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# The impact of the local conservative climate on generalised trust in Sweden

## ABSTRACT

The rise of the radical right parties, with their anti-immigrant rhetoric, may amplify the generally observed negative impact of diversity on generalised trust. The impact of the conservative climate created by these parties is apparent at the national level, but the little research carried out in the field has yet to examine the role of their local political power. In Sweden, the literature suggests that the radical right Sweden Democrats party has a stronger anti-immigration and ethnonationalist rhetoric at the local level, which may reduce the generalised trust of residents by triggering conflict theory. Calculating the conservative climate based on the percentage of party representatives on local councils using multi-level modelling, we observe that the contextual effect of the conservative climate is present and reduces generalised trust. However, the underlying cause of this effect is not fully known. It can be traced back to the party's local politics, the residents and the local media.

*Keywords: conservative climate, radical right, Sweden Democrats, trust*

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly ethnically diverse societies, strong social cohesion and generalised trust as one of its indicators are of paramount importance. Trust is like the glue that binds families, organisations, firms and entire societies together (Bok, 1978; Fukuyama, 1995; Seligman, 1997), and, according to Putnam (1993), trust is the centrepiece of healthy democracies. Trust also helps citizens learn the importance of tolerance towards 'others', including those from different ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds (Sullivan & Transue, 1999). As Rustenbach (2010) has pointed out, low levels of trust are generally associated with anti-immigrant sentiment and prejudice towards 'others'. Generalised trust is a type of trust<sup>2</sup> that some researchers consider a relatively stable value structure (Newton & Zmerli, 2011; Uslaner, 2002). At the same time, others emphasise its plasticity, which changes due to ongoing contact with members of society (Dinesen, 2012; Glanville & Paxton, 2007).

Space is a critical issue in the analysis of trust. According to Ross, mistrust is a consequence of interactions between people and space. Space brings together those who are distrustful and magnifies this characteristic (Ross et al., 2001). Therefore research on trust should rest on the trinity of the individual, temporal change (diversity, economic conditions) and space (Van der Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Putnam also highlights the importance of geography. He argues that social networks and the associated norms of trust and geographical proximity shape social cohesion (Putnam, 2007).

In the context of local space, the conservative climate<sup>3</sup> generated by local radical right parties should be highlighted as an apparent contextual factor, in the same way as the progressive political climate mentioned by Van der Vijver and colleagues (2008). A conservative community may further reinforce xenophobia and justify adverse reactions towards immigrants and further facilitate political mobilisation (Sniderman et al., 2004). Individuals in such environments may be more prone to hold negative views of immigrants regardless of their social status and political views.

This conservative climate can reduce generalised trust by promoting conflict theory through anti-immigrant rhetoric. Conflict theory emphasises that in a confined geographical space, there is competition for the allocation of resources (e.g. property, labour). As a result, some ethnic groups see others as threatening or as rivals (e.g. Blalock, 1967). Although there has been much research on the relationship between ethnic diversity and generalised trust, the mechanism of when, how and why diversity reduces generalised trust is still unexplored (Dinesen & Sønderskov, 2015; Freitag & Bauer, 2013). It should therefore be taken into account that if an individual lives in a community with a high level of distrust, his or her generalised trust is likely to decrease, as the individual becomes more distanced from social relationships that could have corrected the informational asymmetry regarding the trustworthiness of others (Fetchenhauer & Dunning, 2010). Furthermore, a conservative climate

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<sup>2</sup> Other prominent categories of trust categorisation are particularised, community and political trust

<sup>3</sup> In the present study, I have defined conservative ideology with one of the main features of the ideology, the resistance to change (Jost et al., 2003). Change in this case refers to immigration and the transformation of the ethnic structure. The term conservative climate is also used by Sarrasin and colleagues (2012) in their study of the Swiss radical right. Despite the negative prejudice against immigration, conservatism is not a harmful ideology in itself, as it has many positive advantages (Kekes, 2018).

may prevent the development of positive inter-ethnic relations, which would reduce distrust according to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Gaertner et al., 1993; Pettigrew, 1998).

Sweden's most prominent radical right party, the Sweden Democrats, was formed from the Sweden Party in 1988 (Rydgren, 2006). The party's big breakthrough came in 2010 when it won 339 610 votes (5.7%) and 20 seats in parliament. The party has successfully exploited the growing media attention and socio-cultural issues that have become increasingly important in public life (Hellström et al., 2012). Since then, the party has grown in popularity (12.9% in the 2014 elections) and is now the third most powerful party (17.53%), according to the 2018 elections. The party's main programme focuses on restricting immigration, with nationalist and populist elements (Elgenius & Rydgren, 2019). A large proportion of the party's voters support the Sweden Democrats because of its restricting immigration rhetoric. More than 90% of those who voted for the party want to reduce immigration (Rydgren & Tyrberg, 2020).

This research aims to show the negative impact of the strong radical right at the local, municipal level on the generalised trust of residents. The conservative climate created by the radical right party increases anti-immigrant attitudes, which can reduce trust. My preliminary hypothesis is that the conservative climate at the local level acts as a contextual effect and reduces the generalised trust of residents.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Not many studies have been done on the policy-making role of a strong radical right party in power at the local level (and thus its potential impact on residents' trust) (Paxton, 2019). The few studies that examine their impact at the local level agree that, while they do not play a major role here, as they do at the national level, they sometimes engage in even stronger populist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Generally, when they are in power at the local level and have a high degree of autonomy, they actively engage with residents, reach them more, and promote their nativist ideology (Paxton, 2019). In France, at the local level, they take a more mainstream approach and try to present a more acceptable, moderate image of themselves. However, they still engage in populist discourse, portraying opposition parties and the local press as working against the interests of residents (Paxton & Peace, 2020). In Italy, the radical right party in power at the local level has created a sense of crisis, with a constant threat and the imposition of security measures (Paxton, 2017). While the percentage of the representatives of the Sweden Democrats in local councils did not influence the number of refugees, a municipality took in, when the Sweden Democrats held the balance of power, their role in reducing immigration was evident (Bolin et al., 2014). When a minority government is formed, and the Sweden Democrats hold the balance of power, they tend to support right-wing parties (Lundqvist, 2019) and influence their policies. One such significant and high-profile measure was the decision of the Sweden Democrats, together with the Moderate Party and a few smaller local parties, to ban the wearing of the hijab in schools within the municipality of Skurup (Thorell, 2020). It also shows that some issues are presented differently depending on the political level (Poppelaars & Scholten, 2008).

Karim's (2015) research shows that the politics of the Sweden Democrats (manifestos, declarations) are significantly more ethnonationalist at the local level than at the national.

The populist rhetoric and the emphasis on the corruption of rivals can also be harmful because according to Rothstein and Eek (2009), individuals who experience corruption and unequal treatment lose trust not only in the institution in question (police, health care) but also in the people in general. As a result of the negative experience with the institution, residents conclude that ordinary people can benefit by taking advantage of these illegal means, so they cannot be trusted either. Researchers in Gothenburg have created a Quality of Government (QoG) index that has analysed the governments across Europe. Their results suggest that where the corruption mentioned above and lack of honesty are prevalent, minor ethnic and economic differences are highly exacerbated. At the same time, governments in countries with a good QoG index can mitigate and turn any greater diversity into a positive (Charron & Rothstein, 2014). The role of radical right party rhetoric is also reflected in the national and local media. Populist texts increase negative sentiments towards immigrants, and anti-immigrant rhetoric increases negative perceptions of immigration (Wirz et al., 2018).

Researchers at the national level have already found that a conservative political climate, which they have identified with the role of radical right parties, increases negative anti-immigrant sentiment (Semyonov et al., 2006, 2007; Wilkes et al., 2008). At the individual level, it has been well analysed that people with conservative, authoritarian values are more hostile towards immigrants (Esses et al., 2005), but research on the municipal effects of political climate is scarce (Sarrasin et al., 2012). However, research on this is warranted as individuals are embedded in the local political culture, shaped by the norms, beliefs, and values of the local community (Sarrasin et al., 2012).

There are only a few examples of research on the municipal conservative climate. In Switzerland, a conservative climate has reduced inter-ethnic relations (mostly in homogeneous municipalities) but has not affected perceptions of the danger associated with immigrants and conflict hypotheses (Sarrasin et al., 2012). In Sweden, Sevä's (2010) research examined the effect of the conservative political climate (but he identified this with the percentage of votes cast for the Moderate Party). He found that when both conservative climate and local social problems are present, individuals living in the area become more suspicious of welfare abuses.

## METHODS

The territorial level of the research is the Swedish municipalities (kommuner). Of these, 290 are located in the country and are considered the smallest administrative units, corresponding to the LAU2 level. Although, by default, big cities (Stockholm, Malmö, Gothenburg) would be too large and heterogeneous to study the effect of ethnic diversity, this should not be a problem in the present case, as I am looking at the percentage of Sweden Democrats in the municipal council. It is, therefore, justified to treat municipalities as the basic unit for analysis in this research.

To measure trust, I used data from the National SOM 2018 survey, which consists of responses from 10 796 people. This survey measured generalised trust using the standard direct question, which

is the following: „In your opinion, how much can you trust people in general?”. Answers ranged from 0 to 10. Therefore, the trust level scores are ordinal variables, but like most researchers (e.g. Fladmoe & Steen-Johnsen, 2018; Putnam, 2007; Wallman Lundåsen & Wollebæk, 2013), I treated them as scale variables.

Based on the literature, I selected and examined some individual variables from the National SOM, such as gender<sup>4</sup>, education<sup>5</sup>, citizenship<sup>6</sup>, monthly income<sup>7</sup> and whether the respondent was unemployed at the time of the survey. The unemployment issue may also be of particular importance as Sweden is characterised by high levels of economic activity and employment in a European context (Tésits, 2007). I have also included the variable of the respondent’s municipality<sup>8</sup>, which may be important as the Sweden Democrats are stronger in rural areas<sup>9</sup> (Sannerstedt, 2016). Since the voters of the Sweden Democrats generally have lower trust levels (Dal Bó et al., 2018), this should also be considered in the model, so I added the variable on party support to the analysis. At the municipal level, I examined the conservative climate as a contextual factor, using the percentage of Sweden Democrat representatives in the local council as an indicator. Furthermore, I also analyse the effect of ethnic diversity at this level. A study by Gustavsson and Jordahl (2008), based on Swedish surveys conducted in the 1990s, finds that the percentage of foreign-born residents decreases generalised trust. However, a study by Wollebæk and colleagues (2012) suggests that diversity does not affect the generalised trust of residents. I analyse ethnic diversity using a culturally weighted version of the peripheral heterogeneity index (PHI) (see Németh 2019). A strong focus on cultural differences is necessary because it can be crucial for trust to know which ethnic groups live together. Current trends suggest that a large share of immigrants come from areas geographically distant from the destination country, with different religions and values, which slows down integration (Alesina et al., 2018; Card et al., 2012; Farkas, M. 2016). Furthermore, nuancing diversity can capture differences in values and language that can make individuals appear less trustworthy (Dinesen et al., 2020).

As a dependent variable, I also examine how these individual and community-level variables affect attitudes towards refugee rejection. For this, I use the question „What is your opinion on the following position: should Sweden accept fewer refugees?” from the SOM 2018 survey. This question is necessary to correlate a possible decrease in confidence with the rejection of diversity and the validation of conflict theory. Descriptive statistics for each variable are presented in Table 1.

<sup>4</sup> coded as binary variable (0=female, 1=male)

<sup>5</sup> 1=low (up to 9 grades), 2=medium-low (up to upper secondary education), 3=medium-high (post-secondary, undergraduate), 4=high (tertiary education)

<sup>6</sup> coded as a binary variable (0=Swedish citizen, 1=non-Swedish citizen or dual citizen)

<sup>7</sup> In the survey, income data were broken down into categories

<sup>8</sup> 1=large city; 2=town; 3=rural

<sup>9</sup> This statement is valid for radical right parties in general. For example, this is also true of the support for Jobbik in Hungary (Vida & Kovalcsik, 2018).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the variables in the analysis of the impact of the Sweden Democrats on generalised trust

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	n
Agrees: fewer refugees	1	5	2.49	2	1	5 241
Generalised trust	0 (You cannot trust people at all)	10	6.54	7	8	10 270
Citizenship	0 (Swedish)	1 (Not Swedish or a dual citizen)	-	-	0	10 553
Gender	0 (Female)	1 (Male)	-	-	0	10 775
Education	1 (Low)	4 (High)	-	3	4	10 497
Income	1 (Maximum 14 999 SEK)	3 (More than 35 000 SEK)	-	2	2	10 007
Unemployment	0	1 (Unemployed)	-	-	0	10 553
Party preference	0 (Another party)	1 (Sweden Democrats)	-	-	0	9 938
Type of settlement	1 (Large city)	3 (Rural)	-	2	3	10 485
SD representation in the local council (%)	0 (Åsele, Dorotea, Malå, Robertsfors, Vaxholm)	24.39 (Bromölla, Burlöv, Örskälljunga)	9.63	9.23	5,94	290
PHI	0.073 (Öckerö)	0.3384 (Södertälje)	0.163	0.189	0,238	290

Source of data: Statistics Sweden and National SOM 2018. The values of the diversity index are the result of own calculations.

Multi-level analysis is a frequently used method in trust research (e.g. Fladmoe & Steen-Johnsen, 2018; Kokkonen et al., 2014; Wallman Lundåsen & Wollebæk, 2013). This method is necessary in cases where data are drawn from multiple levels and can be described as hierarchically nested (e.g. electoral districts are embedded in municipalities, individuals in municipalities, students in classes, and classes in schools) (Hox et al., 2002). In the present case, level 1 of the analysis is individuals, and level 2 is municipalities. The problem observed in the research, which was also observed in the studies by Reeskens and Hooghe (2009) as well as Sarrasin and colleagues (2012), is that in some municipalities, the number of responses is relatively low, below the values suggested by Kreft (1996) (30/30). However, in general, multi-level analyses can be performed even with a low number of respondents per contextual unit (Gelman & Hill, 2007; Maas & Hox, 2005).

## RESULTS

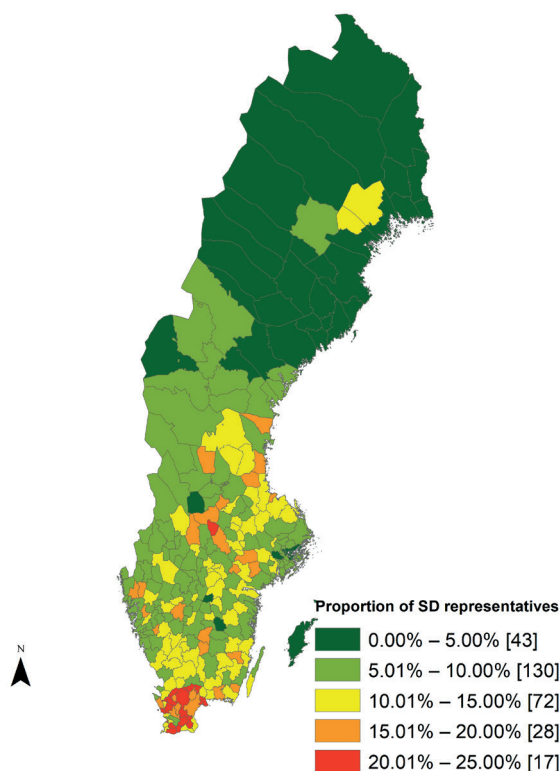
In 2014, the Sweden Democrats acquired 1316 seats in local councils. This result represents a significant improvement compared to 2010 with 286 municipalities having a better result than four years earlier<sup>10</sup>. The worst result of the party was obtained in the municipalities of Västerbotten County. In 11

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dagenssamhalle.se/nyhet/sverigedemokraterna-oekar-med-704-mandat-10707> (Date of access: 2021.03.10.)

of the 15 municipalities in this county, they won only one or two seats, and in four of them, they were not allowed to seat any representatives (Åsele, Dorotea, Robertsfors and Malå). According to Magnus Blomgren, a researcher at Umeå University, there are several reasons for the poor performance of the party in Västerbotten: the excellent performance of local parties (who are attracting people dissatisfied with mainstream politics) and the Sweden Democrats' inadequate mobilisation strategy (lack of organisation and campaigning)<sup>11</sup>. The radical right party performed poorly in the Stockholm conurbation (in Vaxholm, they could not delegate a representative to the local council), with 5.94% of the local council members in the Swedish capital being Sweden Democrat.

The Sweden Democrats have the highest proportion of representatives in the municipal councils in Skåne County (Figure 1). The only municipality where the party has achieved a good result and stands out from this regional grouping is Ljusnarsberg, where the party has improved from 5.7% to 23.6% in four years. In these municipalities, the Sweden Democrats have come close to gaining power, but they have had to find coalition partners. In Bromölla, for example, the Sweden Democrats formed a coalition with the Left Party and the Moderate Party, breaking the previous political blocks and the cordon sanitaire agreement existing at the parliamentary level<sup>12</sup>. The Sweden Democrats gained considerable influence not only in municipalities where they had a large number of representatives on the local council but also in those where they held the balance of power (e.g. Högsby, Knivsta, Skinnskatteberg) (supporting left-wing parties in some municipalities and right-wing parties in others)<sup>13</sup>.

Figure 1. Proportion of Sweden Democrats' representatives in local councils (2014).



Source: own editing based on the Swedish Election Authority

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.folkbladet.nu/2014-09-17/har-ar-kommunerna-dar-sd-inte-fatt-faste> (Date of access: 2021.03.10.)

<sup>12</sup> <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6011936> (Date of access: 2021.03.10.)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/bK4wJd/sd-far-allt-mer-makt-i-kommunerna> (Date of access: 2021.03.10.)

Before modelling, it is necessary to check whether the required variance at level 2 exists at all. Table 2 shows that multi-level modelling is also justified for attitudes towards refugee rejection and generalised trust. For refugee rejection, there is a significant ICC of almost 5%. However, level 2 has an impact of only 1.1% on generalised trust, which is less than the value obtained in the Swedish case study<sup>14</sup> of Sümeghy and Németh (2021). However, it is higher than the ICC reported in the study of Fladmoe and Steen-Johnsen (2018) in Norway<sup>15</sup>.

Table 2. Variance components of trust and refugee rejection in Swedish municipalities (2018)

Indicator	Level		ICC
	1 (Individual)	2 (Municipal)	
Fewer refugees	1.55	0.03***	4.84%
Generalised trust	4.88	0.05***	1.1%

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; + $p < 0.1$

Individual variables shape attitudes towards refugee admission according to prior expectations (Table 3). Sweden Democrat voters are more dismissive, with 82.6% saying that it is a very good proposal to accept fewer refugees. However, women (24.3% say it is a very good proposal compared to 32.9% of men) and non-Swedes or people with dual citizenship (21.5% say it is a very good proposal compared to 29.2% of Swedes) are less opposed. In terms of education, all groups are significantly more in favour of restricting refugees than the highly educated, with a tendency to reject the proposal already evident among those with a medium-high level of education. Wealth and unemployment variables do not significantly affect attitudes towards refugees (anti-immigration is more related to education than to income [Kitschelt & Rehm, 2014]). In terms of settlement type, there is a lower rejection rate in large cities than in rural areas, but this is only significant at the  $p < 0.1$  level (32.5% of respondents in rural areas who „strongly agree”, 27.6% in towns and 24.7% in large cities).

In Model 2, the proportion of Sweden Democrats elected to local councils in 2014, indicating a conservative climate, significantly increases the anti-refugee attitudes of residents. Furthermore, based on the likelihood ratio test, this model shows a better fit than Model 1. The diversity index (PHI) added in model 3 does not show significance, and the model itself does not show a significant improvement compared to model 1. As previous studies have shown, the diversity of an area does not lead to a clear rejection of immigration among its residents. If PHI were substituted for the share of Sweden Democrats in Model 2, the significant negative effect of diversity would be shown at the  $p < 0.05$  level, but in Model 3, the conservative climate overrides its role. The role of the conservative climate is indicated by the fact that after model 2, the variance of the municipality level is only significant at the  $p < 0.1$  level, so the effect of level 2 is explained.

<sup>14</sup> Västra Götaland county ICC=2.3%

<sup>15</sup> ICC=0.9%



Table 3. Results of multi-level models for the anti-immigrant attitudes dependent variable (2018)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	1.68*** (0.16)	1.87*** (0.16)	1.92*** (0.17)
Citizenship (non-Swedish)			
Swedish	-0.18*** (0.07)	-0.18*** (0.07)	-0.18*** (0.07)
Gender (Male)			
Female	0.14*** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.04)
Education (High)			
Medium-high	-0.20*** (0.47)	-0.21*** (0.47)	-0.21*** (0.47)
Medium-low	-0.36*** (0.45)	-0.36*** (0.45)	-0.36*** (0.45)
Low	-0.52*** (0.6)	-0.52*** (0.6)	-0.52*** (0.6)
Income (High)			
Medium	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.04)
Low	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)
Unemployment (Unemployed)			
Not unemployed	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.13)
Party preference (SD)			
Another party	1.31*** (0.05)	1.30*** (0.05)	1.30*** (0.05)
Type of settlement (Rural)			
Town	0.05 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Large city	0.08+ (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)
The proportion of SD in the local council (2014)		-0.01*** (0)	-0.01** (0)
PHI			-0.41 (0.39)
LR-test of deviance, $\chi^2$ (change compared to model 1)		4* (increase)	5
n (Level 1)	4831	4831	4831
n (Level 2)	287	287	287
Individual level variance	1.47***	1.47***	1.47***
Municipal level variance	0.21**	0.01+	0.01*

Note: \*\*\*p<0.001 \*\*p<0.01 \*p<0.05 +p<0.1. Unstandardised coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. For some variables, reference categories are in parentheses. Model data source: National SOM 2018 (level 1), Swedish Statistical Office and Swedish Election Authority (level 2).

Using the same modelling steps as before, I also examined the effect of each variable on generalised trust (Table 4). There is a weak to a medium correlation between generalised trust and attitudes towards refugee admission<sup>16</sup>. In the case of generalised trust, as in previous research (Dal Bó et al., 2018), it is noticeable that voters of radical right parties have lower levels of generalised trust. Lower generalised trust is observed among the unemployed and non-Swedish, or dual citizens. There is no significant difference by gender. Consistent with the former Swedish studies, the wealthiest and most educated have high levels of trust, while this decreases as the categories move towards lower rankings. The municipality of the respondent is not influential, confirming the finding for Sweden in the research of Bodor and colleagues (2017). After model 1, the level 2 variance is significant, so examining the contextual effect is warranted. The proportion of Sweden Democrat representatives

<sup>16</sup> Spearman correlation=0.261; p=0.000

Generalised trust Kolmogorov-Smirnov=0.173; p=0.000

Attitudes towards refugee admission Kolmogorov-Smirnov=0.206; p=0.000

reduces the generalised trust and removes the unexplained variance at level 2. However, the model fit is not significantly improved compared to Model 1, although it is close to the threshold. This contextual effect did not affect the individual variables, only slightly moderating the effect of the non-Sweden Democrat supporters. Adding the diversity variable (PHI) to the model did not improve the fit and did not affect generalised trust. This result confirms previous studies about Sweden (Wallman Lundåsen & Wollebæk, 2013; Wollebæk et al., 2012).

Table 4. Results from multi-level models for the generalised trust dependent variable (2018)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	5.16*** (0.19)	5.38*** (0.20)	5.49*** (0.22)
Citizenship (non-Swedish)			
Swedish	0.57*** (0.08)	0.57*** (0.08)	0.56*** (0.08)
Gender (Male)			
Female	0.06 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)	0.06 (0.04)
Education (High)			
Medium-high	-0.5*** (0.06)	-0.50*** (0.06)	-0.50*** (0.06)
Medium-low	-0.67*** (0.06)	-0.67*** (0.06)	-0.67*** (0.06)
Low	-0.8*** (0.07)	-0.80*** (0.07)	-0.8*** (0.07)
Income (High)			
Medium	-0.17*** (0.05)	-0.17*** (0.05)	-0.17*** (0.05)
Low	-0.5*** (0.06)	-0.5*** (0.06)	-0.49*** (0.06)
Unemployment (Unemployed)			
Not unemployed	0.55*** (0.15)	0.55*** (0.15)	0.55*** (0.15)
Party preference (SD)			
Another party	1.07*** (0.06)	1.06*** (0.07)	1.06*** (0.07)
Type of settlement (Rural)			
Town	0.06 (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Large city	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)
The proportion of SD in the local council (2014)		-0.02*** (0)	-0.017** (0)
PHI			-0.75 (0.52)
LR-test of deviance, $\chi^2$ (change compared to model 1)		2.17	4.77
n (Level 1)	9468	9468	9468
n (Level 2)	290	290	290
Individual level variance	4,47***	4,48***	4,48***
Municipal level variance	0.03**	0.01	0.01

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \* $p < 0.05$  + $p < 0.1$ . Unstandardised coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. For some variables, reference categories are in parentheses. Model data source: National SOM 2018 (level 1), Swedish Statistical Office and Swedish Election Authority (level 2).

Although in the models, the variable indicating party support prevents the contextual effect of the Sweden Democrats from being significant because the municipality is over-represented by radical right voters (who, as we have seen above, have lower trust levels) who vote for the local council members in question; I ran one more model for confirmation. I filtered out respondents who did not have the Sweden Democrats as their preferred party ( $n=8677$ ) and ran the previous models with this sample. In the end, the number of individuals who had no missing data for any of the variables under

analysis was 7714. Model 1 with variables at each level produced the same results as Model 1 ran on the total sample size (Table 5). The only difference was that gender became an influencing factor at the  $p < 0.1$  level, with women having higher trust levels. After the model with level one variables, the level 2 variance is only significant at  $p < 0.1$  ( $p = 0.61$ ). However, the inclusion of the variable indicating the conservative climate still significantly improves the model's fit. Again, the effect is negative, so it can be stated that a conservative climate in the municipality also leads to lower trust levels among non-Sweden Democrats supporters. In model 3, the variable indicating diversity was not significant, and this model only resulted in a less significant improvement compared to model 1.

It might be assumed that PHI and the share of Sweden Democrats are correlated (Spearman's  $\rho = 0.278$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ), but this is not true, as previous studies show that Sweden Democrats are not strong in the most diverse municipalities. Moreover, the Mann-Whitney U test suggests that non-Sweden Democrats supporters live in more ethnically diverse municipalities.

Table 5. Results of multi-level models for the generalised trust dependent variable (2018), based on a sample of respondents who do not identify the Sweden Democrats as their preferred party

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	6.25*** (0.19)	6.49*** (0.2)	6.55*** (0.22)
Citizenship (non-Swedish)			
Swedish	0.6*** (0.09)	0.6*** (0.09)	0.59*** (0.09)
Gender (Male)			
Female	0.08+ (0.05)	0.08+ (0.04)	0.08+ (0.04)
Education (High)			
Medium-high	-0.51*** (0.06)	-0.51*** (0.06)	-0.51*** (0.06)
Medium-low	-0.69*** (0.06)	-0.69*** (0.06)	-0.69*** (0.06)
Low	-0.86*** (0.08)	-0.85*** (0.08)	-0.85*** (0.07)
Income (High)			
Medium	-0.18*** (0.05)	-0.18*** (0.05)	-0.18*** (0.05)
Low	-0.52*** (0.06)	-0.51*** (0.06)	-0.51*** (0.06)
Unemployment (Unemployed)			
Not unemployed	0.54*** (0.17)	0.54*** (0.17)	0.54*** (0.15)
Type of settlement (Rural)			
Town	0.04 (0.06)	0.03 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
Large city	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)
The proportion of SD in the local council (2014)		-0.02*** (0)	-0.02*** (0)
PHI			-0.47 (0.53)
LR-test of deviance, $\chi^2$ (change compared to model 1)		4,2* (increase)	5.6+ (increase)
n (Level 1)	7714	7714	7714
n (Level 2)	290	290	290
Individual level variance	4.08***	4.08***	4.08***
Municipal level variance	0.026+	0.009	0.01

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \* $p < 0.05$  + $p < 0.1$ . Unstandardised coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. For some variables, reference categories are in parentheses. Model data source: National SOM 2018 (level 1), Swedish Statistical Office and Swedish Election Authority (level 2).

As the previous results show, a conservative climate significantly reduces the generalised trust of residents. However, it is not clear whether the effect is due to the Sweden Democrat local council members, their communication and actions, or to the Sweden Democrat voters (who elected the council members), who may also shape the trust level of the other residents in the municipality. To answer this question, I will first examine the extent to which Sweden Democrat voters share their political views with others in general. If they are actively involved in local public life and engage in conversations with other members of the community, their anti-immigrant attitudes and lower trust levels may influence others. First, it is worth recalling the mass social theory that voting for radical right parties is often associated with the social isolation of the voter (Putnam, 1993). Thus these individuals are characterised by a lack of family, friends and workplace connections and reduced participation in local community life (Fennema & Tillie, 1999; Rydgren, 2011). However, research by Nordmark and Bergman (2014) has shown that while support for the Sweden Democrats is less common among those in a relationship, poor informal connections and social isolation are not generally characteristic of Sweden Democrat voters. I investigate the local impact of Sweden Democrats voters by looking at how often individuals who voted for each Swedish party in local elections have discussed political issues in the past year (based on the National SOM 2018 survey).

The results (Table 6) show that Sweden Democrats voters are politically active and that they actively discussed political issues in the week before the survey. The questionnaire survey took place between 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2018 and 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2018, a period that focuses on reactions to the election results and discussion of the formation of the government. We cannot conclude with certainty that the discussion of political issues was a feature of every week before, which could have actively influenced the views of those who engaged in conversation with them. Furthermore, the question under consideration does not indicate in what company these political issues are discussed. If it remains in the family or only among friends who also support the party, it is unlikely to have the same impact on the community's life as if it was done at work or community events.

Although the SOM survey included a question on how often political content is shared on social media, this question was only completed by 133 Sweden Democrat voters, so it is not possible to draw conclusions for the whole sample. Interestingly, 72 of the 133 respondents said that they do not share such content at all. I also analysed further whether the activity of Sweden Democrat voters in discussing political issues depends on their neighbourhood, whether they are more likely to express their opinions in a municipality where the party is strong (Table 7). Based on the proportion of Sweden Democrats in local councils, I thus created three groups (0–8%; 8.01–16%; 16.01–25%) and based on these; I conducted a cross-tabulation analysis.

The results show no difference, with the local strength of the Sweden Democrats not affecting the political opinion of party supporters ( $\chi^2=12.886$ ,  $p=0.377$ ). No pair of categories has an adjusted residual value indicating a significant relationship. However, discussing political issues more than once in the week before the survey is more prevalent among radical right voters in the municipalities with the weakest Sweden Democrats results. While in the municipalities with medium and strong radical right results, there is over-representation of some categories (few times in the last six months

Table 6. Cross-tabulation analysis of the frequency of discussion of political issues and voting for each party (2018).  
Data source: National SOM 2018. A.r= Adjusted residual

Which party did you vote for in the 2018 local elections?	How often have you discussed political issues in the last 12 months?										Total	
	Not even once	A few times in the past year	A few times in the last six months	A few times in the last quarter	A few times in the last month	A few times in the last week	Several times in the past week					
Left Party	n	29	32	26	42	165	203	192				689
	A.r	-6.5	-2.6	-1.7	-2.7	-0.8	2.1	9.3				
Social Democratic Party	n	368	202	128	231	570	556	302				2357
	A.r	6.3	3.1	0.6	1.6	-1.3	-3.2	-4.1				
Centre Party	n	106	64	63	100	255	248	126				962
	A.r	-1	-0.6	2.0	16	1	-0.2	-2.2				
Liberals	n	41	40	30	67	180	208	100				666
	A.r	-4.8	-1.2	-0.8	1	1.1	3.1	-0.3				
Moderate Party	n	144	123	90	176	483	456	240				1712
	A.r	-5	0.1	0.1	2.1	3.2	0.6	-1.9				
Christian Democrats	n	54	40	33	35	122	139	70				493
	A.r	-0.7	0.9	1.6	-1.5	-0.2	1.1	-0.8				
Green Party	n	22	16	13	40	124	152	76				443
	A.r	-4.6	-3.0	-2.2	0	1.4	4.0	1.0				
Sweden Democrats	n	109	56	40	62	192	200	162				821
	A.r	1.2	-0.4	-0.4	-1.5	-1.2	-1.2	3.5				
Feminist Initiative	n	1	4	2	5	24	32	38				106
	A.r	-3.5	-1.4	-1.5	-1.5	-0.6	1.0	5.8				
Other party	n	35	23	18	36	84	126	77				399
	A.r	-2	-1.1	-0.6	0	-1.9	2.6	2.2				
Voted by blank ballot	n	26	13	11	6	32	22	13				123
	A.r	3.2	1.5	1.9	-1.6	0.2	-2.1	-1.5				
Not entitled to vote	n	42	22	15	24	76	72	40				291
	A.r	1.3	0.3	0	-0.4	0.4	-0.5	-0.8				
Did not vote	n	163	46	25	30	92	69	39				464
	A.r	15.8	2.4	0.2	-1.9	-2.7	-5.6	-4.3				
Total	n	1140	681	494	854	2399	2483	1475				9526

and few times in the last quarter), but even here, the adjusted residual does not reach the value of 2, which would indicate a strong relationship.

The local impact of Sweden Democrat politicians is more challenging to assess. Although the survey includes questions such as „How often have you visited a local politician’s website?” and „Have you discussed local election issues with a representative?” these do not specify the party affiliation of the representative/politician in question, and in municipalities where the Sweden Democrats are strong (16.01–25%), there were only a few responses. Indeed, journalism is influenced by the prevailing social climate (Strömbäck et al., 2017). This is evident from Ekstrand and Hall’s (2018) research, which found that local media were more critical of immigrants and immigration in municipalities where the radical right party was strong. In addition, local media are less hostile towards the radical right and less stigmatising of the Sweden Democrats in municipalities with a strong radical right voter base (Persson, 2009). The role of media in shaping opinion on immigration is also highlighted by Arzheimer (2018). When immigration is portrayed as a problem in the media, more people vote for parties that focus on immigration (Eberl et al., 2018). This effect is robust for ill-informed individuals, who are more likely to believe the stereotypical media portrayal of immigrants (Eberl et al., 2018). People also tend to start from the ideas closest to their memory at that moment, which is strongly influenced by the active and continuous presence of a topic in the media (Strömbäck & Theorin, 2018).

So I examined whether there was a difference between having a subscription to the local morning paper and the local strength of the Sweden Democrats. The cross-tabulation analysis shows significant differences ( $\chi^2=22.374$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). Reading the local newspaper is more prevalent in municipalities with a higher proportion of Sweden Democrat local representatives, with a particularly strong relationship in the 8.01–16% category (Table 8).

Table 8. Cross-tabulation analysis of conservative climate and subscription to the local morning newspaper (2018)

			The proportion of SD representatives (%)			Total
			0–8%	8.01–16%	16.01–25%	
Does your household subscribe to the local morning paper?	Yes	n	534	793	144	1471
		Adjusted residual	-4.7	4.2	0.8	
	No	n	870	918	177	1965
		Adjusted residual	4.7	-4.2	-0.8	
Total		n	1404	1711	321	3436

Data source: National SOM 2018

Table 7. Cross-tabulation analysis of the frequency of discussion of political issues and the local conservative climate (2018) Data source: National SOM 2018

The proportion of SD representatives (%)		How often have you discussed political issues in the last 12 months?									Total
		Not even once	A few times in the past year	A few times in the last six months	A few times in the last quarter	A few times in the last month	A few times in the last week	Several times in the past week			
0-8	n	31	15	5	14	58	56	55	234		
	Adjusted residual	0	-0.3	-2.3	-1.1	0.6	-0.2	1.7			
8.01-16	n	55	28	27	34	103	114	81	442		
	Adjusted residual	-0.8	-0.6	1.8	0.2	-0.1	1	-1.1			
16.01-25	n	23	13	8	14	31	30	26	145		
	Adjusted residual	1	1.1	0.4	1.1	-0.6	-1.1	-0.6			
Total		109	56	40	62	192	200	162	821		

Individuals who subscribe to the local morning newspapers have significantly lower trust, according to the Mann-Whitney U-test (Mann-Whitney  $U=1122511$ ,  $p=0.00$ ) (Table 9). If we treat trust as an ordinal variable instead of a scale variable and rerun the analysis, we reach the same conclusion.

Table 9. The relationship between the existence of a subscription to local morning newspapers and generalised trust (2018)

Does your household subscribe to the local morning paper?		n	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
In your opinion, how much can you trust people in general?	Yes	1441	1882.02	2711989.5
	No	1940	1549.11	3005281.5
	Total	3381		

Data source: National SOM 2018

## CONCLUSIONS

The contextual effect of the conservative climate generated by the Sweden Democrats is apparent. Individuals living in municipalities with a higher share of Sweden Democrats in local councils between 2014 and 2018 show a lower generalised level of trust in 2018. More worrying is the fact that residents in these municipalities are also more hostile towards refugees, leading to an even stronger radical right party at the local level in the following elections. The research did not reveal the exact mechanism by which the conservative climate is having an impact. The questionnaire survey did not allow us to investigate the activity of politicians and the negative impact of campaigning. What may be influential is the higher political activity of party voters, as shown by the survey (which contrasts with the picture of social exclusion and exclusion generally portrayed of the radical right voters). However, there is no data on the company in which political issues are discussed and whether this was continued with the same frequency in the years before the survey. Previous research has also shown that the conservative climate impacts local newspapers, with more articles reflecting the ideology and programme of the party appearing in localities. In strong Sweden Democrat municipalities, local morning papers are more widely read, and there is a lower generalised level of trust among readers (but no clear causal link can be established). As the Sweden Democrats achieved even better results in the 2018 local elections than four years earlier and were able to delegate more members to local councils, the impact of the conservative climate is likely to intensify. It would be challenging for the Swedish society typically characterised by high trust and inclusiveness. Examining the local effects can also be helpful because it shows what could happen if the Sweden Democrats were to come to power at the national level.

The results of the research show that contextual influences affect the level of trust of individuals. Putnam and colleagues (2000) interpreted a high generalised level of trust and the high number of voluntary associations in a community as a positive effect. He called this the „rainmaker effect”, whereby the climate generated by a community with high trust impacts those with lower trust and



reduces their distrust. Newton and colleagues (2018, p. 49) took this idea further to good political governance. They argued, „Just as the gentle rain from heaven falls on the just and unjust alike, so good government has a „rainmaker” effect on social trust, whatever the individual propensity to trust or distrust.” In the present research, however, the damaging effect of the political climate has been proven, with the original „rainmaker effect” being replaced by the „acid rainmaker” effect. This suggests that even individuals who would be pedestrianised to a higher level of trust based on their individual variables are more distrustful due to the political context of their daily lives.

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