

RESEARCH NOTE

Changing Representation: The Vote of Non-citizen Immigrant Residents in Their New Homeland

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Abstract

Living in a globalized world, where millions of people no longer live in their countries of birth, we ought to be asking ourselves whether and to what extent the traditional model of representative democracy is changing or needs to change. In particular, to what extent do citizens who live abroad participate in the democratic processes of their home country, and, conversely, what is the relationship with the electoral options in their new homelands? This research note explores the latter aspect by focusing on the Dutch national election held in March 2021. Based on a small sample of survey data, this exploratory analysis shows that non-citizen residents largely support less-established parties that have positioned themselves as parties that want to innovate and bring about new politics. This finding suggests that allowing immigrants to vote at national elections could have a visible impact on election outcomes.

Keywords: non-citizen resident, party abroad, immigrant voting, the Netherlands.

1 Introduction

On 17 March 2021, the Dutch national election saw an extremely high turnout of 82.6%. Tired of the pandemic and many of the policies formulated in its wake, the Dutch nation, voting in high numbers, showed it was ready for change. Yet despite the highest turnout in over a decade, there was no winner that could easily form a government and ‘take on the job’. Prime Minister Rutte’s VVD had garnered the largest number of votes, yet sentiments of discontent about his cabinet’s policies and the scattered voter support for alternative parties made the path towards an agreement for the formation of a cabinet a difficult one.

Despite the large number of voters who cast their electoral choice in the March 2021 election, a significant number of voting age residents were excluded from participation based on their citizenship. According to the Dutch National Statistics Office (CBS), in January 2020, there were 965,351 non-citizen (immigrant) residents of voting age living in the Netherlands. Yet despite living, working and paying

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taxes in the Netherlands, they are not allowed to vote in the national election as they do not hold Dutch citizenship. These facts pose two important questions: the first is an empirical question of what the election results would look like were these people allowed to vote, and the second is a normative question of ‘who should be allowed to vote, when, where and why?’

In today’s globalized world, living and working in a place other than one’s birthplace is common. While a large proportion of people still tend to stay where they are from, the number of people living abroad has only been increasing, the highest changes observed in Asia and in Europe. According to data from the 2020 World Migration Report (United Nations, 2019), the estimated number of people who live abroad totals 281 million, which is roughly 3.6% of the global population. How these migration trends affect the politics of states is a subject of two different scholarly debates. On the one hand, we have the debate on transnational voting patterns, which focuses on how diasporas affect the national vote in their countries of origin (Burgess & Tyburski, 2020; Østergaard-Nielsen & Ciornei, 2019; Rashkova, 2021; Rashkova & van der Staak, 2020; van Haute & Kernalegenn, 2021), while on the other we have the debate on voting patterns and preferences of immigrants (Camatarri et al., 2022; Mügge et al., 2021; Ruedin, 2018; Strijbis, 2014). Despite the growing literature on political participation as a result of migrant flows, we know virtually nothing about another group of people, namely non-citizen (immigrant) residents and their political preferences and behaviour in their new homeland. Filling this knowledge gap is especially

relevant for societies that are net receivers of immigration, such as many West European states. To complement the rest of the contributions to this Special Issue, I focus on the political preferences of non-citizen residents in the Netherlands and how they would vote if they were allowed to participate in national parliamentary elections.

Based on survey data of non-citizen residents in the Netherlands, this article addresses the question of voting preferences and behaviour of this group of people and offers an exploratory analysis of the potential effect that the non-citizen resident vote can have on the national political arena.

The article is organized as follows. The next section briefly reviews the relevant literature. A claim is then made in favour of the expansion of voting rights to residency, as opposed to limiting these rights to only those that hold citizenship. Three hypotheses related to the Dutch case are put forward. Section three discusses the empirical strategy and the data. Section four tests the hypotheses and presents the results. Section five concludes and gives direction for further studies.

2 Theoretical Framework

As noted previously, migration dynamics in a globalized world give rise to the puzzle of voting rights for mobile citizens (i.e. should they be allowed to participate and on what terms?). Scholars have dealt with these issues from the perspectives of both sending and receiving countries. As for participation ‘from abroad’, in particular, the literature has been increasingly focusing on the mobilizing role of the so-called *party abroad*. This is neither a new party

type nor a party branch but an analytical mode of the party that 'sits' in between. Rashkova (2020) argues that *the party abroad* emerges as a response of national political parties to the challenges of change in social structures and the competitive environment caused in part by the global movement of people. Van Haute and Kernalegenn (2021) note that diaspora groups are not just a sub-sample of the people still living in a country but rather a distinct group that needs to be addressed and mobilized in a distinct manner. They argue that parties are actors in transnational politics, where the diaspora participates in both their host and home countries. Several studies have garnered comparative evidence from around the world around political parties' mobilization role in constituencies abroad (Rashkova, 2021; Rashkova & van der Staak, 2020; Kernalegenn & van Haute, 2020; van Haute & Kernalegenn, 2021) to answer that question. The evidence points to the fact that states have different electoral rules regarding the right to vote (Blais et al., 2001), which can significantly influence political parties' outreach strategies and thus mobilization opportunities for emigrant electorates. In particular, Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei (2019) argued that cost-benefit calculations explain the level of transnational political party engagement and that parties tend to engage more when the benefits outweigh the costs. The fact that the expatriate vote matters, and yet that it matters to a varying degree consequential of the electoral legal framework in a given country, is linked to the more normative question of 'who should be allowed to vote (where, when and how)'. This question is inadvertently connected to the other side of the voting puzzle

of a globalized world, i.e. that of the voting rights of immigrants and their political engagement.

So far, there has been no agreement or sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence as to what normative solution works best, but there is considerable evidence that immigrants are significantly under-represented in host countries, whether it is as party members, electoral candidates or registered voters (Bird, 2011; Oliveira & Carvalhais, 2017). As a result, they are also poorly, if at all, represented in national legislatures. Bauböck (2005) and Lafleur (2013) both point to a trend of expansive electoral rights for non-resident citizens, especially in light of many countries now allowing residents to vote in local elections, yet a specific verdict on the link between voting rights, at the national level, and citizenship is not given.

The literature on immigrant voting is vast and rich and examines many different questions. Those related to party politics and relevant to the puzzle I investigate here are the political behaviour of immigrants – i.e. how politically active they are in their host versus their home country and who do they vote for. Mügge et al. (2021) and Chaudhary (2018) study the extent to which there is a trade-off between political engagement in the host and home countries and try to identify factors that explain differences. Both find that country of origin matters for political interest. Mügge et al. also show that gender affects political participation and that social class is a determinant of voting behaviour. Other studies, focusing on voting behaviour (Strijbis, 2014), show that migrants tend to vote more for left political parties, even if the reasons behind this choice are different from

those pertaining to locals who vote based on issue politics (see also Camatarri et al., 2022). All this knowledge, however, focuses on immigrants who have already acquired citizenship in their new homeland but says nothing about non-citizen immigrant residents. In this article, I focus on the latter group. It could be argued that non-citizen residents are likely to behave similarly to voters from migrant backgrounds, in terms of their voting behaviour, yet this is something we do not yet know about.

In light of these arguments and the position commonly found in the extant literature on the under-representation of immigrants (Dancygier et al., 2015; Street & Schönwälder, 2021), I look at the potential effect that non-citizen residents in the Netherlands can have on the political landscape of the country. I focus specifically on the question about vote choice – what political parties do non-citizen residents support and how certain are their choices?

The first point of interest is whether non-citizen residents would support the larger and more established political parties, such as the VVD, PvdA or CDA, or whether they would go for newer, smaller and relatively less traditional political parties such as, for example, D66 and Groen Links. Considering that a main characteristic of immigrants is their sense of being new and different, it seems plausible that they will be unlikely to vote for the more established political parties. Furthermore, if we consider that the age of a political party is linked to the ideologies and interests that it represents, older and more established parties are more likely to support traditional views and those of the initial majority of the state and not so much the newcomers.

This argument can be linked to claims in the extant literature that voters of migrant origin tend to vote left and, more generally, for parties that consider minorities, even if we cannot assume the group of non-citizen residents to be homogeneous in its preferences. Additionally, we can expect that younger non-citizen residents are more likely to be engaged and sympathetic to non-traditional parties owing to their own age and the issues of interest of their generation – such as the environment, starters housing, equality and so on. For these reasons, the first hypothesis to be tested is that the age of non-citizen residents will be adversely related to the support for non-traditional political parties.

Hypothesis 1: Younger non-citizen residents are more likely to support non-traditional political parties.

In addition to their age, non-citizen residents have been classified by the amount of time they have lived in the Netherlands. Following arguments set forth in the resocialization perspective about immigrants' diminishing political relationship with their native country, as they try to acculturate and integrate into their receiving society (Chaudhary, 2018), we can assume that the process of resocialization only deepens with time. This would mean that the longer an immigrant is in a new country, the more integrated he or she is with the customs, practices and ideals of that country. Similarly, we can consider that the political beliefs of an immigrant that has stayed longer in a receiving country may be closer to those supported by more established and traditional parties. As a result, the expected relationship between length

of stay in the Netherlands and vote for traditional parties is positive.

Hypothesis 2: More established non-citizen immigrant residents are expected to vote for more traditional and established political parties.

The rise in migration trends poses a challenge for political representation all over the world, and all the more so for democracies in the European Union. This is mainly because the Union provides for the free movement of people and workers, thus making relocation for a job opportunity relatively barrier-free within the boundaries of the member-states, yet there is no particular provision for how EU citizens living in a country other than their own can get what one may call full and fair political participation and representation in the democratic process. So far, EU states have agreed that citizens of any EU country can cast a vote for the European Parliament in their country of residence, even if this is different from their country of origin. Most EU states also allow some level of participation in local election, but voting for a national parliament is only allowed in the country of origin, whether the vote is exercised there or abroad. If non-citizen residents were to be given the chance to vote in the parliamentary elections of their host country, one may be interested to know the certainty of their choice. In other words, to what extent are the political choices of non-citizen residents informed and lasting, and can they be considered a potential stable electorate? Here, I argue that we can expect EU citizens to be more certain in their vote choice for national parliament in their host EU state. The reason

behind this expectation is that being an EU citizen presupposes a level of connectedness with the politics of the host country even prior to arrival even if by simply being informed; second, we can assume that EU citizens might find it easier, but also more important, to stay politically informed and involved even in their EU host country. Lastly, since EU citizens are the only ones that are also allowed to vote for the EP elections in both their home and host countries, there is likely to be an 'interest spillover' from the host countries' political stances towards the EU and those concerning domestic political issues.

Hypothesis 3: The vote choice of EU citizens is likely to be more certain than that of non-EU citizens.

Hypothesis 3a: EU citizens are likely to be more politically active than non-EU citizens.

In the remainder of the article, I discuss the data that was collected and the general trends found in it. I then test the foregoing hypotheses and discuss the results and their potential implications.

3 Data and Methods

According to Statistics Netherlands,¹ the current population in the country is just over 17.6 million people. Dutch nationals who are 18 years or older are eligible to participate in the national elections. For the 2021 election, an estimated 13.2 million people (a number excluding the non-resident citizens) were allowed to vote. At the same time, of the entire population, more than 1 million people of voting age were ineligible to vote because they did

not possess Dutch citizenship – this is over 7% of the entire potential vote if everyone eligible to vote would do so. Of this 1 million, more than This is a sizeable number, especially considering that half, are people citizens of another EU country.

Where does the non-citizen resident vote matter most? Based on the electoral politics literature (see, for example, Lijphart, 1990), one can argue that the non-citizen resident matters most (1) in systems with low electoral threshold, (2) in systems with low entry barriers and (3) in systems where the race is 'close'. We can easily say that the Netherlands, in 2021, had at least two of those characteristics. It is a country where there is no formal electoral threshold (although the effective threshold for gaining a seat, once all garnered votes are divided by the number of parliamentary seats, is around 65,000 votes). As a result, we cannot ignore the fact that a sizeable non-citizen resident community, as the one present in the Netherlands, has a strong potential to change the political landscape of a country if allowed to vote. The latter would be valid even if we were to concentrate only on migrants who have another EU citizenship, leaning on the idea that voting based on residency, at least within the boundaries of the European Union, which promotes the free movement of people, should be allowed.

To examine the vote of non-citizen residents in the Netherlands, I conducted an online survey consisting of ten questions about voting preference, voting activity, issue interest and some demographic identifiers. The survey was powered by Qualtrics and distributed to a random sample of non-citizen resident via Facebook foreigner groups

in three of the largest urban areas in the Netherlands. The survey was filled out by 173 respondents, all but one of whom completed the entire questionnaire. The results are presented in the next section and are based on these 142 full survey responses.²

The next section presents general summary statistics that the data reveals and identifies a number of observable trends. It also discusses the results of an ordinal logit and regression analysis, aimed at testing the three hypotheses developed in the theoretical section of the article. The dependent variable, *party type*, to test the first two hypotheses is a proxy for party traditionalism, with the assumption that political parties with longer experience in governance are more traditional in their politics than newer or less experienced political parties. It is measured by years in cabinet and classifies all parties that ran for the election in 2021 into three categories – those with less than 5 years in cabinet are coded as 1, those with between 5 and 30 years as 2, and those with more than 30 years in cabinet as 3. Age of the respondents is also coded categorically, with respondents under the age of 18 coded with a 1, those between 18 and 30 with a 2, and those above 30 with a 3. The residency independent variable equals 1 when respondents have lived in the Netherlands for less than 5 years, a 2 when they have lived in the Netherlands between 5 and 10 years, and 3 if they have lived in the Netherlands for more than 10 years. The dependent variables for hypothesis 3 and 3a are the duration of the respondent's answer, measured in seconds, and the political activity of a respondent, measured in a categorical variable from 1 to 4, 1 corresponding to always, 4 to never. The data is derived

from the question ‘how often would you vote in the Dutch national elections if you could do so without naturalization?’ The key independent variable in the second analysis is a dichotomous variable of whether the respondent is an EU citizen (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0).

4 Empirical Findings

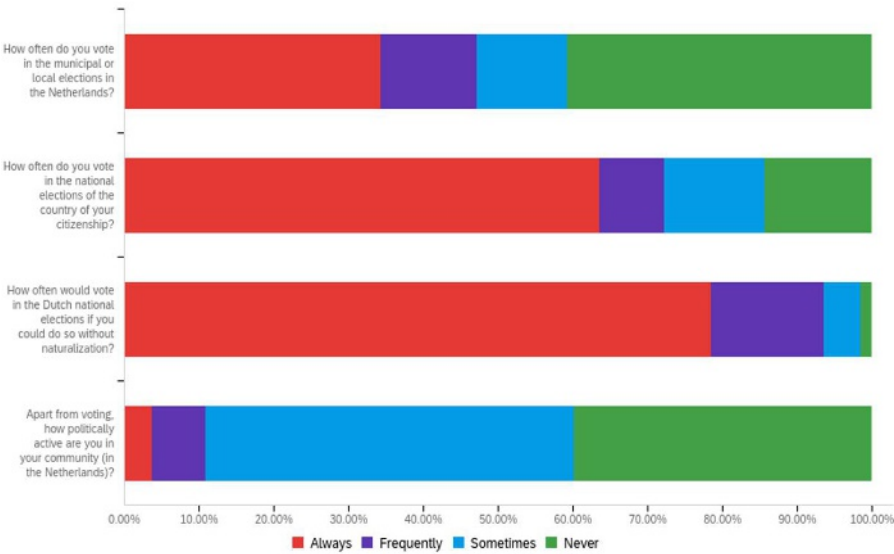
The data retrieved from the Qualtrics survey reveals a number of important findings. The most pertinent of those is the finding about the political activity of non-citizen residents. Four questions were asked in order to gauge the level of activity of non-citizen residents and its various aspects. They were asked about the frequency with which they vote in Dutch municipal elections (for which they have the legal right to do so); how often they vote for national parliament in their home countries; how often they would vote for national parliament in the Netherlands if allowed to do so; and how politically active, apart from voting, are they in their community in the Netherlands. A significant proportion, 46%, responded that they vote ‘always’ or ‘frequently’ for the Dutch municipal election, but only about 11% of the sample responded with such certainty about their political involvement at the local level (see Figure 1). A very important result of the collected data is that non-citizen residents stated that they are more likely to vote in a Dutch national election – more than 93% answered with ‘always’ and ‘frequently’ – in comparison with their casting a vote for the national elections of their home countries, where the response rate for the same two categories was 72%. These

last two answers suggest two things – one, non-citizen residents in the Netherlands are already very engaged in the political process (not far from Dutch citizens whose turnout was more than 80% of the voting population in 2021) and, two, they are more interested in being politically active in their new country than in the countries of their origin. The likelihood of many of those people ceasing to vote in their original state, if they were allowed to vote by residence, is high. Of the respondents, 60% stated that they were EU citizens.

Respondents were also asked to choose a party they would vote for in the election had they been invited to vote. As Figure 2 attests, non-citizen residents’ overwhelming support goes to innovative and what could be considered comparatively less-established political parties, such as Groen Links and D66. The support for these parties was 32% and 19%, respectively. The third party, which receives notable support, is VVD, with 15% of the people claiming they would vote for them.³ BIJ1, a fairly recently found party, and SP, the Socialist Party, each received around 6% of the non-citizen residents’ vote. The Dutch Labour Party, PvdA, comes in only with 4.6% of the vote and Volt, a recently established social-liberal party, part of a European level movement, with 4%.

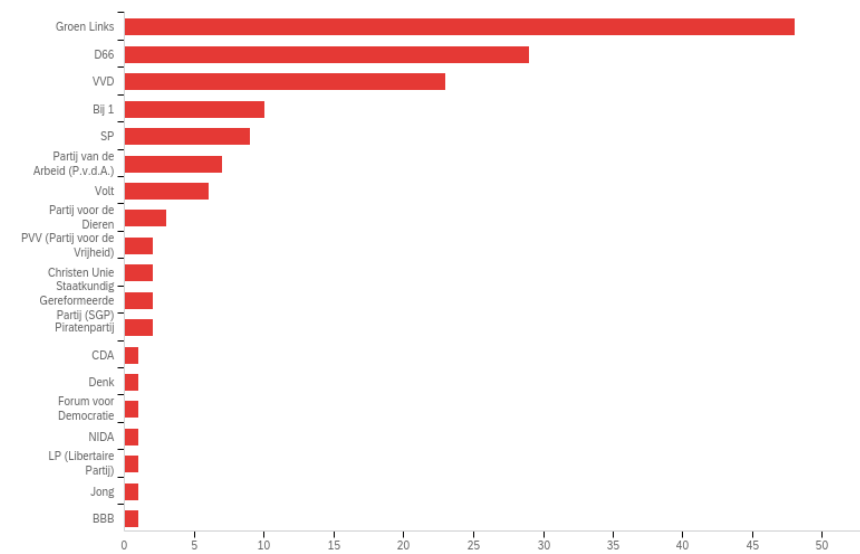
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Figure 1 *Political activity of Dutch non-citizen residents*



Source: Qualtrics Survey, conducted by author.

Figure 2 *Vote choice of Dutch non-citizen residents in the 2021 national election*



Source: Qualtrics Survey, conducted by author.

The collected data provides informative results. With a caveat on the size and variability of the sample, which can always be improved when more data is collected, we can test the hypotheses developed in the theoretical section by statistical analysis. Using ordinal logit regression, I tested whether the age of the respondent, as well as the length of their residency, has an effect on the type of political party they vote for. The expectations developed earlier are that younger respondents will tend to vote for newer and more innovative parties and that more locally established residents (people who have resided longer in the Netherlands) are more likely to vote for established and traditional political parties. Table 1 summarizes the results.

Table 1 *The effect of age and length of residency on voters' party choice*

| Variable | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Age | 0.71** (0.32) | 0.62* (0.37) | 0.62* (0.37) |
| Residency | | 0.11 (0.24) | 0.14 (0.24) |
| Gender | | | -0.40 (0.32) |
| Number of observations | 140 | 140 | 140 |
| Pseudo R ² | 0.0156 | 0.0163 | 0.0212 |

Note: Results from an ordinal logit with standard error presented in parentheses. The statistical significance levels correspond to p-values of ***<0.01, **<0.05, *<0.1.

It is evident from the data analysis that the age of the respondent does matter, as it turns out to be significant in all 3 model specifications. The sign of the coefficient is positive, which means that as we move to more mature groups of participants, the odds of them choosing more established political parties, operationalized here as parties with more years in cabinet, are significantly larger. The length of residency is not statistically significant, nor is gender, which says that neither one of those factors is a good predictor of vote choice in this particular context.

The second set of hypotheses, related to whether being an EU versus a non-EU non-citizen resident in the Netherlands has an effect on the party choice, are tested with subsequent models. The theoretical section developed two hypotheses related to EU citizenship, one about vote certainty and the other about political activity. Owing to the construct of the dependent variables, the first is tested with a regular regression because of the continuous nature of the variable *duration*; the second, trying to explain the level of political activity with EU citizenship, which is operationalized categorically, is estimated again with an ordinal logit model. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 *The effect of EU citizenship on vote certainty and political activity*

| Variable | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
|----------|---------|---------|---------|
|----------|---------|---------|---------|

Table 2 (Continued)

| Variable | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
|------------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| EU citizen | -0.74 (1.06) | -0.74* (0.41) | -0.73* (0.44) |
| Age | -0.36 (1.09) | – | – |
| Residency | 0.16 (0.70) | – | 0.02 (0.28) |
| Gender | -0.33 (0.98) | – | -0.49 (0.41) |
| Activity | 0.98 (0.79) | | |
| Number of observations | 138 | 138 | 138 |
| R ² | 0.0207 | 0.0166 | 0.0239 |

Note: Model 4 is fitted with a regular regression and a DV duration; model 5 with an ordinal logit with DV activity. Standard error is presented in parentheses. The statistical significance levels correspond to p-values of ***<0.01, ** <0.05, * <0.1.

The results from the second set of models do not show much significance. In particular, model 4, which aimed at explaining the certainty of voter’s choice, against the theoretical expectation does not show proof of the existence of a relationship between EU citizenship and voter certainty. In essence, the results show that there is no significant difference in voter certainty related to the voter’s EU citizenship or not. This could be due to the operationalization of voter certainty, in the current analysis proxied with the time one took to fill the survey. Therefore, to test this relationship further, we need to find more precise measurement for it in future studies. Being an EU citizen, however, does have a significant impact on one’s political activity. And given that the operationalization of political activity is coded with a smaller number when respondents participate more, the negative sign in front of the coefficient shows a reversed relationship – when a respondent is an EU citizen, the odds of the outcome variable go down, corresponding to higher levels of participa-

tion. The significance of the relationship holds in the two models shown (models 5 and 6), but barely loses significance when we also include age.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to provide preliminary evidence in support of the idea of extending voting rights for national parliament beyond citizenship to non-citizen residents. The question of who should be allowed to vote and where is an important one, particularly in the highly globalized world that we live in today. It is especially valid for entities like the European Union, where, in addition to the natural migration patterns, movement of people for work, travel or study is free and also encouraged within the boundaries of the Union. A growing volume of literature in the party politics subfield is addressing the question of how national parties engage with their citizens abroad, but hardly any work has been done on the question of voting and representation

of immigrants in their host country. Here, studying the voting preferences of non-citizen residents in the Netherlands, I take a first step towards remedying this. The empirical focus of the article is the Dutch national election in 2021, and the data examined is based on a survey that was distributed a day before the election among several foreigner groups on social media.

In combination, the data presented in this article suggests that the question about the right to vote is very pertinent, and timely, and needs clear resolution, at least for EU citizens. Furthermore, for the Dutch case, specifically, there are several arguments as to why Dutch politicians need to pay more attention to their immigrant, non-citizen, population. First, non-citizen residents in the Netherlands are quite a large group (CBS data from 2021 reports over 1.2 million non-citizen residents of voting age in the Netherlands). Considering the size of the country, and its voting population of around 13 million, this is a sizeable number. Second, Dutch non-citizen residents are (ready to be) politically active, which means that only a little mobilization could suffice for a lot of extra votes. Finally, their participation will likely change the political status quo. According to the analyses presented here, non-citizen residents largely support less-established parties such as Groen Links and D66, which have positioned themselves as parties that want to innovate and bring about new politics. As noted earlier, these results need to be taken with caution since they have been drawn from a relatively small and non-representative sample. Nonetheless, considering the relative lack of extensive studies (and data collection programs) on non-citizen residents,

the findings shown here represent a first step towards envisioning the potential impact of immigrants' political attitudes and preferences on the host country's political landscape. Future studies will have to expand this 'counterfactual' approach based on both more solid data and sophisticated approaches, also in a comparative perspective.

Notes

- 1 Statistics Netherlands (CBS): www.cbs.nl/en-gb/visualisations/dashboard-population/population-counter.
- 2 I acknowledge that the small sample size and the self-selected mechanism of collecting the data pose risks to its validity, generalisability and reliability. Yet in the absence of any similar data already collected and the limited time available to carry out the survey, the collected data presents a first-step exploratory opportunity, which can set up the question and show how necessary it is to study this with more data.
- 3 Groen Links is a leftist, green political party formed in 1971 that promotes the need for green energy; D66, formed in the 1960s, is a centrist liberal party, which is also one of the few parties that mention internationals in their campaign documents. VVD is a conservative liberal party founded in 1948, which has been the leading political force in the Netherlands since 2006. SP is a socialist party founded in 1971; PvdA, founded in 1946, is the Dutch Labor Party; and Volt and BIJ1 are new parties, from 2018 and 2016, respectively, the former a social liberal party and the latter with anti-capitalist rhetoric.

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