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Emigration and Elections: The Role of Emigrants' Missing Votes

The number of migrants is continuously increasing worldwide. One in 30 people is a migrant, which amounts to 3.6 percent of the world's population (World Migration Report 2022). To put this into an economic perspective, data shows that remittances sent by emigrants have increased from USD 126 billion in 2000 to USD 702 billion in 2020 (World Bank 2021). That is a sixfold difference in 20 years, pertaining to a trend of rapid increases in international migration. Economic reasons are not the only factor leading to the decision to migrate. Up to 2019, over 6.1 million students chose to study abroad (UNESCO 2019), and, at the end of 2022, 108.4 million people worldwide were displaced because of conflict, persecution, violence, or human rights (UNHCR 2022). While the economic and social implications of migration for the country of origin have been explored, little attention has been given to its impact on election results.

How election results are influenced depends on the type of emigration. For instance, we could think about a country that has large outmigration of educated and young individuals. If these people have a tendency to vote for left-wing governments, and they are less likely to vote after they move abroad, these left-wing votes would be “missing.” That might make it more likely for a right-wing government to win elections. On the other hand, if low-skilled individuals who are more likely to vote for right-wing parties move out of a country, and their voting turnout is lower as they are abroad, these right-wing votes might be “missing.” While the absolute number of “missing” votes depends on the size of the diaspora, these results could be crucial for governments facing a close election race. One example is the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan campaigning in Germany, where the dias-

pora is largely on his side. Based on the diaspora's political preferences, governments may strategically opt for campaigns abroad as well as certain registration and voting methods to either facilitate or hinder overseas voting.

This report presents the case of Poland, a country with 12.5 percent of its population living abroad. Many of them still have Polish citizenship and thus the right to vote in Poland. It is particularly interesting that migrants' turnout rate in voting from abroad is 5 to 10 percent compared to 50 percent turnout of Polish citizens living in Poland. The reasons behind this disparity are multifaceted, including factors such as the time and effort costs of casting a vote, future plans of living in Poland or abroad, and levels of political engagement. Additionally, Polish citizens residing abroad represent a distinct group in terms of education and

KEY MESSAGES

- **Emigrants typically differ from the origin population in terms of age, education, and political preferences**
- **Emigrants are also voting less in their country of origin even if they have the right to vote**
- **As emigrants are not voting in their country of origin, their votes are missing**
- **This can influence elections if emigration is large, and elections are tight**
- **Policies facilitating voting for the diaspora can ensure better representation**



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age, leading to political preferences that are different from those voters left behind in Poland. Emigration from Poland has thus changed the structure of the voting population, potentially yielding significant effects on election outcomes. Notably, Poland has witnessed a shift in government leadership over the past few decades, transitioning from left-leaning in the early 2000s, to centrist in 2005, and ultimately

to the right-leaning Law and Justice (PiS) party ruling since 2015.

The main question this research answers is to what extent emigration has implications for the origin country's election outcomes. To have a significant effect on election outcomes, three main conditions should be met. First, emigrants should have distinct political preferences that differ from those left behind. Second, emigrants' turnout rates should be lower compared to their hypothetical turnout rates (e.g., if they had not migrated). Third, the group of emigrants should be large enough to make a difference. These three conditions are met in the case of Poland. Thus, the main conclusion of this research is that high emigration rates have increased voting for right-wing parties in Poland, as left-leaning votes have been "missing".

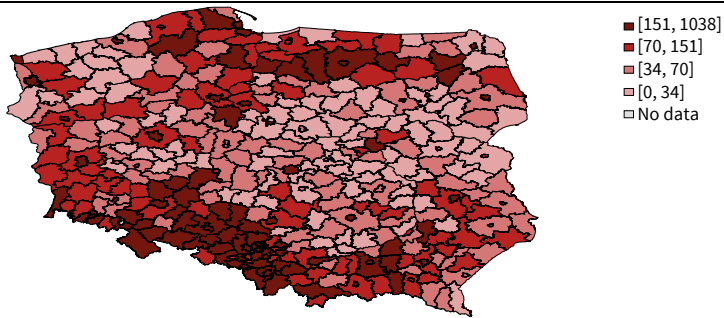
This policy report is based on a recently published academic paper by Giesing and Schikora (2023). Closely related to this paper are studies showing that emigration can affect economic outcomes in the country of origin. Fackler et al. (2020) highlight that emigration fosters knowledge transfers and innovation in the home country, while Rapoport et al. (2021) demonstrate that migrants disseminate cultural values and norms from their destination to their origin countries. Moreover, the role of family members abroad in political activism is highlighted by Paarlberg (2017). The most similar article to our report is the paper by Anelli and Peri (2017). It explores the "exit effect" in Italy, where emigration reduces the influence of liberal-minded voters on domestic politics. In contrast to their work, our study focuses on national parliamentary election outcomes and employs a different methodology. Moreover, the emigrants in our study are not driven by a recession, leading to differences in their self-selection compared to the previous research.

DATA

We utilize data from the administrative records of Statistics Poland, which include information on permanent immigrants and emigrants. The dataset covers the period from 1997 to 2019, aligning with the available election data. Analysis at the county level is made possible due to the granularity of the dataset, which also facilitates merging the data on votes per county. We classify political parties as left, right, or center, drawing from various political party classifications to ensure the robustness of our results. Socio-economic characteristics and attitudes are derived from the Life in Transition Survey (LiTS), a repeated cross-sectional survey run by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The combination of these datasets provides comprehensive information on emigrants, voting patterns, preferences, and demographic characteristics.

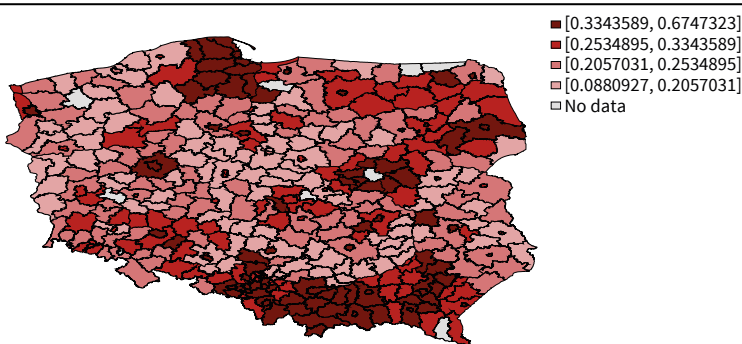
Emigration has increased strongly in Poland, particularly following its 2004 accession to the EU.

Figure 1
Emigration Flows across Polish Counties in 2006



Note: Figure 1 displays emigration per county in 2006, which is characterised by a particularly large outflow of emigrants after accession to the EU in 2004. The different shades of red indicate the number of emigrants in a given county in 2006. Yet, the overall emigration patterns are stable over the observation period. Emigration is defined as the number of persons registering their departure to abroad.
Source: Statistics Poland. © ifo Institute

Figure 2
Vote Share for the Right across Counties in 2001



Note: Figure 2 displays the vote share for the right per county in 2001, which is before the large outflow of emigrants after accession to the EU in 2004.
Source: National Electoral Commission (PKW). © ifo Institute

Figure 3
Turnout Rates of Polish Citizens, in Poland and from Polish Citizens Living Abroad



Note: Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of eligible voters who cast their vote for those residing in Poland and for Polish citizens in the United Kingdom, Germany, and the EU28 countries excluding Poland (2001–2019). It is important to note that official statistics often report extremely high participation rates from abroad. This is because they base eligible voters on those that registered to vote and not on the entire eligible population of Polish citizens residing abroad. Therefore, the numbers of eligible voters are estimated for the observed countries using Eurostat data on population by age group and citizenship.
Source: National Electoral Commission (PKW); Eurostat. © ifo Institute

In 2004, an average of 50 emigrants per county were registered compared to 2006 with 124 emigrants per county. Figure 1 shows the map of the 380 counties in Poland and their migration flows in 2006. That year had high migration rates due to the Polish EU accession of 2004. However, the patterns observed here remain similar throughout the years. Darker shades of red indicate stronger emigration.

As expected, emigrants are a selected group of the overall Polish population. When comparing Polish citizens born and residing in Poland to individuals born in Poland and living in OECD countries, the latter are twice as likely to be highly educated and are also predominantly young adults (aged 25–34).

Regarding voting, the proportion of citizens casting a right-wing vote has increased from 17 percent in 2001 to about 50 percent in recent elections. Figure 2 shows the voting for the right-wing parties in 2001. Given these statistics, we plot the correlation of emigrant numbers to right-wing vote shares at the county level. The correlation is highly positive, further supporting our hypothesis. Also in line with our hypothesis is the turnout rate of Polish citizens abroad. While the turnout rate is about 50 percent in Poland, Polish citizens residing abroad have a rate of only about 5 to 10 percent. Figure 3 shows descriptive evidence of how emigrants are less likely to participate in elections compared to people residing in Poland. Given the propensity of highly educated individuals to participate in voting, coupled with the higher educational levels of Polish residents abroad, we deduce that Polish emigrants possess distinct voting preferences, and their absence from the electoral process leads to “missing” votes. For instance, in the 2019 Polish parliamentary election, 43.6 percent of Polish people in Poland voted for the right-wing “Law and Justice” party PiS, while only 24.9 percent of the diaspora voted for PiS.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Despite this evidence being suggestive, the observed correlation may be caused by a range of factors. To establish a causal connection between emigration rates and right-wing voting at home, we adopt an instrumental variable strategy. For the main specification, the difference in the share of votes for right-wing parties is regressed on the number of emigrants for all years preceding the election. Our main interest is this coefficient, which could be biased due to unobserved characteristics that affect both variables (such as economic, political, and demographic changes). An instrumental variable approach addresses these issues and provides a causal estimate of the effect of a 1 percent change in emigrants per parliamentary term on the changes in political results per county.

We instrument emigration in our setting with the distance from the county’s center to the closest bor-

der to a country with free labor mobility. The underlying premise is that counties near borders that are open for Polish workers experience higher emigration rates. The different timing of opening the borders to Polish workers due to the transitional provisions of the EU accession adds time variation to the instrument. For instance, a county initially closest to the open border with the Czech Republic (i.e., before 2011) may become closest to Germany after the latter opens its borders to Polish workers in 2011. Thus in 2011, there is a change in the way we instrument this county’s emigration. Distance to the closest airport is also used as an extension of the instrument. For this estimation method to give causal estimates, the instrument must be relevant and exogenous. To ensure relevance, we regress the emigration variable on the instrument. The results are negative and significant, meaning that the shorter the distance to a border, the higher the emigration.

To address concerns of endogeneity, we add regional-level controls such as information on employment, GDP, income, the share of female residents, sector structure, age, etc., and performed several validity checks. Thus, we conclude that our instrument can be used in the current setting.

RESULTS

Initially, we examine the share of voting for right-wing parties. In this article, we focus on reporting the causal results derived from the instrument described above. Results from Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions are shown for comparisons. There is a substantial increase in right-wing voting with higher emigration: a 1 percent increase in the number of emigrants in a given county increases the share of right-wing votes by 0.249 percent (see Table 1). When using the left-wing vote shares as an outcome, the result runs in the other direction: a 1 percent increase in the number of migrants causes a 0.569 percent decrease in vote shares for the left-leaning parties. These results are a strong confirmation of our hypothesis.

The instrumental method we use here serves to solve several issues. First, the data may not be complete due to unofficial immigrants not being registered. Second, economic downturns could simultaneously drive emigration rates upward and suppress right-wing voting (as individuals seek job security offered by left-wing parties). Furthermore, if it is the voting share that causes emigration, we could reach the wrong conclusion. If such mechanisms are at play, the inclusion of distance to the closest open border as an instrument gives us the causal effect of emigration on right-wing voting.

To explore additional outcomes that align with the voting results, we examine peoples’ preferences for further European Union (EU) integration, cohesion, and an internal market. Employing the same instrumental variable estimation, we find weak evidence

Table 1

Effect of Emigration on the Share of Right-Wing and Left-Wing Votes

	(1) Share right-wing OLS b/se	(2) Share right-wing IV b/se	(3) Share left-wing OLS b/se	(4) Share left-wing IV b/se
Log emigration per county	0.019*** (0.004)	0.249** (0.126)	-0.050*** (0.010)	-0.569** (0.266)
State*Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Regional covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean	0.635	0.635	0.202	0.202
N	2955	2955	2546	2546
N counties	380	380	380	380

Notes: * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%. The outcome variable in column 1 and 2 (column 3 and 4) is the share of right-wing (left-wing) votes per county and election year. Emigration is measured as the number of emigrants per county in logs. Standard errors are clustered on the county level and are displayed in parentheses. The number of observations drops for the share of votes to left-wing parties in columns 3 and 4, because no left-wing party reached the required 5 (8) percent threshold in the 2015 parliamentary elections. To control for county-level characteristics, we include the following covariates: registered unemployed persons, GDP per capita, per capita average income, share of female residents, percentage working in agricultural sector, share of respondents aged 15–29, aged 30–49, aged 50–64, graduates from tertiary migration, and net internal migration.

Source: Statistics PL and National Electoral Commission (PKW).

that the voters left behind in Poland favor further EU integration. While this may seem counterintuitive, since the people who favor further EU integration the most should be the ones who moved away, this finding can be attributed to numerous factors. First, the people left behind could still have a wish to move to the EU at a later point in time and thus be supportive of further EU integration (Bertoli and Ruysen 2018). Additionally, regions experiencing high permanent emigration are also highly likely to witness temporary emigration, whereby these temporary emigrants potentially support the EU to ensure ongoing job opportunities. Last, the people left behind benefit from remittances and increased wages (Dustmann et al. 2015).

Trust in political institutions serves as another alternative outcome that corroborates the voting results. The analysis here is simpler as preference data is available only in three cross-sections (2006, 2010, and 2016). Thus, we simply perform a regression of the stayers' social preferences (such as trust in people, trust in government, etc.) on an indicator that equals one in counties with high emigration and zero otherwise. We find that the stayers' trust in government authorities decreased in 2006 (when there was a left-wing government) and increased in 2016 (when there was a right-wing government). Considering that the voices "missing" from emigration are mostly supporting the left, these results are in line with our voting results. The effect of emigration on trust in people in general is insignificant, affirming that the observed changes are not general trust patterns, but rather specific to trust in government authorities. It is now clear to see that for the stayers, trust patterns follow voting patterns.

Our central hypothesis suggests that emigration affects voting shares through the channel of "missing votes" from the emigrants who left. An alternative mechanism could be that the voting behavior of those left behind changes due to their interaction with emigrants. To rule out this alternative and strengthen

our hypothesis, we perform the analysis before 2014 and for the period from 2014 to 2019. The reasoning goes as follows: before 2014, it was difficult to cast postal votes from abroad. We would expect the positive result on right-wing voting to be stronger in that period since more votes would be missing. This is indeed what the numbers confirm. Before 2014, a 1 percent increase in emigration increases right-wing voting by 0.269 percent, while afterward the number falls to 0.095. This confirms our central hypothesis.

To further reinforce the robustness of our results, we introduce additional tests. The findings remain consistent when incorporating time or state-level fixed effects and their interactions. Alternative ways of measuring the emigrant variable, such as the stock of emigrants since 1997 or the logarithm of the emigrant share, yield similar outcomes.

Additionally, using the distance to the nearest airport instead of the distance to the nearest border as an instrument aligns with previous specifications.

POLICY CONCLUSION

Voting is commonly considered a right, and democratic countries have long fought to facilitate voting for everyone despite characteristics that set them apart. Among the diverse groups of people, migrants stand out as they live outside the country of their birth. However, their inability to vote in either country could be a big challenge to democratic values. Migrants without acquired citizenship usually do not have the right to vote in their country of residence, and voting in their origin country may be difficult. This makes them disenfranchised from voting, and our research has shown that this can have implications for voting outcomes in the country of origin. These migrants play an especially important role when the election race is close. Instances like the Turkish president campaigning in Germany or the Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador visiting major US cities show that governments of origin countries

have realized the potential of the diaspora to influence elections.

Whether emigrants should vote in their country of origin or their destination is a topic of controversy. Some argue that since emigrants no longer reside in their home country, voting outcomes there may not directly impact them, hence they should be excluded from voting. The counterargument could be that these emigrants may return to their origin, they may want to vote regarding their family's well-being, or they might not be allowed to vote in their destination country. Several European countries allow permanent residents to vote in their local elections (e.g., Germany), but forbid non-citizen residents to vote in general elections.

Another issue will be the type of effect emigrants have on voting outcomes. This report has shown that in the case of Poland, the large-scale emigration of young and educated voters causes a negative shift in left-wing voting. More generally, this effect will depend on the selection of migrants and their voting preferences. Based on this, countries might also want to apply different policies to steer the wheel in either direction.

While this research cannot tell in which country migrants should be allowed to vote, it can show that there are implications to either action. If a country wants to facilitate the voting of its emigrants so that their votes are no longer “missing”, some policy actions could be considered. First, voting will become easier if there are more voting stations abroad, if emigrants can vote by post, and if the registration to vote from abroad is not long and complicated. All these options serve to reduce the barriers to voting and reach higher turnout rates from citizens who reside abroad. In combination with postal and in-person voting, some countries also offer “proxy voting”, which enables a person of your choosing to cast your vote in the home country. More recently, the idea of “remote” or “electronic” voting is also being tested (e.g., in Estonia). This would entail a vote through the internet, mobile phone, or with a personal digital assistant. While the latter will be costly if it is not automated, an internet vote could be cheaper than any of the other options in terms of time and administrative burden.

On the other hand, host countries could decide that migrants should be allowed to vote in their destination country. Firstly, voting could be easily facilitated for permanent residents. It is most likely that permanent migrants plan to live in the host country long term, and any voting outcome affects them in a similar extent as citizens. Germany is an example of a country that allows permanent EU residents to vote in local elections. This type of policy could be adopted by more countries and for more types of elections.

Voting is perhaps the most important political right of a person. Whether the host or home country decides to facilitate voting for migrants, it is important that there be a clear policy in this regard. Some of the options are costly, especially in terms of cost per voter, but many countries are taking steps forward in this regard with options like electronic voting. This report has shown that in cases of a selected, large diaspora, the implications of these policies could be crucial.

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