support for right-wing populist parties. Nevertheless, with some adjustment, many of the theoretical arguments could reasonably be applied to left-wing populist parties, such as La France Insoumise.

Support for specific party families, such as right-wing populist parties, is contingent on the electoral institutions and particular parties of a given country (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021, 485). In Paper C, I thus also study people's tendency to hold populist political attitudes. In the literature, populist attitudes are conceived of as consisting of three components: *people-centrism*, *anti-elitism*, and *Manichaeian outlook* (Castanho Silva et al. 2020; Castanho Silva et al. 2018; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Schulz et al. 2018). People-centrism refers to the idea of a homogeneous people that is both pure

and good. The people holds common-sense opinions that ought to be the guiding light of political decision-making. Anti-elitism refers to the antagonistic relationship that pits the pure people against the elites. Definitions of "the elite" vary, but it usually includes mainstream politicians. Finally, the Manichaeian outlook sees politics as a struggle between good (the people) and evil (the elite).

The rising demand for right-wing populist parties across Western democracies and the prevalence of populist attitudes have fueled research to explain this demand (Berman 2021, 73). Explanations generally emphasize either economic conditions or cultural cleavages. While distinct, these explanations often interact and complement each other to create one comprehensive explanation of the appeal of populist messages.

Economic explanations of the increasing demand for right-wing populist parties emphasize how the globalization of world markets has undermined the existing economic foundation for people's daily lives (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Rickard 2020). Especially manufacturing and manual jobs have been affected as they can be done cheaper in China or other emerging markets. Studies from economics have shown that growing international competition has led to increased unemployment, less labor force participation, reduced wages, and lost revenues in areas that have been particularly hard hit by the import competition (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2013; Acemoglu et al. 2016). This creates a new structural cleavage between winners and losers of the upheaval of the economy (Kriesi et al. 2006). This argument has been supported by several studies of the local contextual determinants of the support for right-wing populist parties. A prominent example is Colantone and Stanigs, who rely on the same instrument as (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2013) to identify the causal impact of local import shocks on the support for right-wing populist parties (Colantone and Stanig 2018b) and Brexit (Colantone and Stanig 2018a). Increased economic challenges for manufacturing jobs have cascading effects on the local economies that further worsen the economic prospects. Other studies have thus shown how manufacturing layoffs fueled support for Donald Trump (Baccini and Weymouth 2021), and that offshoring of manufacturing jobs makes local electorates punish incumbent politicians (Rickard 2022). When local economies crumble, it also affects the housing market. Declining or stagnating housing prices have thus been found to increase local support for Brexit in the UK, Marine Le Pen in France (Adler and Ansell 2020), and right-wing populist parties across Scandinavia (Ansell et al. 2022). While the economic explanations emphasize different aspects of economic development, they rely on a similar mechanism. As people's economic situation deterio-

rates, they become increasingly angry with political elites and more willing to take a risk by voting for someone who will upend the status quo (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, and Utych 2021; Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, and Bowler 2019).

Economic explanations of the rising demand for right-wing populist parties are often contrasted with cultural explanations (Berman 2021; Inglehart and Norris 2017, see eg.), which often emphasize quite different mechanisms (Margalit, Raviv, and Solodoch 2022).

One prominent perspective is Norris and Inglehart' (2019) argument that support for populism is fueled by an inter-generational backlash. As younger cohorts grow up and become socialized under increasingly prosperous and secure conditions, they come to hold more post-modern values. Older generations who hold more authoritarian and materialist values experience that their views are slowly being marginalized and they thus turn to populist movements. Another perspective emphasizes the importance of immigration. According to one version of the argument, voters turn to right-wing populist parties to limit immigration, to reduce competition for resources (Rydgren 2007, 250). In other versions, immigrants are scorned because they compromise the cohesiveness of the national unity and thus threaten national identities (Rydgren 2008). Irrespective of the mechanism, anti-immigrant attitudes are a common denominator among right-wing populist parties' electorates (Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers 2002; Ivarsflaten 2008). While this explanation is not necessarily as prominent in rural areas, where fewer immigrants choose to settle (Harteveld et al. 2021), other cultural perspectives again have emphasized the importance of community disintegration (Ballet 2021) or other cultural cleavages (Rydgren 2007; Golder 2016).

However, these different perspectives are often complementary rather than contradictory in explaining support for right-wing populism. Several studies thus propose models that explain how economic and cultural factors interact and complement each other (Bowyer 2008; Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre, and Utych 2021; Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, and Bowler 2019; Gidron and Hall 2017; Harteveld et al. 2021). Economic challenges may increase voters' tendency to hold cultural grievances, or different explanations may be more pertinent in some areas. Ethnographic studies have documented across different contexts how economic and cultural factors intermingle and create a common narrative of resentment and animosity towards elites (Gest 2016; Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016).

Many of these studies propose policies to counter the appeal of populist messages and parties (Austin, Glaeser, and Summers 2018; Cramer 2016; Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, and Bowler 2019; Norris and Ingle-

hart 2019; Colantone and Stanig 2018b, see eg.). While some motivate this with their distaste for right-wing populists, whom they view as undermining pluralistic democratic ideals, others focus more on the depressed conditions in these areas, which seem to foster discontent. Irrespective, it leads them to propose some form of geographically targeted policy to alleviate the challenges people face in their local area.

Changes in local political priorities can either substantiate narratives of a disinterested elite in concrete experiences of local cutbacks in public expenditures, or they can undermine the same narratives by demonstrating how mainstream politicians look out for people and their local communities by diverting public expenditures to their local area. Therefore, I hypothesize in Paper B and Paper C that changes in local political expenditures are negatively associated with residents' tendency to hold populist attitudes and support right-wing populist parties.

## 2.3 Summation

Across the three papers of the dissertation, I thus theorize that people acquire information about changes in local political priorities through casual observations as well as social interactions with acquaintances. I expect changes in local political priorities to elicit a response because it both impinges on residents' material interests and mobilizes their attachment to their local area. Finally, I theorize that residents may link changes in local political priorities to their political behavior. Residents may hold incumbents accountable for their priorities. After all, they were directly responsible for the decisions. In addition, changes in local political priorities may substantiate or undermine the appeal of populist messages, as it demonstrates how elites behave in relation to residents' local areas.



## Chapter 3

### Designs

In the three papers of the dissertation, I have estimated the effect of changes in local political priorities on residents' political behavior. In this chapter, I summarize the main methodological challenges this entails, and how I have chosen to handle them in the three papers of the dissertation. Additionally, I highlight how the designs of the papers complement each other.

#### 3.1 The challenge of a politicized "treatment"

Selection bias is a major methodological challenge in the study of context effects (see eg. Hopkins 2010; Bisgaard, Dinesen, and Sønderskov 2016). As people choose where they want to live, any correlation between residence and political attitudes may be due to the reason they choose to settle in a specific area rather than a particular aspect of the local area. It is therefore inherently difficult to disentangle whether spatial patterns in political behavior arise due to different local experiences or because of different compositions of local populations (Oliver and Wong 2003; Tam Cho, Gimpel, and Hui 2013). One example is the increased geographic polarization between urban and rural areas on many cultural issues such as immigration. Maxwell (2019, 2020) has explored how spatial patterns can be understood as the consequences of residential sorting. As people with longer educations move to the cities to pursue careers in the expanding knowledge economy, people with more traditionalist opinions are left behind. Thus the cleavage is not necessarily due to contextual differences but to differences in the composition of local electorates. Similarly, faced with changes in local political priorities, residents with particular political attitudes may decide to move, while others choose or are forced to stay. One way of alleviating this is by relying on experiments, as randomly attributed treatments eliminate the challenge of selection bias (Angrist and Pischke 2009, 15). However, attributing changes in local political priorities at random is challenging.

Some previous studies have utilized natural experiments to study the contextual effects on residents' political behavior of changes in local political priorities. One example is Bechtel and Hainmueller (2011), who relied on data on the German government's change in local political priorities after the Elbe flooded large areas in 2002. As the flooding only directly affected areas close to the river, Bechtel and Hainmueller could utilize this naturally occurring variation to study the residents' reaction to the government's relief response. Even in the case of natural disasters, one can argue that it affects not only the government's relief response but also the need for said response in the affected areas. The "treatment" is thus also more multifaceted than just changes in local political priorities. Furthermore, for most changes in local political priorities, it is hard to argue that they occur at random as they are outcomes of a deliberate political process. Beyond being ethically problematic, studying the effects of changes in local political priorities in an ideal experimental setup is thus substantively impractical. The issue of selection bias thus persists.

In Paper B and Paper C, I track how different objective changes in local political priorities affect residents' political behavior, and I use various identification strategies to handle selection bias. In the following section, I elaborate on the approaches taken in these two studies.

In Paper A, I sidestep the challenge by focusing on the appeal of local candidates. To study the mechanism underlying local appeals, you either need to make some strong assumptions that are likely to be unwarranted or come up with situations where you somehow can manipulate the mediator (Imai et al. 2011, 779). To study why voters respond to local appeals, I therefore shift the focus from local political priorities to the appeal of local candidates. In a candidate choice experiment, I can manipulate the behavioral localism and symbolic localism of political candidates and thus study the mechanism underlying local appeals. In the following, I will further elaborate on the experimental design in Paper A.

## 3.2 Preregistrations

A prime advantage of preregistering a study is that it allows the researcher as well as the readers to clearly distinguish between when the researcher conducts hypothesis tests and when the researcher conducts exploratory tests (Nosek et al. 2018). By limiting researchers' opportunities to adapt theories to findings, preregistrations shield the researcher from hindsight bias and limit their ability to fish for significant results (Humphreys, Sierra, and Windt 2013; Monogan 2013, 11). An additional advantage is



that it forces researchers to make decisions on a range of minute details before collecting the data. It can thus clarify potential defects in the design early in the process and allow researchers to correct such mistakes when it is still possible to change the design.

I have taken advantage of these possibilities by preregistering Paper A and Paper C.<sup>1</sup> I preregistered Paper A before I collected the data for the survey experiment. In Paper C, I rely on data from Statistics Denmark's Research Services. Access to these data is heavily restricted<sup>2</sup>. I could thus credibly preregister the study before accessing the data.

I make a few deviations from the preregistered analysis plans to improve the tests and to give the reader a better grasp of the implications of the findings. To enable the reader to evaluate these decisions, I also report the test in full accordance with the preregistrations in the respective papers and note the various deviations in the texts. To improve the succinctness of this summary, I have largely abstained from making such notes here. I refer the reader to the respective papers for a more thorough review of the specifics.

Preregistering a study where the researcher is familiar with the data does not provide the same advantages. If you know the data, you cannot credibly claim that the preregistration limits your ability to adapt your theories to the data (Humphreys, Sierra, and Windt 2013, 12). I therefore abstained from preregistering Paper B, as the data was familiar to me before I started the analysis.

### 3.3 Observational strategies

In the following, I outline and compare the identification strategies that I employ in Paper B and Paper C. The two papers rely on somewhat similar identifying assumptions but utilize different data sources that allow me to focus on different aspects of people's political behavior and measure changes in local political priorities in different ways. Furthermore, I outline how I handle the modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP), an additional challenge in the study of context effects.

The first identification strategy I use to handle selection bias is to control for the observable differences between residents of different areas. I do so when I analyze cross-sectional survey data in Paper C. The causal identification of the effect of changes in local political priorities on the re-

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<sup>1</sup>The preregistrations are hosted at [osf.io/wh5mu](https://osf.io/wh5mu). At the time of publication, some of the preregistrations may still be embargoed to maintain anonymity in the review process. However, the full registrations are available in the appendices to the respective papers.

<sup>2</sup>See Statistics Denmark (2014) for details.

spondents' political behavior in the cross-sectional analysis relies on the *conditional independence assumption*. If the conditional independence assumption holds, residents are exposed to changes in local political priorities as if random after control for a variety of observed covariates (Angrist and Pischke 2009, 53). This means that I estimate an equation in the cross-sectional analysis somewhat like:

$$Y_s = \delta D_s + X'_s \beta + \epsilon_s \quad (3.1)$$

where  $Y_s$  is the political behavior or attitude of a respondent  $s$  who lives in a local area that experienced  $D$  changes in local political priorities.  $\delta$  captures the causal effect of interest. However, the causal interpretation relies on  $X'$ , which is a vector of the observed confounding variables. If a confounding variable is not included in  $X'$ , the conditional independence assumption is violated, and the results are potentially biased. The drawback of this approach is thus that it only takes observed conditions into account. One temptation may therefore be to include as many controls as possible. However, by conditioning on the effects of changes in local political priorities, I would end up with post-treatment bias (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016, 514). I therefore rely on a limited range of potential confounders.

The second identification strategy goes a step further by relying on observations of the same units over time. In the analysis of panel data in Paper C and precinct-level election returns in Paper B, I include unit and period fixed effects in the estimators and thereby control for all time-invariant heterogeneities between units and all unit-invariant heterogeneities over time. I thus no longer compare differences in the outcome levels between units but rather differences in the development in the outcomes between units. In the panel analysis in Paper C and the generalized differences-in-differences design employed to study election returns in Paper B, I estimate an equation like:

$$Y_{st} = \gamma_s + \lambda_t + \delta D_{st} + X'_{st} \beta + \epsilon_{st} \quad (3.2)$$

where  $Y_s$  is the political behavior or attitudes of unit  $s$  at time  $t$ . The main difference between the estimators in Paper C and Paper B is that the units refer to individual respondents in Paper C and precincts in Paper B.  $\gamma_s$  introduces a dummy for each unit, thus absorbing all unit invariant heterogeneity over time. In Paper C, I thus estimate changes within respondents over time, and in Paper B, I estimate changes within precincts over time.  $\lambda_t$  similarly introduces a dummy for each period. This reduces the potential for confounders to aspects that vary across units and periods. If I observe these aspects, I can control for them in  $X'_{st}$ .

The identifying assumption in the panel analysis and the generalized differences-in-differences design is that absent the difference in changes in local political priorities, the development in political behavior between units would have followed parallel trends. This is also known as the common or parallel trends assumption (Angrist and Pischke 2009, 230). This assumption cannot be tested directly, as it is impossible to observe the counterfactual situation without changes in local political priorities. Nevertheless, a common practice is to test for parallel trends in the pre-treatment periods (237). I do so in Paper B, where the data lends itself to such a test. I have data on several consecutive elections, which allows me to follow the trends between affected and unaffected precincts in the pretreatment periods. In Paper C, I am unable to conduct such a test as I only observe the respondents twice.

In Paper B, I use a generalized differences-in-differences design to study a staggered treatment: closure of schools and hospitals. This design has recently come under renewed scrutiny in the econometrics literature (Goodman-Bacon 2021). Until recently, studies utilizing treatments that occur in different units at different points in time relied on a fixed-effects estimator with a treatment indicator as outlined in equation 3.2 (see eg. Angrist and Pischke 2009, 239). However, this approach can lead to biased estimates when treatment is staggered, as the units no longer are balanced before and after treatment. If a unit is observed for a long time after it was treated, a larger share of its treatment effect will be absorbed by its unit fixed effect. Similarly, the larger the share of the units that are treated in a particular period, the period fixed effect for that particular period will pick up more of the treatment effect (Goodman-Bacon 2021; Gardner 2021, 7). Several new strategies have been developed to handle this challenge (see e.g. Callaway and Sant’Anna 2020; Sun and Abraham 2021; Chaisemartin and D’Haultfœuille 2020). I have chosen to rely on the “two-stage difference-in-differences” (2SDiD) estimator developed by Gardner (2021) and implemented for R by Butts (2021). As implied by the name, 2SDiD works in a two-stage process. In the first stage, the pretreatment observations are used to estimate unit and period fixed effects, and the fixed effects are subtracted from the outcome. In the second stage, the average treatment effect on the treated is estimated by comparing the residualized outcomes between the treated and untreated units (Gardner 2021, 8). In Paper B, I report both the two-way fixed effects estimates and these 2SDiD estimates. I will reference the 2SDiD estimates in the text.

An additional challenge beyond selection bias in the study of contextual effects is the modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP) (Openshaw

1983; Cho and Baer 2011). MAUP occurs when you aggregate a phenomenon over geographical units with defined borders. As the exact partitioning of a geographic area can be accomplished in infinitely many ways, you can manipulate how you aggregate a phenomenon to show exactly opposite results (Openshaw 1983, 23). While there is no way of resolving this problem, as it is an inherent feature of studying the effects of geographical phenomena, there are both empirical and theoretical approaches to handling it.

Empirically, you can probe the sensitivity of the analysis to the chosen aggregation level by replicating the analysis across different aggregations. This well known approach is widely used in studies of contextual phenomena such as housing prices, unemployment, and ethnic diversity (Larsen et al. 2019; Bisgaard, Dinesen, and Sønderskov 2016; Dinesen and Sønderskov 2015). In Paper C, I probe the sensitivity of the findings by analyzing different aggregation levels (at the parish and the municipal level), and in Paper B, I consider different ways of determining whether a precinct is affected by a school closure.

On theoretical grounds, MAUP can also be handled by conditioning the studied mechanism to specific aggregation levels (Openshaw 1983, 33). In line with this approach, I theorize in Paper B that hospital closures affect a much larger area than school closures, as hospitals serve a much larger catchment area. It therefore makes little sense to only consider the precincts within which the hospital is located to be affected by their closure. In contrast, as schools affect much smaller catchment areas, I argue that precincts are appropriate geographical units to study their effects. In effect, this approach conditions the results on the chosen geographical unit (34). It is therefore important to be nuanced when deciding on the appropriate aggregation level and to theorize how residents may encounter information about that particular aspect of their local surroundings.

### 3.4 Experimental approach

In Paper A, I utilize a conjoint experiment to disentangle why voters respond to local appeals. Is it primarily out of material concerns or local attachments? In the experiment, I can control the information the respondents have access to when they evaluate a range of hypothetical political candidates. By controlling the information, I can randomize which respondents receive which cues about the political candidates. Randomizing treatment assignment allows me to solve the challenge of selection bias, as the potential outcome of the respondents is independent of their

treatment assignment (Angrist and Pischke 2009, 15). The design thus allows me to examine the causal mechanism underlying local appeals.

I specifically rely on a conjoint experiment, as it allows me to test how people respond to a range of treatments in isolation and conjunction (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). I can thus test the effects of cues about the candidates' descriptive localism, behavioral localism, and symbolic localism at the same time. Furthermore, by withholding information about certain attributes, I can compare the overall treatment effect of knowing that a candidate lives in people's local area to the treatment effect when a potential mediator is kept constant (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2018). In the experiment, I withhold information about the candidates' behavioral localism and/or symbolic localism from some respondents and leave them to make inferences about these aspects of the candidates based on the available information. They may thus think that a candidate who lives in their local area is more likely than a candidate who lives somewhere else to spend most of their time in office on improving conditions in their local area. This can also be thought of as a violation of information equivalence of background features, as respondents systematically infer specific aspects about candidates based on the information that is available to them (Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018). If voters prefer a candidate who lives in their local area *because* they think that a descriptively local candidate is more likely to improve local conditions, the advantage of descriptively local candidates should disappear if I also provide the respondents with information about the candidates' behavior in office in relation to their local area. However, including this information in the profiles should not affect the importance of information about the descriptively local candidate, if it is irrelevant to their preference for the candidate.

In the experiment, I present each respondent with two hypothetical candidates for the Danish Parliament (Folketinget). To avoid any kind of deception, it is made clear that the candidates are "fictitious"<sup>3</sup>. The two candidates (Candidate A and Candidate B) are presented in short vignettes of five to seven sentences. In addition to information about the candidates' descriptive localism and four control attributes, I randomly provide or withhold information about the candidates' behavioral localism and/or the candidates' symbolic localism. Respondents who are given information about the candidates' behavioral localism and/or symbolic localism do not have to make inferences about these aspects of the candidates' attachment to the respondents' local area. If respondents make inferences about the candidates' behavioral localism and/or sym-

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<sup>3</sup>"Opdigtede" in original Danish formulation.

bolic localism based on cues about the candidates' descriptive localism, such differences should be reduced when I provide the respondents with cues about the candidates' behavioral localism and/or symbolic localism. If respondents use the information to make inferences about descriptively local candidates, it allows me to examine the mechanism underlying voters' preference for local candidates.

I present each respondent with five pairs of candidate profiles. Previous findings have shown that survey satisficing is minimal even with a large number of choice tasks (Bansak et al. 2018). Similarly, I only find minor differences across the five tasks, which suggests that there is no carry-over effect between the tasks.

To enhance the external validity of the results, I have designed the tasks to resemble candidate descriptions the respondents might encounter in the real world as closely as possible. In contrast to the regular grid structure found in many conjoint experiments (Bansak et al. 2021), I have therefore relied on short vignettes that are quite similar to what you can find on the homepages of many political candidates under the "about the candidate"-tab or on campaign flyers.

In addition, I follow the advice of Cuesta, Egami, and Imai (2021) and make the distribution of the control attributes across the candidates follow the marginal distribution in the target population. As more candidates for Folketinget are male lawyers, age 34-49, and run for the Social Democrats in the real world, I also present the respondents with more candidates with control attributes like these. The target population for the candidate profiles is candidates for Folketinget, and I have therefore relied on records from Statistics Denmark on such candidates in 2019 to construct the marginal distribution of gender, age, occupation, and partisanship (Statistics Denmark 2019). For the three attributes concerning local appeal, I use a uniform distribution and thereby maximize the statistical power in each category.

To recover the causal effect of an attribute level in a conjoint experiment, most studies rely on the average marginal component effect (AMCE) (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). The AMCE is the marginal effect of an attribute averaged over the joint distribution of the remaining attributes (10). AMCEs thus have a clear causal interpretation as the effect of changing an attribute from its reference level to a target level, holding the remaining attributes constant. AMCEs can be estimated by linear regressions and are thus easily obtained.

However, in Paper A, I have chosen to rely more on estimates of the marginal mean of the different attribute levels (MM)(Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020) because most of the analysis focuses on subgroups. What

is the difference in the effect of the candidates' descriptive localism between respondents who are/are not told about the candidates' behavioral localism and/or symbolic localism? Comparisons of AMCEs between subgroups can be misleading, as the level in the reference category usually diverges (212). Instead, I report the marginal means and subgroup differences in marginal means. A marginal mean of an attribute level describes the average outcome of candidates with that feature, ignoring all other attributes (208). They thus allow me to compare the respondents' preferences for the candidates across the different subgroups.

### 3.5 Summation

In the three papers of the dissertation, I employ different research designs to examine citizens' reactions to local political priorities and appeals. A central challenge has been that changes in local political priorities are immutable to researchers' discretion. In Paper B and Paper C, I therefore rely on observational data, which can be prone to selection bias. I handle this by controlling for potential confounders and by using panel analysis and generalized differences-in-differences designs, which allows me to rule out many sources of selection bias. In Paper A, I sidestep the challenge altogether by focusing on the appeal of local candidates. As I control the information my respondents received about the candidates' local appeals, I avoid selection bias.

An advantage of using observational data is its external validity. When I track how the election returns change in precincts affected by hospital and school closures in Paper B, it is how citizens' real-world behavior changes in reaction to actual local changes in political priorities. In contrast, the experimental setup in Paper A is inherently artificial. I have thus taken several steps to model the conjoint tasks over candidate descriptions the respondents might encounter on their own.

I have taken many of these design choices in conjunction with considerations of the possible available data. In the following chapter, I describe the data sources I have relied on in the respective papers.





## Chapter 4

### Data

In this chapter, I describe the various data sources I have utilized in the three papers. First, I summarize how I have measured changes in local political priorities that I can link to specific local areas. I then describe how I measure the outcome variables of the observational studies, whether that is support for incumbents, support for right-wing populist parties, or different attitudinal outcomes. Finally, I describe the experimental data collected for Paper C. For succinctness, I have left some details out of the present summary. I refer to the papers for a comprehensive review of the respective measures and data sources.

#### 4.1 Capturing changes in local political priorities

Changes in local political priorities can manifest themselves in people's local areas in many ways. People may experience that politicians change the location of public institutions. An example is closure of schools and hospitals, as I explore in Paper B. Political priorities may also change more subtly, as expenditures at existing localities change. While less visible than changing the location of existing institutions, they constitute decision-makers' more common tweaks to the geographical distribution of resources. In Paper C, I capture these more subtle changes in local political priorities by looking at the payroll to public employees.

To capture changes in local political priorities, I rely on various Danish registries, which contain information on the entire population and allow me to link changes in political priorities to specific geographic locations. Administrative data sources, including the registries I use here, are not collected or structured with research in mind (Connelly et al. 2016, 4). To handle the specific challenges inherent to each registry, I have preprocessed the data to make it fit for further analysis.

Table 4.1 gives an overview of the different registries I have utilized in the project. They all include geographic information that allows me to link either a specific expenditure or a specific public institution to a

Table 4.1: Danish registries utilized to capture changes in local political priorities

Pa- per	Name of registry	Content
B	The Danish Institution Registry	Registry of entities providing education
B	The National Catalogue of Health Organisations	Registry of entities providing health care
B	The Central Business Register	Register for all registered companies in Denmark
C	The Integrated Database for Labor Market Research (IDA)	Annual inventory of firms, workplaces, employments and persons.

certain location. They also include a time component, which allows me to capture whether priorities have gone up or down over time.

#### 4.1.1 School and hospital closures

In Paper B, I study voters' reactions to policies with adverse local effects: school and hospital closures.

I first acquired data on school closures from The Danish Institution Registry (National Agency for IT and Learning 2020). However, the registry does not deal with mergers and branches of schools in an adequate way when the purpose is to capture residents' local experiences. Sometimes a school is considered a new entity if other schools are merged into it, even though the school still is located at the same address. Other times schools are recorded as closed when they are merged into other schools, even though they continue to operate at their existing locations more or less as they did before. I have therefore cross-referenced the registry with data from several other sources. I first cross-referenced it with data from The Central Business Registry, which contains information on all companies in Denmark. However, the registry has its own shortcomings regarding companies that are a part of the public sector. I therefore also use data from Møller (2019), who used minutes from municipalities to verify the information in The Danish Institution Registry. Finally, I conducted

my own research in the newspaper archive Infomedia (Infomedia). Local media often cover the last day of school at schools that are closing and/or the decision to close specific institutions. This allows me to verify the information in the registries. To my knowledge, this gives me the most comprehensive and accurate dataset on the placement and closure of all public schools in Denmark from 2005 to 2019.

The process to acquire data on hospital closures followed a similar methodology. First, I retrieved data from The National Catalogue of Health Organisations (National Health Data Authority 2019), which I complemented with information from The Central Business Registry, before I finally searched local media sources in Infomedia. Again, this should give me the most accurate dataset on the placement and closure of all public hospitals in Denmark from 2005 to 2019.

Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2, which are drawn from Paper B, depict the spatial distribution of all public schools and hospitals from 2005 to 2019. As shown, school and hospital closures take place throughout the country but most frequently in more rural areas.

Figure 4.1: Spatial Distribution of School Closures in Denmark 2005-2019

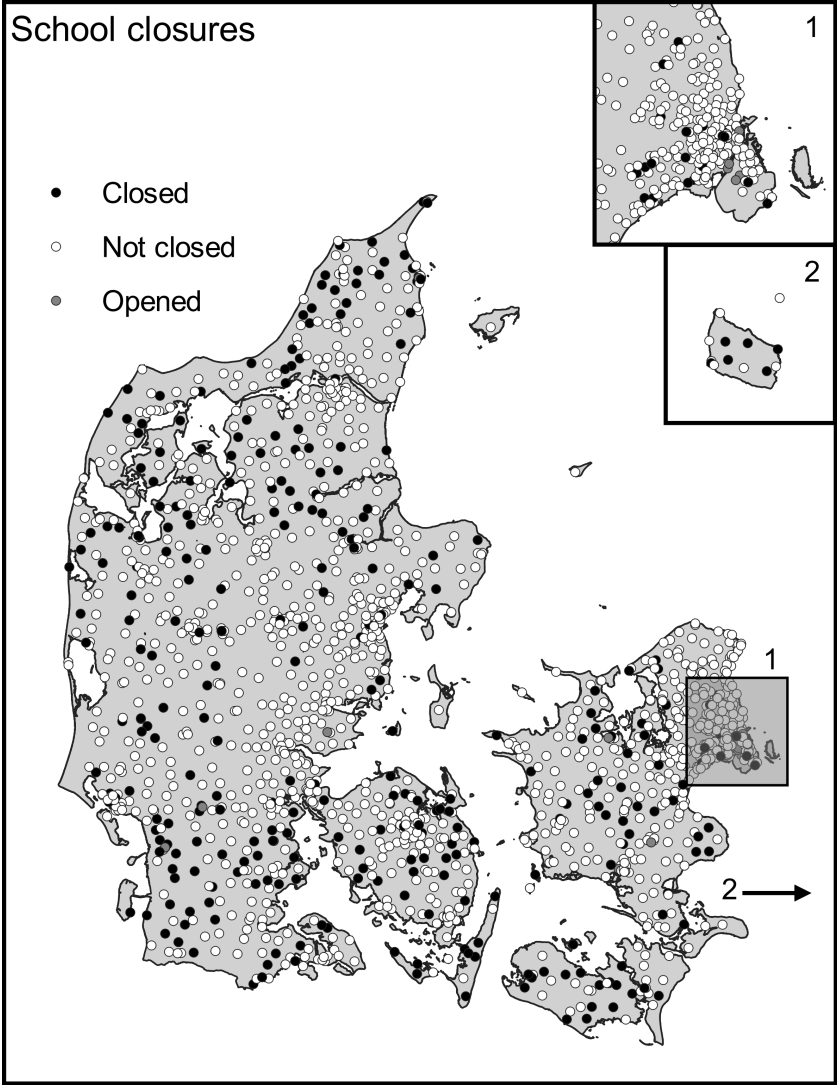
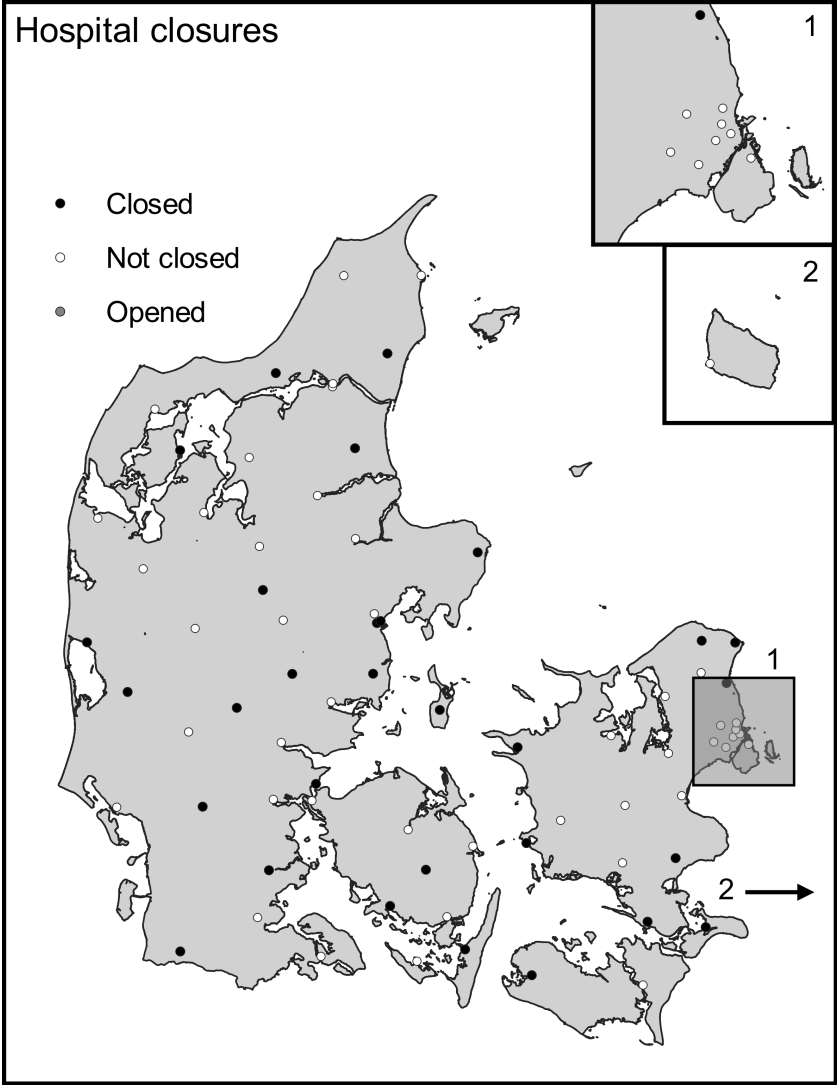


Figure 4.2: Spatial Distribution of Hospital Closures in Denmark 2005-2019



#### 4.1.2 Expenditures to wages to local public employees

In Paper C, I rely on data on expenditures to public employees to capture changes in local political priorities. More specifically, I identify all workplaces that are controlled by electoral bodies and are located in the same parish as the respondents. I then calculate the percentage change over the preceding four years in the total payroll for all employees at these workplaces. By focusing on expenditures to public employees, I can capture and link a substantial proportion of all political priorities to specific local areas.

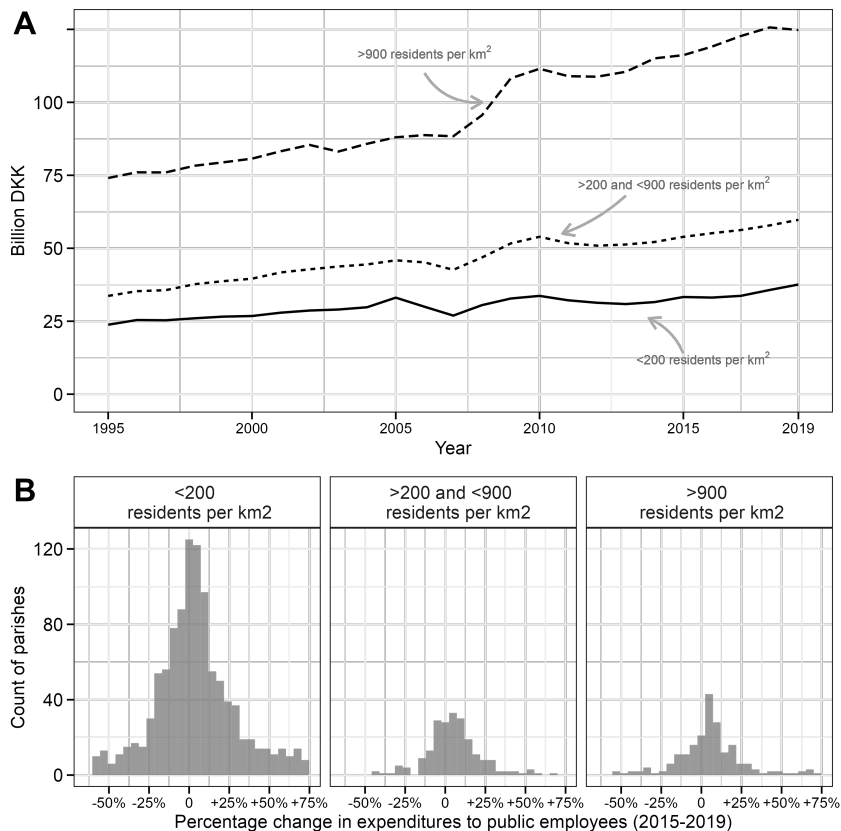
I acquire data on workplaces from The Integrated Database for Labor Market Research (IDA), which includes data on *all* workplaces in Denmark. In the registry, a workplace is defined as business units that belong to one organization, are geographically continuous, and are primarily engaged in a single industry (Zeuthen et al. 1990). Thus, each firm has separate workplaces at each geographical location it operates. For each workplace, IDA includes information on its geographical location, the number of employees, the employees' salaries, which industry the workplace was engaged in, and which sector the workplace belongs to. This enables me to measure objective changes in local political priorities in the respondents' local area.

I aggregate changes in local political priorities over the Danish parishes. Previous studies of context effects that rely on data from Danish registries have constructed concentric circles around the respondents with varying radii (see e.g. Dinesen and Sønderskov 2015; Bisgaard, Dinesen, and Sønderskov 2016; Larsen et al. 2019). While this approach enables the authors to gauge the importance of the aggregation level to their findings, I have not replicated this approach in this study. This is partly due to the object under study. Public workplaces are less numerous than fellow citizens or housing, which these previous studies examine. Focusing on entities within the nearest 2.5 km would thus not capture the relevant nearby public workplaces. Data limitations also make this approach unfeasible, as the addresses of workplaces are registered slightly differently than other addresses. Instead, I aggregate the payroll at workplaces over the local parishes in the main analysis and over municipalities in robustness tests. I argue that parishes are the smallest geographic unit where people organize around public service provision in Denmark. It should therefore be the appropriate aggregation level to study the effects of changes in local political priorities. There were 2,159 parishes with residents in Denmark in 2019, with geographically larger and less populous rural parishes.

Figure 4.3, from Paper C, shows the development in total expenditures to public employees across urban parishes (population density  $> 900$  residents pr. km<sup>2</sup>), rural parishes (population density  $< 200$  residents pr. km<sup>2</sup>), and in the middle parishes (population density between the two other groups). Panel A shows the aggregate amount of resources spent in each type of parish. The total amount spent across all three groups has increased over the studied period, most sharply in urban parishes, especially in the years just after the amalgamation of municipalities in 2007. Expenditures in the more rural areas increased over the studied period but they also stagnated or declined for long periods.

Panel B of figure 4.3 shows the distribution of change in local political priorities from 2015 to 2019 across the three groups. The variation within each group is quite substantial. Negative or positive changes in local political priorities are thus not necessarily a rural or an urban phenomenon. From 2015 to 2019, local political priorities shifted substantially in both rural and urban. Denmark as a case thus provides ample variation to study how changes in local political priorities affect residents' political attitudes.

Figure 4.3: Development in local political priorities aggregated over urban, rural and middle parishes in Denmark



Note: Wages have been inflation adjusted (2015 ref). Parishes with an extreme change in local political priorities have been excluded from Panel B. See further details in Paper C.

## 4.2 Measuring residents' political behavior

While the data on changes in local political priorities can be linked to specific local areas, data on people’s political behavior rarely allow researchers to link people to local contexts in a similar way. Most survey data do include some information that links respondents to geographic areas, such as the NUTS regions in the European Social Survey (ESS) or



the ISO 3166-2 in World Values Survey. However, contextual theories of opinion formation theorize that political behavior is affected by people's casual observations of their surroundings and social interactions with other residents in their local area (Baybeck and McClurg 2005; Newman et al. 2015; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). These mechanisms have a relatively short geographical range. Using regional geographical information, which is prominent in standard surveys, would thus not capture the theorized mechanisms. In Paper B and Paper C, I rely on other data sources that allow me to link people's political behavior to relevant spatial entities.

In Paper B, I rely on data from election returns at the precinct level (Statistics Denmark and Thomsen 2022). Each precinct relates to a given geographic area, which allows me to link the election returns to a specific school or hospital closure. I use data from the national elections in (2005,) 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019, and from the local elections in (2005,) 2009, 2013, and 2017.<sup>1</sup> Denmark has almost 1,400 precincts, which each correspond to a single polling place. In 2019, there were on average about 3,000 eligible voters per precinct. The precincts vary in size, with larger precincts with fewer voters in rural areas and smaller precincts with more voters in the cities. The borders of some precincts have been redrawn over time. To construct a balanced panel for the studied period, I have relied on the same approach as Larsen et al. (2019). I thus use Statistics Denmark and Thomsen (2022) to fix the borders of the precincts to those in a reference year (2019) and then recalculate the election returns based on these borders for the remaining elections.

As election returns constitute people's actual political behavior, they do not suffer from social desirability or other issues that may affect some self-reported data. Nor do the data constitute a sample of a broader population, as the election returns are the entire population of all precincts in Denmark. However, a drawback of using election returns is that they are aggregated over the local populations, which means that I am unable to track which individuals change their political behavior. Changes in local election returns can thus both be attributed to changes in residents' political behavior and changes in the composition of the local electorate. This is known as the ecological fallacy (Openshaw 1983; Robinson 1950). Nevertheless, election returns still constitute an important data source when tracking local changes in political behavior over time.

In Paper C, I rely on survey data from two separate surveys in which the respondents' personal identification number was retained for research

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<sup>1</sup>Data from 2005 are only used to measure the change in support for incumbents and not to estimate support for right-wing populist parties.

purposes. The personal identification number makes it possible to link responses to data from Statistics Denmark, e.g. residence. I can thus link the responses to specific local areas and determine how long respondents have lived there.

The first survey I use is The Danish National Election Study from 2019 (DNES) (Hansen and Stubager 2020). This wave of DNES includes a large variety of survey items related to populist attitudes and place-based resentment that allow me to examine different aspects of the respondents' political attitudes about changes in local political priorities. The survey was conducted from June to September 2019 after the general election on 5 June. DNES comprises several data collection efforts. In addition to the main survey ( $N = 2,050$ ), the team behind DNES collected a two-wave panel survey. The first wave of the panel was collected before the election, and the second wave ( $N = 2,375$ ) was collected simultaneously with the main study. As this second wave includes the same survey items as the main study, I have merged the data from the second wave with data from the main study to improve the statistical power of the study.

The second survey I use is The Danish Social and Political Panel Study (SPAPS). While the scope of the relevant available survey items is more limited, the panel structure allows me to improve the causal identification strategy. The first wave of SPAPS consists of the Danish respondents from ESS Round 1 (2002), Round 4 (2008), and a random sample of the respondents from Round 2 (2004). The second wave of SPAPS consists of a separate survey that was fielded in 2011 among the same respondents. I exclude respondents from the analysis who moved out of their local area over the studied period and did not experience the changes in local political priorities. Combined with the overall retention rate of 47%, it leaves me with 906 respondents (320 from round 1, 136 from round 2, and 450 from round 4).

#### 4.2.1 Measuring support for incumbents

To determine voters' support for incumbents, I rely on different outcome measures in Paper B and Paper C.

In Paper B, where I use data from election returns, I measure support for incumbents as the change in percent of valid votes cast for the incumbent party(s) from the last election to the current election. As the incumbent party changes from election to election, I cannot just look at support for incumbents. Instead, I have to identify how many votes the relevant incumbent got in the previous election to find the change in support. In local elections, I identify the incumbent as the party that held

the mayor's office before the election. In general elections, I define the incumbent party/parties as the party/parties in government. I thus include coalition partners, following previous studies of support for Danish incumbents in national elections (Larsen et al. 2019).

In Paper C, I measure support for incumbents as the respondents' trust in politicians based on data from surveys. In DNES, I combine in an additive index the respondents' answers to the two items: "How much trust do you have in Danish politicians in general? Do you have a lot of trust, quite a lot of trust, quite little trust, or very little trust?"<sup>2</sup> and their agreement on a five-point Likert scale with the statement: "Our political leaders can generally be trusted to make the right decisions for the country". The two items are highly correlated ( $r = 0.56$ ), and their internal consistency is high (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ). In SPAPS, I rely on the respondents' answers to a single item: "Tell me on a scale from 0 to 10, how much trust do you personally have in the institutions I mention. 0 means that you have no trust at all in the institution, and 10 means that you have full trust in the institution. ... politicians?" To ease interpretations, I re-scale these measures to range from 0 to 1.

#### 4.2.2 Measuring populist support and place-based resentment

To examine whether changes in local political priorities affect the appeal of populist messages, I measure a range of outcomes across Paper B and Paper C.

In Paper B, I measure support for right-wing populist parties as percent of the valid votes cast for a right-wing populist party in a given election. During the studied period, Denmark has seen the emergence of several new right-wing populist parties. While the Danish People's Party has been the most prominent party throughout the period, I also include support for The New Right and The Hard Line in the latter elections (Larsen 2021, for introduction to these newer parties see:).

In Paper C, I measure the respondents' tendency to hold populist attitudes and their place-based resentment. While related, these measures are both theoretically and empirically distinct (Munis 2020). I measure the respondents' populist attitudes with an additive index consisting of the respondents' answers to four Likert-style items. In the items, the respondents indicate the extent to which they agree with the following statements: "Politicians consistently pay too little attention to what vot-

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<sup>2</sup>All item wordings are translated here from their original Danish formulations by the author. See the respective papers for the original wordings.

ers think.” “There is a big divide between the elite and the people in today’s Denmark.” “It often happens that the elite trumps the will of the people in Denmark.” “Most politicians don’t care about the people.” These four items have a high internal correlation ( $r > 0.35$ ) and internal consistency (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.77$ ).

I measure the respondents’ place-based resentment similarly based on the following four items: “I am afraid that the area I live in will be disconnected from the development of society.” “My local area has generally been overlooked compared to other parts of the country.” “The population outside the major cities gets less of the economic development than they deserve.” “People living in big cities look down on those living in the countryside.” Again, the internal correlation ( $r > 0.28$ ) and internal consistency (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.70$ ) are relatively high.

In table 4.2, I summarize the data sources and measures I employ in Paper B and Paper C. In the following, I describe the data I collected for the experiment in Paper A.

Table 4.2: Data in observational studies

Paper	Data source for independent variable	Independent variable	Data source for dependent variable	Dependent variable
B	The Danish Institution Registry,	School closure in precinct	The Danish Election Database	$\Delta$ Support for mayor's party (%)
	The National Catalogue of Health Organisation,	One of three nearest schools closed		$\Delta$ Support for incumbent government (%)
	The Central Business Register,	Nearest hospital closed		Support for right-wing populist parties (%)
	Minutes from municipalities (Møller 2019), and newspaper articles from Infomedia.			
C	The Integrated Database for Labor Market Research	% $\Delta$ in expenditures to local public employees	The Danish National Election Study	Trust in politicians
			The Danish Social and Political Panel Study	Populist attitudes
				Place-based resentment

## 4.3 Experimental data

The conjoint experiment was conducted among 1,021 respondents in YouGov’s Danish panel in November 2020. Respondents were recruited based on quotas of the distribution in the Danish population on gender, age, region, and education. This yielded a total of 10,210 respondent-candidate dyads before the analysis ( $1,021 \times 2$  profiles  $\times 5$  conjoint tasks). I excluded 242 respondents from the analysis due to inattentiveness (completing the survey in under 3 minutes) and up to 1,175 additional dyads due to “Don’t know” responses.

In the conjoint task, I manipulate the candidates’ descriptive localism, behavioral localism, symbolic localism, age, gender, occupation, and partisanship. See Paper A for the exact wordings of all levels of the seven attributes.

I vary the candidates’ *descriptive localism* by varying their place of residence and the place they grew up. In Denmark, many political candidates live in Copenhagen but run for office in a local area they can claim to originate from (Pedersen, Kjær, and Eliassen 2008). I therefore made it a priority to distinguish between where the candidate lives and where they grew up. This gives me four attribute levels ranging from candidates who live and grew up in another part of the country to candidates who live and grew up in the respondent’s local area.

I vary the candidates’ *behavioral localism* by altering how they allocate their time in office between local and national issues. By spending most of their time on local issues, the candidate signals that they take care of the material interests of the voters and the local area. The same cannot be said of candidates who spend their time on national issues. This variation is heavily inspired by a treatment formulated and implemented by Campbell et al.(2019).

I vary the candidates’ *symbolic localism* by changing the extent to which they conform to local norms known from various studies of candidates’ “home-style” (Fenno 1978). That is, candidates aim to present themselves to their constituents as belonging to the local in-group using a variety of strategies often tailored specifically to the local community. In some areas, you need to show up for the county fair and eat corn dogs, in other areas you are expected to drive a specific car brand. However, as such norms are very context-specific, I am unable to tailor the cue specifically to the respondents’ place of residence. Instead, I rely on broader norms of being an engaged local citizen, i.e., knowing your neighbors’ names, showing up at local events, and participating in local associations.

I measure the respondents' attitudes towards the candidates by asking: "How likely is it that you would vote for Candidate A [B]?" In the analysis, higher values indicate that the respondents have said that they were more likely to vote for the candidate. In addition, I conducted all analyses with a forced-choice question as the dependent variable. In many countries with single-member districts, such an outcome directly mirrors voters' choice between two candidates in real elections. However, as Danish voters have multiple candidates to choose from, the forced-choice question does not provide the same appeal.

Before the respondents are presented with the conjoint tasks, they are prompted to provide a range of background information on, e.g., gender, age, occupation, and partisanship. I use this information to improve the efficiency of the estimates by controlling for the correspondence between the respondents' and the candidates' characteristics. I hypothesized that the respondents may prefer candidates who share their demographic characteristics or ideological leanings (Cutler 2002).

## 4.4 Summation

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the data sources I have utilized in the three papers of the dissertation. Together with the design choices, which I described in chapter 3, they allow me to answer the dissertation's research question. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the empirical foundations for the papers. The approach in each paper is distinct, but the approaches complement each other. While Paper A allows me to disentangle why people respond to local appeal, Paper B and Paper C focus on changes in local political priorities. Paper B relies on precinct-level election returns that cover the entire population. Paper C complements this by allowing me to track individual citizens and their political attitudes rather than voting intentions.

In the following chapter, I outline what these research designs have enabled me to find and answer whether people's experiences with local political priorities and appeals affect their political behavior.

Table 4.3: Overview over design and data in papers

Paper	Preregistered	Design	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable
A	Yes	Conjoint survey experiment.	Availability of cues about the character of a candidates' attachment to the local area	Likelihood of supporting candidate
B	No	Generalized difference-in-differences design.	Closure of local school Closure of local hospital	<i>Political behavior:</i> Change in support for responsible politicians. Support for right-wing populist parties.
C	Yes	Cross-sectional analysis. Panel analysis.	Changes in expenditures to local public employees	<i>Political attitudes</i> Trust in politicians. Populist attitudes. Place-based resentment



## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings**

This chapter consists of three sections that each deal with an aspect of the extent to which people's local experiences with political priorities and appeals affect their political behavior. Each section summarizes findings from one of the three papers of the dissertation. In the first section, I present the main findings from the candidate choice experiment in Paper A and delve into the mechanism underlying the effectiveness of local appeals. The experiment allows me to disentangle what it is about local candidates that is universally appealing to voters. In the second section, I draw on findings from both Paper B and Paper C to show how changes in local political priorities affect the support for incumbents and mainstream politicians. Can incumbents improve their support in local communities by advancing the material interests of the local area? In the final section, I again draw on findings from Paper B and Paper C to show the extent to which changes in local political priorities affect the draw of populist appeals.

#### **5.1 Why react to local appeals?**

To examine the mechanism that underpins local appeals, I rely on the results from the conjoint experiment in Paper A. The following figures and analysis stem from and synthesize findings from Paper A. Here, I presented 1,021 Danes with hypothetical political candidates with different cues about the candidates' attachment to their local area. All respondents were given information about the candidates' descriptive localism, that is, where they live and where they grew up. In addition, some respondents were provided with cues about the candidates' behavioral localism, that is, how they distributed their workdays between local and national issues. Finally, some respondents were also told about the candidates' symbolic localism, which refers to the extent to which they conform to local norms. The spectrum goes from not being seen regularly in the local area (thus signaling indifference towards the constituency) to knowing most people's names and being active in local associations. In

addition, the respondents were given cues about the candidates' gender, age, employment before entering parliament, and partisanship.

The respondents were then asked to rate on a Likert scale how likely they were to vote for the candidates. This outcome has been scaled to range from 0 to 1, with high values indicating that the respondents are very likely to vote for the candidate. In figure 5.1, I report the respondents' ratings of the candidates dependent on the candidates' attributes. The facet to the left shows the marginal means, which are descriptive measures, while the facet to the right shows the average marginal component effects, which are the causal estimates of changing the candidates' attributes from the reference level to the target level.

I find that Danes prefer candidates with a strong local attachment across the candidates' descriptive localism, behavioral localism, and symbolic localism. Respondents rate candidates who grew up and live in their local area .033 points (.014-.052)<sup>1</sup> higher than candidates who grew up and live elsewhere. Similarly, telling the respondents that the candidate spends four out of five working days on bettering conditions in their local area increases evaluations of the candidate by .042 points (.022-.062) compared to when the respondents are not told about the candidates' behavioral localism. In contrast, the respondents' likelihood of voting for the candidate does not change significantly when they are told that the candidate spends the whole working week on national policies. The respondents may already assume that candidates for the national parliament do that. The cue thus provides little new information. Finally, I find that voters prefer candidates who signal their adherence to the local in-group. Candidates who are active locally and know people's names receive .041 points (.02-.061) higher ratings than candidates whose symbolic localism is undisclosed. In addition, I find that candidates who fail to adhere to local norms receive a significantly lower rating. Telling respondents that a candidate is not seen regularly in the local area reduces their rating by .026 points (.047-.004) compared to when they are not told about the candidate's symbolic localism.

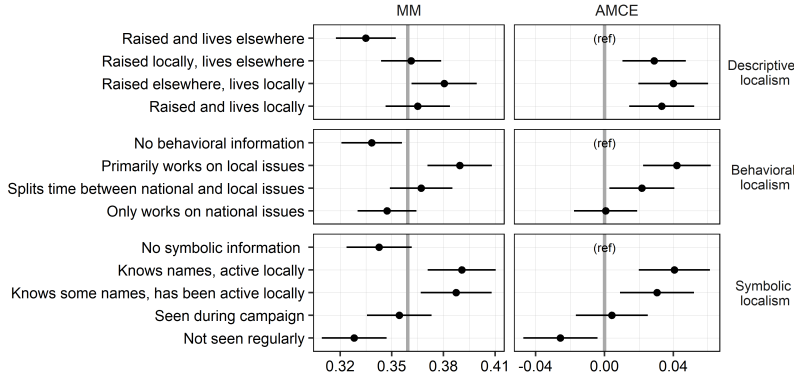
The candidates' descriptive localism, behavioral localism, and symbolic localism have considerably greater effects than the candidates' other demographic attributes. Neither candidates' gender nor candidates' occupation seem to affect the respondents' ratings. The only demographic attribute that reaches conventional levels of significance is age. Older candidates (64-74 years old) receive a significantly lower rating (.057 to .005 lower) than their younger counterparts (27-33 years old).

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<sup>1</sup>All estimates that are based on the various models are provided with 95% confidence intervals in parentheses immediately after the estimate.

In contrast, I find that the candidates' partisanship is much more important to the respondents' evaluations than descriptive localism, behavioral localism, and symbolic localism. Respondents who identify with the candidate's party rate the candidate .254 points higher (.229-.280) than if they do not identify with the party. Even if the candidate only comes from a party from the same political block<sup>2</sup>, the respondents rate the candidate .170 points higher (.149-.191). Nevertheless, candidates' localism retains its causal effect on the respondents' likelihood of voting for them even when I take the candidates' partisanship into account.

Figure 5.1: Estimated Marginal Mean and Average Marginal Component Effect of each Candidate Attribute Level



Note: All AMCEs are estimated compared to the baseline level (ref) of the attribute. Standard errors clustered at the respondent level. Bars show 95% confidence intervals. Bold vertical grey lines indicate the average score on the outcome variable in the left panel. Models include controls for the candidates' gender, age, occupation, and partisanship in addition to controls for correspondence between attributes of respondent and candidate characteristics with regard to gender, age, occupation, and partisanship.

To examine the mechanism underlying the respondents' preference for local candidates, I withhold information about the two proposed mediators (behavioral localism and symbolic localism) from a random sample of respondents. If voters prefer candidates who are descriptively local

<sup>2</sup>In Danish politics, political parties have organized themselves in two "blocks". While the parties promote their own policies and candidates, parties in each block are expected to coalesce around a common candidate for the prime minister's office.

because they make inferences about their behavioral localism (or symbolic localism), then the effect of the cues about the candidates' descriptive localism should be smaller when respondents are informed about the candidates' behavioral localism (or symbolic localism). I test this in figure 5.2.

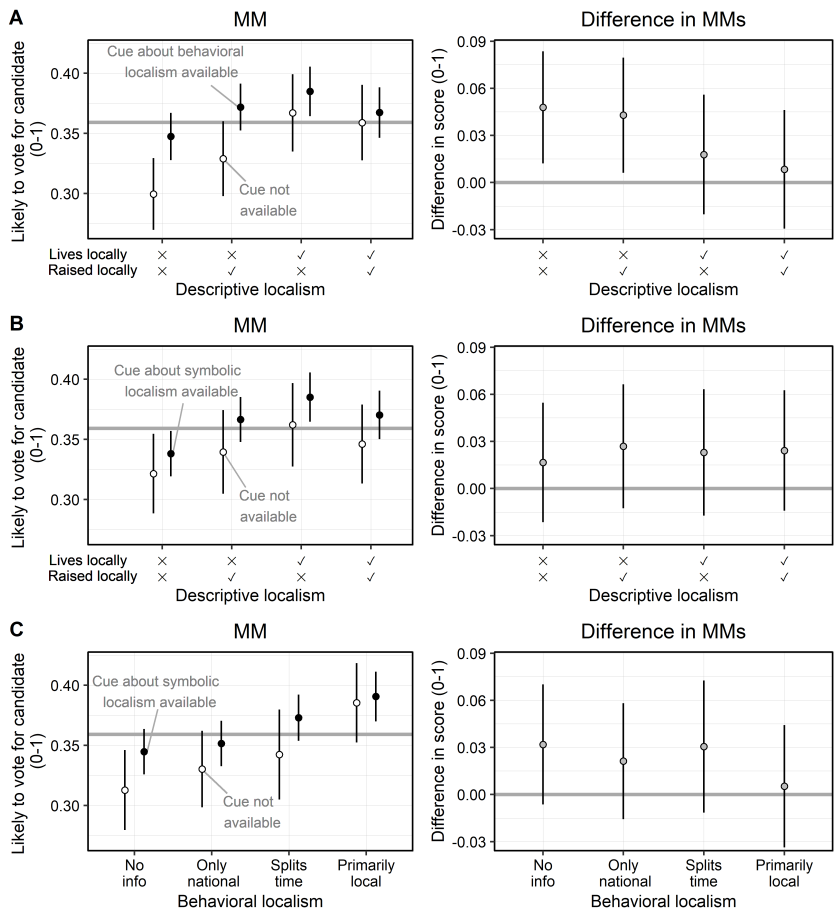
In the left facet of panel A in figure 5.2, I report the marginal means of descriptive localism among respondents who are told about the candidates' behavioral localism (black dots) and among respondents who do not receive this information (white dots). The right facet shows the difference in marginal means between the two groups. In Paper A, I find that the respondents who are informed about the candidates' behavioral localism rely less on the cue about the candidates' descriptive localism. When respondents do not know about the candidates' behavioral localism, there is a difference of .059 (.017 - .100) in their rating of candidates who grew up and live elsewhere and candidates who grew up and live locally. When I disclose information about the candidates' behavioral localism, this difference is reduced by 0.039 (CI .088 smaller to 0.009 larger,  $p=0.11$ ). This suggests that the respondents rely less on information about the candidates' descriptive localism when they also receive information about the candidates' behavioral localism.

Cues about the candidates' behavioral localism seem to affect the respondents' evaluation of candidates who grew up and live elsewhere the most. The marginal mean for these candidates is .30 (.27-.33) when I do not disclose their localism. The respondents' evaluation of these candidates improves by .048 (.012-.083) when the respondents are informed about the candidates' behavioral localism. They report that they are almost as likely to vote for these candidates who grew up and live elsewhere as they are to vote for a candidate who grew up locally but whose behavioral localism remains undisclosed. Thus, when voters know how a candidate will spend their time in office on local issues, they rely much less on information about descriptive localism.

In panel B and panel C of figure 5.2, I analyze the importance of the candidates' symbolic localism similarly. What is the effect of the candidates' descriptive localism (Panel B) or behavioral localism (Panel C) when information about the candidates' symbolic localism is disclosed/undisclosed? Here, I do not see the same drop-off in the effect of either descriptive localism or behavioral localism when information about the candidates' symbolic localism is disclosed. While the respondents tend to rate candidates higher when they are informed about the candidates' symbolic localism (all black dots are above the white dots), this difference does not seem to depend on the candidates' descriptive or behav-

ioral localism. This suggests that while respondents prefer candidates who conform to local norms, it is not the reason they prefer local candidates. Knowing about candidates' symbolic localism does not significantly affect the importance of knowing about the candidates' behavioral localism or descriptive localism.

Figure 5.2: Interaction Between Different Levels of Descriptive Localism, Behavioral Localism and Symbolic Localism



Note: Black dots: Cues about candidate’s behavioral/symbolic localism is available to respondent. White dots: Cues about candidate’s behavioral/symbolic localism is *not* available to respondent. A = descriptive localism × behavioral localism. B = descriptive localism × symbolic localism. C = behavioral localism × symbolic localism. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level. Bars show 95% confidence intervals.

These results suggest that voters respond to local appeals because they seek to further the substantial interests of their local area. One reason voters prefer local candidates is that they infer that these candidates will spend their time in office improving local conditions. When they know how candidates spend their time in office, they rely much less on cues about descriptive localism to make inferences about their behavior in office.

While voters also prefer a candidate who conforms to local norms over candidates who do not, that is not why they prefer local candidates. Information about the candidates' symbolic localism does not confirm or disprove the respondents' prior notions about local candidates.

These results suggest that material changes in people's local areas are important to their voting decision. Voters do prospectively seek candidates who will spend time in office procuring benefits for the local area. However, do they also retrospectively evaluate political candidates based on their ability to do this in the preceding election period? I test this in the following, where I present the findings from Paper B and Paper C regarding how changes in local political priorities affect voters' support for responsible incumbents and trust in politicians.

## 5.2 Effect of changes in local political priorities on support for incumbents

To test whether changes in local political priorities affect voters' support for incumbents, I rely on the findings from Paper B and Paper C. The following figures, tables, and analyses stem from and synthesize findings from both papers. The two papers complement each other and enable me to examine how political attitudes and voting behavior are affected by changes in expenditures to local public employees and policies with adverse local effects.

I first turn to voters' attitudes towards incumbents. In Paper C, I test how changes in local political priorities, measured as the percentage change over the past four years in expenditures to public employees working in the respondents' local parish, affect residents' trust in politicians as a class. Table 5.1 presents the main findings from this analysis. The coefficients are the estimated change in the respondents' trust in politicians on a scale from 0 to 1, of a 100% change in local political priorities. The largest change in local political priorities I observe is about 75% in DNES and about 115% in SPAPS, as I have excluded extreme out-

liers from the analysis<sup>3</sup>. Estimates can thus be thought of as the effect of an extreme change in local political priorities on trust in politicians. The two models stem from two different estimators. The leftmost coefficients stem from a panel model based on data from SPAPS. It can be interpreted as the change within individuals in trust in politicians of a change in local political priorities. The rightmost estimate stems from an OLS model based on data from DNES and is the difference in trust in politicians between respondents dependent on changes in local political priorities.

As shown in the first row of table 5.1, the effect of changes in local political priorities on the respondents' trust in politicians is minuscule. Neither in the cross-sectional analysis nor in the panel analysis are the estimates substantially large or statistically significant. According to the panel model, trust in politicians changes by between +2.9% and -5.7% among residents of parishes where local political priorities increased by 100%. The cross-sectional analysis provides similarly negligible results. A 100% increase in local political priorities is associated with a change in trust in politicians in the range between +3.6 % and -4.0 %. Residents' trust in politicians seems to be largely unaffected by changes in local political priorities.

Instead, trust in politicians seems to be more prevalent among respondents with more personal resources. Respondents with a longer education, higher income, and a job are significantly more trusting of politicians according to the cross-sectional analysis. At the contextual level, there is a tendency for respondents living in areas with increasing housing prices and with a lower population density to hold more trust in politicians. Nevertheless, politicians' decisions to change local political priorities have negligible effects on trust in politicians.

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<sup>3</sup>Extreme outliers are defined as respondents who live in an area that experienced a change in local political priorities that falls outside a fence with a lower bound defined by  $Q1 - 3IQR$  and an upper bound set at  $Q3 + 3IQR$ .



Table 5.1: Estimated Effect of Changes in Local Political Priorities on Trust in Politicians.

Data:	SPAPS	DNES
Dependent variable:	Trust in politicians	Trust in politicians
% $\Delta$ in local political priorities	-0.014 (0.022)	-0.002 (0.019)
<i>Controls</i>		
Individual controls	Yes	Yes
Context controls	Yes	Yes
<i>Fixed-effects</i>		
Unit	Yes	No
Round	Yes	No
Municipality	No	Yes
Respondents	906	2,546
Observations	1,812	

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses at municipality or respondent level. Individual controls include: gender, age, education, household income (log), and employment. Context controls include: population density, population growth, ethnic diversity, change in ethnic diversity, unemployment rate, median household income (log), growth in median household income, and change in housing prizes. Regression table with co-efficients for all individual and contextual controls can be found in Paper C. Signif. Codes: \*: 0.05, †: 0.10.

In Paper B, I focus on voting behavior, more specifically, support for incumbent politicians. I test whether local support for incumbents is affected by policies with adverse local effects they may implement in people's local areas by estimating the change in support for incumbent politicians in local municipal elections and national general elections in precincts affected by school and hospital closures. Schools fall under the purview of municipal councils, while shifting national governments have been heavily involved in the closure of many hospitals. If people hold the responsible incumbents accountable for policies with adverse local effects, we should expect that they punish local mayors for school closures and the national government for hospital closures. On the other hand, people should hold local mayors free of blame when the local hospital closes and absolve the national government of blame for school closures.

Figure 5.3 reports the main findings from Paper B in relation to support for incumbents. The figure plots the estimated difference-in-differences in the change in support for incumbents among precincts that were affected by either school or hospital closure in the elections before the closure ( $p - 2$  or  $p - 3$ ) or after the closure ( $p$ ,  $p + 1$ , or  $p + 2$ ). The coefficient in  $p$  is the immediate effect of changes in local political priorities on people's tendency to vote for the incumbents, and thus the direct test of the hypothesis. Meanwhile, the coefficients in  $p - 2$  and  $p - 3$  test the common trends assumption. They estimate the differences in pre-treatment trends in changes in support for incumbents. They should both be indistinguishable from 0 if the assumption holds. I do detect some differences in the pre-treatment periods in some specifications. However, they mainly pertain to situations where the incumbents are not responsible for the specific policies (hospital closures and support for local mayors or school closures and support for national governments) or only with certain estimation methods (two-way fixed effects and not 2SDiD)<sup>4</sup>. For the main results, the assumption hold.

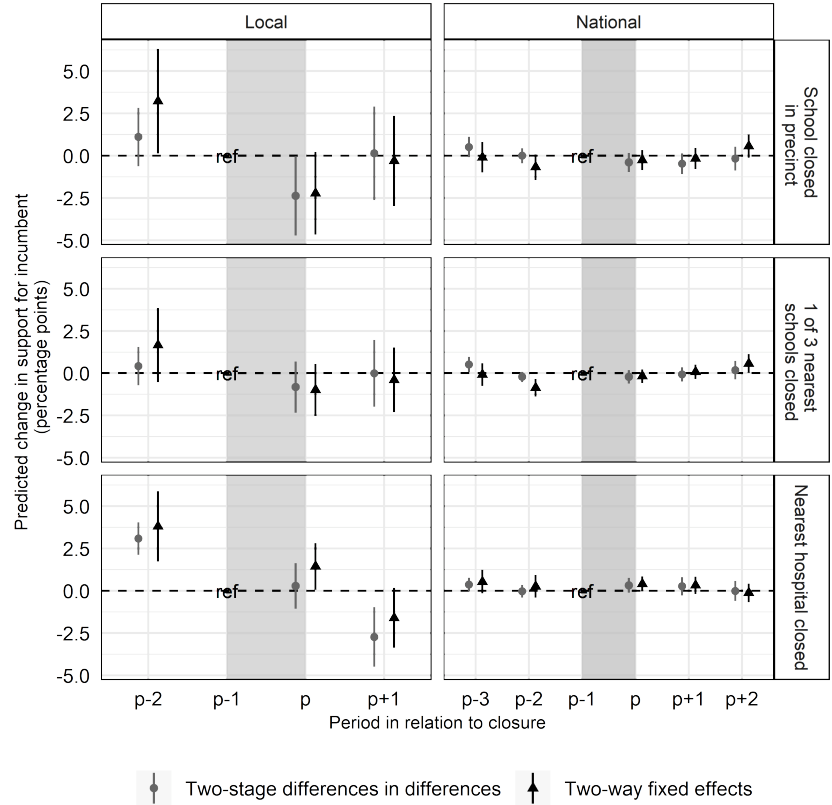
In Paper B, I find that the mayor's party loses 2.4 percentage points (4.7 to 0.3) more support in precincts where they have closed a school in the preceding election period than they do in other precincts (see upper left facet of figure 5.3). A substantial reaction to a single policy. Nevertheless, this effect is fairly local. In the middle facet on the left, I estimate the same model but define whether a precinct is affected by school closure differently. Instead of looking at the precincts where a school closed, I look at all voting districts where the distance from the voting districts' centroid to the three nearest schools has increased over the previous four years. Here the effect decreases to -0.8 percentage points (-2.3 to 0.7) and does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ( $p = 0.28$ ).

In national elections, there is even less difference in the trends in support to the incumbent government between local areas that are affected by policies with adverse local effects and those that are not. In Paper B, I find negligible effects of both relevant policies (hospital closures) and irrelevant policies (school closures) on the change in support for incumbents. None of the effects in any of the periods exceeds 1 percentage point, and none reaches conventional levels of statistical significance.

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<sup>4</sup>Reported results in the text stem from 2SDiD models.

Figure 5.3: Estimated Effect of School and Hospital Closures on Electoral Support for Incumbent Parties



Overall, the findings from Paper B show that voters do hold mayors accountable for local school closures, as their support declines in affected precincts in the election immediately after the closures. In national elections, on the other hand, voters do not hold the government accountable for either school or hospital closures. Support for the national government is largely unaffected by both changes in local political priorities.

### 5.3 Effect of changes in local political priorities on appeal of populist messages

While I mainly do not find that people's political behavior in relation to incumbents is affected by changes in local political priorities, such changes may still affect the appeal of populist messages. To test this proposition, I estimate in Paper C the association between local changes in expenditures to public employees and people's tendency to hold populist attitudes and be place-based resentful, and in Paper B, I test how local school and hospital closures affect the electoral fortunes of right-wing populist parties.

In Paper C, I leveraged that DNES contains a large number of survey items, which allow me to tap both residents' populist attitudes and place-based resentment. That is not the case with SPAPS, and I am thus left to rely on cross-sectional analysis to shed some light on the issue. Table 5.2 reports the main results from Paper C regarding the effect of changes in local political priorities on people's tendency to hold either populist attitudes or be place-based resentful.

In line with the findings regarding residents' trust in politicians, I find that changes in local expenditures on public employees have no substantial or statistically significant effect on the respondents' tendency to hold populist attitudes. Respondents living in areas that experienced large increases in local public expenditures on public employees held neither much less nor much more populist attitudes. However, the model does confirm previous findings of the characteristics of voters for right-wing populist parties: They tend to have shorter educations, lower household income, and be unemployed (Larsen 2021; Patana 2020; Jennings and Stoker 2017). In addition, I find that increasing housing prices in the respondents' local area tend to dampen populist attitudes ( $p = 0.09$ ). This corroborates previous findings of the effect of changes in housing prices on support for right-wing populist parties (Ansell et al. 2022; Adler and Ansell 2020).

Nevertheless, I find that increases in the total expenditures on public employees over the preceding four years in the respondents' local area tend to reduce residents' place-based resentment ( $p = 0.09$ ). A 100% increase in local expenditures on local public employees is associated with a 4.1 percentage points decrease (8.7 to -0.6 percentage points) in residents' tendency to be place-based resentful. This effect size is similar to the difference in place-based resentment between a respondent who has finished primary school or less and a respondent who holds a bachelor's degree. In Paper C, I argue that this effect constitutes weak support

Table 5.2: Estimated effect of Changes in Local Political Priorities on Populist Attitudes and Place-Based Resentment.

Data:	DNES	
Dependent variable:	Populist Attitudes	Place-Based Resentment
% $\Delta$ in local political priorities	0.001 (0.017)	-0.041 <sup>†</sup> (0.024)
<i>Controls</i>		
Individual controls	Yes	Yes
Context controls	Yes	Yes
<i>Fixed-effects</i>		
Municipality	Yes	Yes
Respondents	2,286	2,019

Note: Clustered standard errors in parentheses at the municipality or respondent level. Individual controls include: gender, age, education, household income (log), and employment. Context controls include: population density, population growth, ethnic diversity, change in ethnic diversity, unemployment rate, median household income (log), growth in median household income, and change in housing prizes. Regression table with coefficients for all individual and contextual controls can be found in Paper C. Signif. Codes: \*: 0.05, <sup>†</sup>: 0.10.

for the proposition that residents’ place-based resentment is affected by changes in local political priorities. Partly due to that, the change in local political priorities in most local areas is much smaller than the 100% needed to reach the estimated effect. In addition, the effect seems to be sensitive to the model specifications. In auxiliary tests, I run a range of permutations over the original specification, which does not suggest that this is a robust finding. The results thus only provide tentative support for the proposition that place-based resentment is affected by changes in local political priorities.

Instead, place-based resentment seems to be related to local population growth and population density. Residents in less dense parishes with a lower population growth seem to be more inclined to hold place-based resentful attitudes. This support previous findings that place-based resentment is particularly prevalent in declining rural communities (Munis 2020; Cramer 2016; Hansen and Hjorth 2021). In Paper B, I test the effect of changes in local political priorities in the form of school and

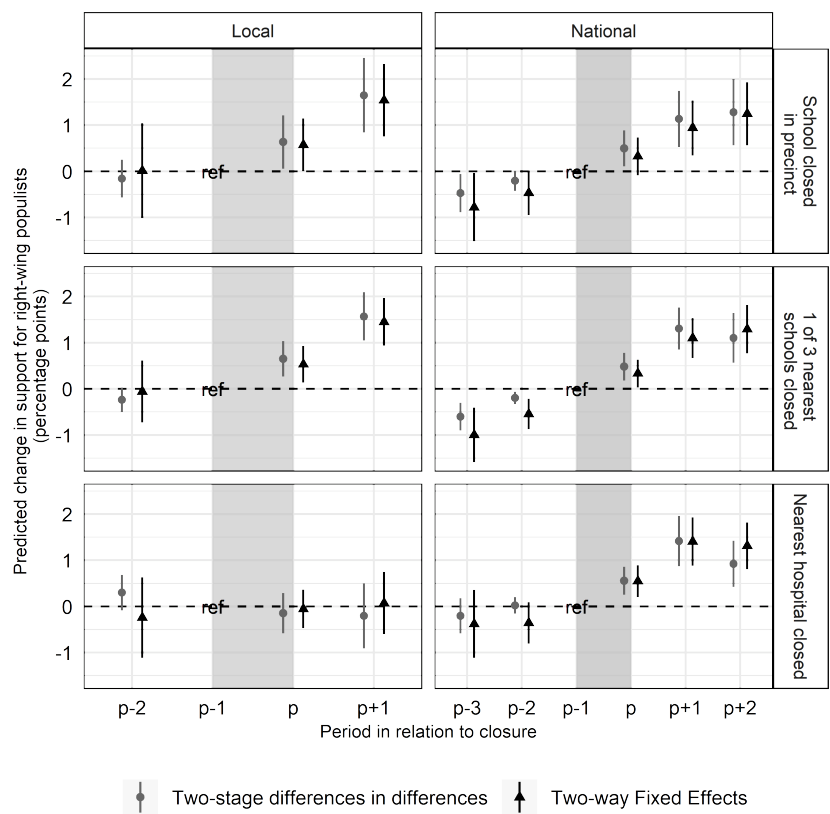
hospital closures on the support for right-wing populist parties (mainly support for The Danish People's Party, but support for The New Right and The Hard Line is included in the later periods). Figure 5.4 reports the difference in the change in support for right-wing populist parties (in percent) between precincts that were affected by either school or hospital closure in the elections prior to the closure ( $p - 2$  or  $p - 3$ ) and in the elections after the closure ( $p, p + 1$  or  $p + 2$ ).

I find that in elections immediately following a school closure, support for right-wing populist parties increases by 0.6 percentage points (0.06 - 1.2) in local elections in precincts affected by school closures compared to the trend in precincts that are not affected. This effect is not sensitive to the chosen aggregation level. I thus find a similar effect when I define exposure to school closures as a change in the distance to the three nearest schools. These effects are not short-lived either, as I find that it increases to a 1.6 percentage points (0.8 - 2.5) advantage in the second election after the closure. Right-wing populist parties thus seem to gain a persistent electoral advantage in local elections in precincts affected by school closures.

At the national level, I find similar results concerning hospital closures. In the election just after the nearest hospital closed, support for right-wing populists increases by 0.6 percentage points (0.3 to 0.9) more in precincts affected by hospital closures than in unaffected precincts. Again, the effect increases in the longer term to 1.4 percentage points (0.9 to 2.0) in the second election and then declines to 0.9 percentage points (0.4 to 1.4) in the third election after the closure. Overall, right-wing populist parties enjoy a substantial electoral advantage in precincts affected by hospital closures in national elections.

However, the results are more mixed in elections to electoral bodies unrelated to the policy in question. I thus find no difference in the trend in support for right-wing populist parties in local elections between precincts affected by school and hospital closures. Meanwhile, there seems to be a similar positive effect of school closures for right-wing populist parties in national elections. However, in these models, the common-trends assumption tends to be violated in the pre-treatment periods. I therefore abstain from drawing any firm conclusions from these results.

Figure 5.4: Estimated Effect of School and Hospital Closures on Electoral Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties



## 5.4 Summation

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the main findings from the three papers of the dissertation. Each paper provides distinct insight into the extent to which people’s experiences with local political priorities and appeals affect their political behavior. In the following chapter, I summarize and conclude on the dissertation’s overall research question and discuss potential limitations and implications of the findings.





## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion and conclusions**

In this dissertation, I set out to answer whether people's experiences with changes in local political priorities and appeals affect their political behavior. I have done so in three papers that utilize diverse data sources and research designs. In this chapter, I will summarize my answer to the research question based on the findings from the three papers and discuss the broader applicability of the findings. I then go on to outline some of the key implications of the findings. What does it mean to democratic accountability, and how can we expect support for populist messages and place-based resentment to be affected by shifting political priorities? Finally, I dwell on the implications of the findings for the broader literature on context effects and outline some future avenues for research.

#### **6.1 Summation of findings**

Do people's experiences with local appeals affect their political behavior? Yes, I find that voters prospectively respond to local appeals. People favor political candidates who signal attachment to the local area. This applies to simple descriptive cues, such as knowing that a candidate lives or grew up there. However, knowing that a candidate spends most of their working time on improving local conditions or is actively engaged in the local community also improves people's likelihood of voting for the candidate. This even holds when I take people's partisanship and the candidates' partisanship into account.

Furthermore, I find that people's preference for candidates who are descriptively local to a large extent can be explained by the inferences people make about such candidates' behavioral localism. People seek candidates who will look out for the material interests of their local area, and finding a candidate who resides locally is a way of doing just that. Thus, when voters are provided with cues about candidates' behavioral localism, the importance of the candidates' descriptive localism diminishes.

Do people's experiences with local political priorities affect their political behavior? On the one hand, my answer is *yes*. In Paper B, I find that local mayors lose about 2.5 percentage points of their support in precincts where the municipal council closed a school in the preceding election period. Here changes in local political priorities seem to establish a link between voters' local experiences and elected politicians' actions in office. As a consequence, residents punish the responsible incumbent. In addition, I theorize that people's experiences with local political priorities affect the appeal of populist messages. In support of this proposition, I find that right-wing populist parties improve their relative electoral prospects significantly in local elections when the local school closes, and in national elections when the nearest hospital closes. At the precinct level, changes in local political priorities thus seem to matter to the relative electoral strength of right-wing populist parties.

That being said, I do not always find that residents' political behavior is affected by changes in local political priorities. In Paper B, I thus find that support for the national government is unaffected in precincts where the nearest hospital is closed. In addition, the findings from Paper C clearly illustrate the limitations of residents' attention to changes in local political priorities. I thus find that people who experience an increase in expenditures on public employees who work in their local area do *not* trust politicians more or less or have a lower or higher tendency to hold populist attitudes. While I find that residents' tendency to be place-based resentful is reduced slightly by increases in local political priorities, the effect does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance and does not replicate consistently across alternative model specifications. An explanation of these findings may be that voters are inattentive to the amount spent on public employees in their local area. I thus also find that many are unable to answer whether they think that the number of public jobs in their local area increased or decreased over the preceding year, and there is no correlation between objective changes and respondents' subjective perception. So while I find that voters do respond to local appeals and some changes in local political priorities, voters do not seem to notice this particular aspect of their local surroundings.

## 6.2 Generalizing of the results of the study

In this dissertation, I rely exclusively on data from Denmark, because it allows me to link respondents' political behavior to data on changes in local political priorities. Furthermore, Denmark provides an exemplary case to study support for right-wing populist parties, place-based

resentment, and the effectiveness of local appeals. While these phenomena are far from unique to Denmark, they are all present in the Danish case. Denmark has had a relatively successful right-wing populist party in the form of the Danish People's Party, which has partly mobilized on an appeal to declining rural communities. So much so that the election in 2015, when the Danish People's Party peaked electorally, was described as a "rebellion from the periphery" (Hansen and Stubager 2017b). In addition, the electoral system incentivizes candidates to make local appeals, and voters can reward such local appeals. Denmark has a proportional election system that traditionally has been associated with weaker local accountability (Shugart, Valdini, and Suominen 2005, 438). However, most parties employ some form of open lists that enable voters to influence which candidates are elected (Elklit 2020, 69). In this particular aspect, the incentives of political candidates emulate the incentive structure of single-member electoral districts.

However, focusing exclusively on Denmark raises the question of the relevance of the findings in a broader context. In the following, I discuss three aspects that may limit the relevance of the findings: 1) the relevance of local appeals and changes in local political priorities beyond Denmark; 2) how changes in local political priorities are comprehended. Are Danes more or less attentive to their local context? 3) the issue of self-selection.

In theory, the relevance of local appeals and changes in local political priorities could be a Danish peculiarity, but it is not. With respect to local appeals, descriptively local candidates have been found to have an electoral advantage in the United States (Tatalovich 1975; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1983), the United Kingdom (Campbell et al. 2019; Campbell and Cowley 2014; Evans et al. 2017), Japan (Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto 2020), Germany (Jankowski 2016; Schulte-Cloos and Bauer 2021), Norway (Fiva and Smith 2017), and Estonia (Tavits 2010) to name a few. Relying on cues about candidates' descriptive localism is thus not just a Danish phenomenon. While voters elsewhere may use cues about candidates' descriptive localism to learn about other aspects of the candidates' characteristics than their behavioral localism, having a candidate in office who works for your local area is still advantageous to voters. It is thus plausible that the finding from Paper A generalizes to other contexts.

In Paper B and Paper C, I explicitly utilize that Denmark has implemented a series of public sector reforms that increased the variation in changes in local political priorities. This variation may be greater in Denmark than in many other countries. However, changing the spatial distribution of public resources, i.e. pork barrel politics, is a widespread policy tool across polities (Ferejohn 1974; Feldman and Jondrow 1984;

Stein 1990; Levitt and Snyder 1997; Stratmann 2013). The more concrete changes that I focus on in this study can also be found elsewhere. Amalgamations of local government have swept many developed democracies (Blom-Hansen et al. 2016), and many OECD countries have closed schools and hospitals over the preceding decades (Ares 2014; OECD 2020). As I have shown in the Danish case, these closures have been concentrated in rural areas, which is also the case in the United States (NCES 2020; Kaufman et al. 2016). Reforms aimed at alleviating the challenges in rural and peripheral regions by shifting the spatial distribution of public expenditures have also become a prominent aspect of many government policy platforms across western democracies. In the UK, the Johnson government launched the plan "Levelling Up the United Kingdom" (UK Government 2022), which explicitly aimed to "shift government focus and resources to Britain's forgotten communities" (Prime Minister's Office 10 Downing Street et al. 2022). In the US, the bipartisan infrastructure bill included funding for a range of projects in rural areas, and the Biden Administration has made a substantial effort to reach out to these communities to ensure that the money is spent (The White House 2022). La Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne (National Strategy for "Inner Areas") in Italy (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale 2021) is another example of outreach to declining communities. In other words, neither local appeals nor changes in local political priorities seem to be unique to Denmark.

While changes in local political priorities and local appeals may resemble phenomena elsewhere, Danes may comprehend them differently. A precondition for people's political behavior to be affected by their local context is that they are cognizant of their local context, and that they link their experiences to politics.

Are Danes particularly ignorant of or attentive to their local surroundings? In Paper C, I find that respondents to a large extent are ignorant of objective changes in local political priorities. This may not generalize to another context. However, previous studies of context effects in Denmark have demonstrated that Danes are not generally ignorant of their local context. They find that Danes are cognizant of the ethnic diversity in their neighborhood (Hjorth 2020), and that their political behavior is influenced by such disparate aspects as housing prices (Larsen et al. 2019), unemployment (Bisgaard, Dinesen, and Sønderskov 2016), and ethnic diversity (Dinesen and Sønderskov 2015; Danckert, Dinesen, and Sønderskov 2017). The findings rather demonstrate that people are not attentive to all aspects of their local context, which means that only

some aspects influence their political behavior. This highlights that we need a better understanding of what aspects people are cognizant of.

Another possibility is that Danes rely less on information from their local context. Comparatively, Denmark has high levels of nationalization of political behavior (Caramani 2004, 93). If Danes are more likely to let their political behavior be dictated by national issues rather than local concerns, my estimates of the effect of changes in local political priorities on political behavior may be smaller than in less nationalized contexts. While nationalization of political behavior in Denmark is at a comparatively high level making it a hard case in this respect, other countries have been reaching similar levels or are becoming increasingly nationalized (Caramani 2004; Hopkins 2018). Denmark is thus starting to resemble other countries in this respect as well. Nevertheless, Danes could still interpret changes in local political priorities differently than residents elsewhere. In this project, I have argued that an increase in local public expenditures is generally interpreted as a positive development. It improves people's own and their local community's welfare, and it signals politicians' adherence to the local in-group and power-sharing with the community. However, in Cramer's (2016) interviews with rural residents in Wisconsin in the United States, it is clear that residents do not have such a rosy perspective on increased expenditures on public employees in their local area. While many respondents were willing to pay for public services, they thought that their taxes were sucked away to the cities (Cramer 2016, 159). In addition, public employees were perceived to enjoy superior working conditions, which people had to pay for with their hard-earned incomes (146). As property taxes are used to pay for local services in the US, there is a clear link between local expenditures on local public employees and the local tax burden (Laubach 2005).

Here, Denmark diverges from the United States. The comprehensive regional equalization system enables local governments across the country to provide somewhat similar services despite widely varying tax bases (Ministry of the Interior and Housing). In addition, 28% of the population are in some respect employed by the state. This is similar to other Nordic countries but much higher than in most other OECD countries (OECD 2021). Most Danes are thus either employed by the state or have close relatives who are. As residents do not feel a close link between their taxes and expenditures on local public expenditures, they may view increased expenditures as an isolated good.

If people in other contexts generally are less positive towards public employees, it further limits the potential consequences for incumbents of changing local political priorities. If incumbents cannot expect locals to

view their efforts as furthering the material interests of the local area, they should expect even less reward for their efforts than I find here. However, as this discussion highlights, how the policy is interpreted to a high extent depends on the specifics of the policy at hand. Who is going to pay for increases in local expenditures? Is the expenditure something people's local area is entitled to, or is the expenditure excessive? Understanding how voters experience local political priorities is an important avenue for further research.

A final concern is that Danes may be more likely to move than other populations. As politicians shift resources away from a local area, residents may move away to find areas with better opportunities and public services. Denmark is a geographically small country, and the population is both culturally and socially homogeneous (Jenkins 2011, 47). This limits the cost of moving from one part of the country to another. You never get that far away from your social network, and most areas are not that different from where you came from. Self-selection may thus be a larger concern than elsewhere.

However, descriptive statistics suggest that this does not apply to a substantial part of the population. In a recent analysis, the Danish Transport Construction and Housing Authority (2018) used Danish registries to analyze how far people had to travel to go "home" for Christmas. They found that 44 % of the Danish population live within 10 km (6.2 miles) of the parish they were born in (Danish Transport Construction and Housing Authority 2018). Many never leave their childhood area, and many return home after they have taken an education. Self-selection is thus unlikely to be a much larger issue than in other contexts.

In addition, I have sought to minimize the issue of movers in the papers and instead focus on residents who have experienced change in local political priorities. While I am unable to identify movers in Paper B, I do so in Paper C. In the analysis, I specifically focus on people who did not move out of their local parish in the studied period. By doing so, I exclude many younger respondents who often move in connection with education and job. As they would have done so anyhow, this allows me to focus on the relevant part of the population.

Overall, the findings of the dissertation are based on the case of Denmark. However, as the preceding discussion indicates, the findings are likely to be relevant in other contexts with similar developments. That being said, further studies from other contexts would improve our understanding of people's sensitivity to changes in local political priorities.

## 6.3 Implications

At the outset of this project, I argued that understanding whether people react to changes in local political priorities and local appeals is important because of their potential effects on people's support for incumbents and the appeal of populist messages. In the following, I pick up this argument and discuss the findings' implications for people's tendency to hold incumbents accountable for their actions in office and the effects of changes in local political priorities on the appeal of populist messages in declining local areas.

### 6.3.1 Holding incumbents accountable

Normative models of democracy often assume that people base their vote choice on candidates' policy positions or their performance in office (see, e.g., Key 1966; Schumpeter 1943; Dahl 1998). Voters' susceptibility to local appeals was therefore deplored by Key (1949) when he first established what he termed "friends-and-neighbors voting". Voters were "susceptibility to control by the irrelevant appeal to support the home-town boy" (Key 1949, 37). However, as Campbell et al. (2019) argue, people do vote for local candidates out of material concerns. As I further demonstrate in Paper A, voters do not rely on cues about candidates' descriptive localism to make inferences about their symbolic localism. While they prefer "the home-town boy" who knows their names and is engaged in local associations, that is *not* the reason they prefer local candidates. Instead, I find that they prefer candidates who live in their local area because they infer that they will spend more time in office on local issues. This inference is often warranted, as local political candidates have been found to promote their local area's interests once elected (Tavits 2010; Fiva and Halse 2016; Binderkrantz et al. 2020; Carozzi and Repetto 2016). Voting for a local candidate can thus be in full accordance with democratic ideals that presume that voters seek candidates who represent their material interests.

However, it is one thing to prospectively seek candidates who represent one's local interests, it is another to respond to the actual changes in local political priorities and hold incumbents accountable for their actions in office. While former Speaker of the House "Tip" O'Neil's statement that "all politics is local politics" suggests that political candidates should take care not to cross the interests of their local electorates, my findings suggest that in many cases, changes in local political priorities have a limited impact on their electoral prospects. While local mayors

are punished for the closure of the local school, that is about the extent to which I detect that incumbents are punished or rewarded retrospectively for changes in local political priorities.

This can be given a positive interpretation. Strong local accountability can have detrimental effects on policy outcomes as illustrated by NIM-BYism (Not In My Back Yard), the phenomenon that support for policies at the aggregate level disappears at the local level (Hankinson 2018, 475). Previous studies have found that transition to sustainable energy sources has been hampered by opposition to the construction of wind turbines at the local level (Stokes 2016). Similar issues have affected the housing crisis (Hankinson 2018). Limited local accountability may thus give politicians leeway to pursue policies that otherwise have broad electoral support.

Another possibility is that residents approved of the studied changes in local political priorities. While politicians may fight vigorously for provisions for their constituents, constituents may not always view increases in local political expenditures as a good. They may either view expenses over a certain limit as excessive, or they may primarily care about the quality of local services and not how much money is spent on them. Residents of Nakskov may thus find it wasteful to have a hospital in town or they may view it as more appealing to go to a hospital far away and be treated by specialized surgeons than going to the local hospital. The location of public services is thus only one parameter residents use to evaluate the performance of public services.

Nevertheless, the limited retrospective response to changes in local political priorities puts politicians in an awkward position. On the one hand, voters will reward politicians for making local appeals, because they expect them to promote the interests of their local area. However, as they cannot be sure that residents respond to actual changes in local political priorities, politicians have little incentive to follow through. While voters do not outright encourage politicians to be hypocrites, they far from always hold them accountable for their actions in office in relation to their local area.

### 6.3.2 Affecting the appeal of populist messages

The logic of alleviating the appeal of populist messages by shifting the distribution of public resources fundamentally follows Easton's logic that: "One of the major ways of strengthening the ties of the members to their system is through providing decisions that tend to satisfy the day-to-day demands of these members" (Easton 1957, 395). While some may want to shift public resources to declining communities to limit the appeal of



right-wing populist movements, the immediate goal is to alleviate people's day-to-day challenges. Nevertheless, in this dissertation, I have focused exclusively on the effect of changes in local political priorities on residents' political behavior. I am thus also unable to discern whether the studied changes in local political priorities actually can reduce these challenges in declining communities.

Often the magnitude of the decline in many communities is so large that changes in local political priorities will be unable to alleviate local decline. When Gest describes residents of former industrial towns, he likens them to Greeks and Italians wandering among the ruins of their ancient empires (2016 11). While public jobs and similar services provide some economic stability in a local area, it is hard to imagine that changes in the spatial distribution of public resources alone can replace the jobs and growth that previous industries brought with them.

However, less can do it too. I show in Paper A that people respond favorably to cues about candidates' symbolic localism. You may expect that residents of declining communities reward mere gestures that aim to alleviate local decline, but as I show in Paper C, you cannot just change local political priorities and expect voters to notice. I do not find that residents' tendency to hold populist attitudes or be place-based resentful is affected by changes in expenditures on local public employees, as they seem to go unnoticed.

That being said, access to public services does seem to be important to residents' susceptibility to populist appeals. In Paper B, I find that policies with adverse local effects improve the relative electoral prospects for right-wing populist parties in the affected regions. This is in line with recent findings from other studies. Hansen and Hjorth (2021) thus find that the distance to the nearest town hall and the distance to parliament increase voters' tendency to hold place-based resentful attitudes in Denmark, and Cremaschi et al. (2022) find in a recent working paper that the distance to public service hubs in Italy increases support for right-wing populist parties.

However, the different results may also be due to differences in the analysis level. In Paper B, I rely on aggregate data at the precinct level. I am thus unable to determine why right-wing populist parties hold a relatively stronger position in the local area. Do voters gravitate towards right-wing populist parties because they find their messages more appealing when their local area is exposed to a policy with adverse local effects? Or do resourceful voters, who rarely vote for right-wing populist parties, move to more prosperous areas? While both mechanisms may be at play, I am unable to determine which is most prevalent based on

the aggregate data. A promising route for further research would be to unpack the compositional effects on local electorates of changes in local political priorities.

## 6.4 Concluding remarks

It is challenging to connect local experiences with changing political priorities to politics. Did the hospital in Nakskov just close? Or was it just a downsizing? Was it the regional government or the national government that closed it? And is it a bad thing? Might I actually receive better service at a hospital further away? Do I want to change my vote because of it? As I have shown in the three articles and the present summary, local appeals and changes in local political priorities do affect people's political behavior. However, linking local experiences to politics is not straightforward.

While this dissertation focuses almost exclusively on the contextual effects of changes in local political priorities, these policies may impact geographical polarization in other ways than by affecting residents' political behavior. When I find, in Paper B, that policies with adverse local effects improve the relative strength of right-wing populist parties, an obvious next step would be to explore the compositional effects on the local electorate of changes in local political priorities. A plausible hypothesis is that changes in local political priorities affect a local area's appeal to potential new residents. Who wants to settle in a deteriorating industrial town such as Nakskov, when the old hospital is being torn down? Not only are future job prospects poorer; access to public services is worse than in other competing areas. Previous studies have shown that partisans have limited differences in their view on the desirability of different neighborhoods (Martin and Webster 2020), and they often choose their place of residence based on other characteristics than the neighborhood partisan makeup (Mummolo and Nall 2017). Nevertheless, there may still be differences between how mobile people with different political viewpoints are. It is central to Maxwell's (2019) argument concerning the polarization of attitudes towards immigrants between urban and rural areas. Highly mobile educated workers seek jobs in the knowledge economy in the cities, leaving behind the less educated, who are more critical of immigrants. A fertile avenue for further research would be to untangle how changes in local political priorities affect people's moving patterns, and how these correlate with their political attitudes.

Across the different studies, I find that there are limits to the influence of local appeals. This highlights the need to better understand the

conditions that make residents attentive to their local context. Previous studies of context effects emphasize that voters are more attuned to salient aspects of their local context. Being in contact with a particular aspect or intensive media coverage may make one more cognizant of that aspect (Larsen et al. 2019; Hopkins 2010). Furthermore the bigger an aspect is, the closer it is, or the more distinct it is, the more salient it becomes (Enos 2017, 70). When I find that school and hospital closures do affect the relative strength of political parties, but that changes in local political priorities only have limited effects, salience could be an important conditioning factor. However, both track the outcome of political decisions. Understanding how residents appraise their local area for politically relevant information is an important avenue for further research.

A separate concern is to understand when residents link their local experiences to electoral politics. In Paper B, I find that the fortunes of national governments are unaffected by changes in local political priorities. One may thus think that people disregard their local context when voting in national elections. However, this is not always the case, as I also find that support for right-wing populist parties increases in national elections when an area is affected by a policy with adverse local effects. I introduced this summary with the discrepancy between the apparent importance of local appeals to people's political behavior on the one side and the multiple hurdles people face in connecting local experiences to their political behavior. However, as the dissertation shows, these observations exist in parallel. While people may be attuned to national considerations, they can also be swayed by changes in local political priorities.



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## English Summary

Changes in local political priorities constitute some of the most prominent experiences people have with political decisions. When a local school or hospital closes, it affects citizens' well-being, the future prospects of the local area as well as its status and prestige. Political candidates are thus also quick to make local appeals and promote their local credentials.

Connecting experiences of changes in local political priorities to politics is challenging. For changes in local political priorities to affect people's political behavior, people have to pay attention to their local context, make sense of the changes and decide how they will affect their political behavior. In the end, people may instead rely on their usual national affiliations.

Changes in local political priorities provide citizens with the opportunity to hold incumbent politicians accountable for their decisions and can establish a link between citizens' own local experiences and elected politicians' behavior. Furthermore, the growing support for right-wing populist parties in rural areas and other declining regions has drawn attention to the possibility of reducing local challenges by moving public investment to these regions. However, it is unclear whether shifts in the geographical distribution of public resources affect the draw of populist messages.

This dissertation examines whether citizens' experiences with changes in local political priorities and local appeals influence their political behavior. Drawing on theories of context effects, local appeals, and support for right-wing populist parties, the dissertation develops expectations about how people's political behavior is affected by changes in local political priorities. This includes both why voters respond to local appeals and how they link their local experiences of changes in local political priorities with support for incumbents and the draw of populist messages.

These expectations are tested in three studies. The first study uses experimentally manipulated descriptions of political candidates to disentangle why people respond to local appeals. Do people respond to local appeals because of their material interests or because of in-group favouritism? The study shows that the importance of a candidate's res-

idence to respondents' evaluations is significantly diminished when respondents also are informed about how the candidate divides their working time between local and national issues. People thus partly seek out local candidates to represent their local area's substantial interests.

The second and third studies examine whether people retrospectively respond to changes in local political priorities. By drawing on administrative data on school closures, hospital closures, and spending on public jobs, the studies link objective data on changes in local political priorities to local election results and surveys of residents' trust in politicians, populist attitudes, and place-based resentment. The overall conclusion from these studies is that people do respond to changes in local political priorities. Local school and hospital closures increase the relative support for right-wing populist parties, and local mayors are punished for local school closures. However, people far from always respond to changes in local political priorities. People's trust in politicians, populist attitudes, and place-based resentment thus seem to be unrelated to local changes in expenditures on public employees.

These findings give rise to discussions of the conditioning factors for context effects. People have to notice changes in local political priorities for them to have an effect. While it is hard to miss a school or hospital closure, more gradual changes in overall spending on public jobs can go unnoticed. This dissertation thus shows that there are limits to local appeals in parallel with that changes in local political priorities are pertinent to people's political behavior.

## Dansk resumé

Ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteringer er nogle af de mest fremtrædende erfaringer, folk har med politiske beslutninger. Når en lokal skole eller et lokalt hospital lukker, påvirker det ikke kun borgernes velfærd, men også lokalområdets fremtidsudsigter, status og prestige. Politiske kandidater er derfor også hurtige til at appellere til lokale anliggender og promovere deres egne lokale kvaliteter.

Ikke desto mindre er det udfordrende at forbinde erfaringer med ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteringer med politik. Hvis folks politiske adfærd skal påvirkes af ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter, kræver det, at folk er opmærksomme på deres lokale kontekst, forstår ændringerne og beslutter, hvordan de skal påvirke deres politiske adfærd. I sidste ende kan det være, at folk falder tilbage til at støtte sig til deres sædvanlige nationale tilhørsforhold.

Ikke desto mindre giver ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteringer folk mulighed for at holde de siddende politikere ansvarlige for deres beslutninger. Sådanne ændringer kan nemlig skabe en forbindelse mellem borgernes egne lokale erfaringer og de valgte politikeres adfærd. Desuden har den stigende støtte til højrepopulistiske partier i länddistrikter og andre regioner i tilbagegang skabt opmærksomhed om muligheden for at mindske lokal tilbagegang ved at flytte offentlige investeringer til disse regioner. Det er imidlertid uklart, om forskydninger i den geografiske fordeling af offentlige ressourcer påvirker hvor attraktive populistiske budskaber er.

I denne afhandling undersøges det, om borgernes erfaringer med ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter og lokale appeller påvirker deres politiske adfærd. Med udgangspunkt i teorier om konteksteffekter, lokale appeller og støtte til højrepopulistiske partier udvikler afhandlingen forventninger om, hvordan borgernes politiske adfærd påvirkes af ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter. Dette omfatter både, hvorfor vælgerne reagerer på lokale appeller, og hvordan de forbinder deres lokale erfaringer med ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter med støtte til de magthavende politikere og populistiske budskabers tiltrækningskraft.

Disse forventninger afprøves i tre studier. I det første studie anvendes eksperimentelt manipulerede beskrivelser af politiske kandidater til

at undersøge, om folk reagerer på lokale appeller på grund af deres materielle interesser eller på grund af favorisering af lokale? Undersøgelsen viser, at betydningen af politiske kandidaters bopæl for respondenternes vurderinger mindskes betydeligt, når respondenterne også informeres om, hvordan kandidaten fordeler sin arbejdstid mellem lokale og nationale spørgsmål. Folk opsøger således til dels lokale kandidater for at få deres lokalområders materielle interesser repræsenteret.

I det andet og tredje studie undersøges det, om folk reagerer retrospektivt på ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter. Ved at trække på administrative data om skolelukninger, hospitalslukninger og udgifter til offentlige arbejdspladser knytter studierne objektive data om ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter sammen med lokale valgresultater og undersøgelser af indbyggernes tillid til politikere, populistiske holdninger og stedbaseret utilfredshed. Den overordnede konklusion er, at folk reagerer på ændringer i de lokale politiske prioriteringer. Lukninger af lokale skoler og hospitaler øger den relative støtte til højrepopulistiske partier, og lokale borgmestre straffes for lokale skolelukninger. Det er imidlertid langt fra altid at folk reagerer på ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter. Deres tillid til politikere, populistiske holdninger og stedbaseret utilfredshed synes således ikke at være relateret til ændringer i udgifterne til offentligt ansatte i folks lokalområder.

Disse resultater rejser diskussion om, hvad der afgør, om folks lokale kontekst er betydende for deres politiske adfærd. Folk skal lægge mærke til ændringerne i lokale politiske prioriteringer, for at de kan have en effekt. Mens det er svært at overse en lukning af en skole eller et hospital, kan mere gradvise ændringer i de samlede udgifter til offentlige arbejdspladser gå ubemærket hen. Denne afhandling viser således, at der er grænser for, hvor meget folk reagerer på lokale politiske appeller parallelt med, at ændringer i lokale politiske prioriteter er relevante for folks politiske adfærd.