

Electoral Discrimination, Party Rationale, and the Underrepresentation of Immigrant-Origin Politicians



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Abstract: *Immigrants and other minorities are underrepresented in politics in most Western democracies. We argue that strategically acting party gatekeepers who update their nomination strategies based on voter behavior contribute to this representation gap. Drawing on unique panel data from Swiss local elections, we find that candidates with a “foreign-sounding” name systematically receive not only fewer votes but are also fielded on less promising list positions compared to native candidates. We track candidates across elections and show that this inequality is driven by voter discrimination in previous elections. Our study carries relevance for research on minority candidates by linking different stages in the electoral process and showing how parties indirectly discriminate due to their use of candidate-performance information. It also bears practical implications, pointing to avenues how parties can break the cycle of discrimination in the electoral process.*

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EIINMP>.

Immigrants and individuals with a migration background make up a growing share of the population in many Western democracies. However, this development is rarely reflected in the political sphere: in most countries, minorities—such as persons with a migration background—are severely underrepresented among political candidates and in political offices (Fisher et al. 2015). This underrepresentation can challenge the

core democratic principle of equal representation of political views if it hinders the inclusion of the interests of underrepresented populations in the political discourse (Mansbridge 1999; Williams 1998). Moreover, the political representation of minority populations has a symbolic effect because it emphasizes the relevance of these groups’ perspectives in politics (Pitkin 1967).

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There is a growing number of studies in different geographical contexts, including Europe and the United States, demonstrating that parties contribute to this underrepresentation because they are reluctant to nominate minority candidates (Dancygier et al. 2020; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019). However, the explanations for why parties disadvantage individuals with a migration background and other minority populations when selecting candidates vary widely. Some attribute this to prejudices and negative stereotypes held by party leaders (Besco 2020; Van Trappen, Devroe, and Wauters 2020), others to electoral incentives and electability concerns (Bateson 2020; Dancygier 2017; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019). According to this latter view, party selectorates anticipate voters' attitudes toward minority candidates and internalize them in the nomination process, that is, they are more likely to field minority candidates if they expect that it will help them attract votes and if it will not discourage other voters from casting their vote(s) for the party (Dancygier 2017; Deiss-Helbig 2018). In contrast, parties are less likely to nominate minority candidates if they believe that voters will discriminate against these candidates (Bateson 2020; Dancygier 2017).

Yet, it is still unexplored whether and how party gatekeepers update their information about voter discrimination and their nomination strategies in response to candidates' electoral performance. Bridging work on electoral discrimination, electability, and party gatekeeping, we argue that party officials disadvantage minority candidates by considering how candidates performed in prior elections. This argument draws on insights from studies on parties' nomination strategies, which show that candidate performance serves parties as one of the most direct indicators of candidates' ability to attract votes (André et al. 2017; Crisp et al. 2013). If voters have discriminated against immigrant-origin candidates in a prior election, strategically acting party leaders may consider this in their nomination process and support these candidates less in subsequent elections.

To what extent party leaders take voter behavior into account is an open question: on the one hand, party leaders might value diversity or simply ignore information from previous electoral results. In this case, we do not expect that electoral discrimination will affect subsequent nomination processes. On the other hand, vote-seeking party leaders may closely observe and consider signals from voters' behavior that are relevant to their parties' electoral success. In this situation, how party selectorates decide during nomination processes is linked to voter behavior and potential discrimination. Finally, it is conceivable that biased party leaders reward immigrant-origin candidates less for electoral achievements than similarly

performing native candidates, putting them at an additional disadvantage.

Exploring the link between electoral discrimination and party behavior requires not only a clear depiction of voter preferences but also—especially in observational settings—extensive longitudinal data that make it possible to relate changes in electoral performance to nomination patterns. To address this challenge, we rely on novel data on more than 9,000 candidates in local elections in the canton of Zurich between 2006 and 2018, which allows us to follow electoral nominations over time. Thus, we can observe not only the positioning of first-time candidates and their subsequent electoral performance but also how parties react to voters' behavior.

The open-list proportional representation electoral system (referred to as “free-list PR”) employed in Switzerland, in which voters can distribute preference votes to candidates on party lists, enables us to track voter behavior in exceptional detail. We identify immigrant-origin candidates by following prior research and take advantage of unique historical sources to differentiate Swiss from non-Swiss—that is, foreign-sounding—last names. Using a database of all surnames registered in Swiss municipalities, we code candidate surnames as Swiss if they were registered before 1939 and as non-Swiss if they were registered for the first time after this cutoff (Portmann and Stojanović 2019).¹

First, we find that candidates with foreign-sounding names receive about 5% fewer votes on average than otherwise similar candidates with Swiss names on the same party list, corroborating prior studies that report electoral discrimination against immigrant-origin candidates in Switzerland and other European countries (Fisher et al. 2015; Portmann and Stojanović 2022; for contrasting findings in the United States, see Hood and McKee 2015; Juenke and Shah 2016). Second, we show that parties equally reward the electoral performance of candidates in prior elections, independent of whether they have a migration background, by granting them better list positions. However, these election results include discrimination by voters, thereby perpetuating the disad-

¹With immigrant-origin candidates we here refer to candidates with foreign-sounding names and vice versa for Swiss candidates. As we elaborate below, the name is the only indication of migration background on the ballot. Alternative terms such as ethnic minorities are less suitable in the multilingual Swiss context. While in the United States, the term often refers to all visible minorities except African Americans (Juenke and Shah 2016; Sobolewska 2017); in comparative and European literature it often also includes linguistic minorities (Hänni 2017). The use of the term “racial minorities” as another alternative is often limited to describe visible minorities, which cannot be identified on the ballots in Switzerland. When we refer to minorities, we follow Tajfel (1978), who uses this term to denote societal groups that lack (social) power compared to other groups.

vantages for immigrant-origin candidates in subsequent elections. We consider this behavior of party leaders a form of indirect discrimination.

An additional finding of our study is that local party chapters place first-time immigrant-origin candidates in less promising list positions than similar native candidates because they lack information about previous performance. Moreover, we probe alternative explanations that could account for systematic differences in the candidate pool between two elections but find no evidence for differences in dropout rates and higher-level recruitment between native and immigrant-origin candidates. Finally, we use additionally collected data from municipal elections in other Swiss cantons and show that our main findings hold in the extended sample as well.

The findings of our study are highly relevant for the literature on electability and discrimination. First, scholars have highlighted the importance of bias among candidate selectorates, who—due to electability concerns—discriminate against minority candidates (Bateson 2020; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019). We theoretically elaborate how strategically acting party gatekeepers consider electability by using accurate information on prior voter preferences in subsequent nomination processes. We thereby link different stages on the path to elective office: nomination by parties and electoral support from voters. This is rare in the existing literature and has been described as an important direction to better understand the underrepresentation of immigrant-origin candidates (Dancygier et al. 2020; for exceptions, see Gonzalez Juenke and Shah 2015). Second, by empirically investigating the dynamics of party gatekeeping over multiple elections in an observational setting, we extend most existing studies, which typically focus on nominations in one specific election.

Finally, our research carries implications for political practice beyond Switzerland. Our approach allows us to demonstrate that voter discrimination not only directly curtails the electoral chances of immigrant-origin candidates but also indirectly reduces their prospects in the next election, as parties respond to the behavior of voters. We argue that by adjusting their nomination strategies, parties could break the cycle of discrimination instead of perpetuating it.

Electoral Discrimination and Party Behavior

An influential explanation for political underrepresentation is that voters discriminate against minority candidates. Research on racial bias in the United States,

however, provides mixed findings: some studies find evidence of voter discrimination (McDermott 1998; Sigelman et al. 1995), while a growing number of recent studies suggest that voters no longer lower minorities' electoral chances (Hood and McKee 2015; Juenke and Shah 2016). An emerging literature in Europe more consistently reports discrimination against immigrant-origin candidates by voters (Fisher et al. 2015; Portmann 2021; Van Trappen, Devroe, and Wauters 2020). Such voter behavior may be based on prejudice and negative stereotypes against immigrant-origin individuals and racial minorities or can result from policy-based considerations, for instance when (potentially biased) voters assume that minority candidates hold unfavorable ideological positions (Besco 2020; Van Trappen, Devroe, and Wauters 2020).

Yet, discrimination against immigrant-origin individuals may also stem from parties' nomination strategies and lack of support for such candidates (Fraga and Hassell 2021; Hassell and Visalvanich 2019). Parties are important gatekeepers that influence access to political office via their candidate recruitment and nomination strategies. Furthermore, they can influence candidates' electoral chances by providing endorsements or by granting them access to influential political actors or the media (Hassell and Visalvanich 2019; Juenke and Shah 2016; Ocampo and Ray 2019). Whether and how intraparty dynamics and candidate-selection procedures contribute to the (under)representation of minorities has only recently gained more attention in the literature (Bateson 2020; Dancygier 2017; Hassell and Visalvanich 2019). The findings on the role of parties in the political representation of minorities is mixed. Some studies find that minority candidates receive additional party support while others show that party leaders systematically discriminate against minority candidates (for an overview, see Hassell and Visalvanich 2019, 908).

This study focuses on how the interplay between voter attitudes toward minority candidates and parties' nomination strategies influences political representation. In so doing, we bridge accounts of voter demand and party behavior. We assume that party selectorates are guided by (rational) vote-maximizing behavior and assess the opportunity costs of nominating a minority candidate. The literature has explored several reasons why parties may include the minority status of candidates in their strategic considerations. By fielding minority candidates, a party can gain votes because it improves its inclusive image (Fraga and Hassell 2021). In contrast, party leaders may be reluctant to put forward minority candidates or place them in promising list positions if they perceive voters as hostile toward minority candidates (Bateson 2020; Dancygier 2017).

Thus, ideology plays a role in nomination strategies, with right-wing and conservative parties being typically more concerned than left-wing parties that their supporters will not feel comfortable with the promotion of minority candidates (Deiss-Helbig 2018; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019). Furthermore, parties may respond to larger demographic factors in the constituency, such as the share of the enfranchised immigrant-origin population. It can be reasonable for a party to increase its efforts to attract minority votes by fielding candidates with a migration background if the share of the enfranchised immigrant-origin population is high (Dancygier 2017).

In this context, uncertainty represents a problem for vote-maximizing behavior, as parties often have little information *ex ante* about what type of candidate voters deem electable. In an electoral environment under incomplete information, party leaders' filtering and processing of information may be biased. Indeed, actors who select candidates, parties, and primary voters seem to perceive the electorate as more hostile toward minority candidates than representative surveys suggest (Bateson 2020; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019). Correcting beliefs about the electability of minority candidates, however, can be an effective means to foster support for minority candidates among primary voters, as Bateson (2020) shows experimentally. Several questions remain: to what extent do party gatekeepers update their information in the same way as primary voters? How do parties act when information suggests that minorities have lower chances of being elected?

We argue that parties consider voters' *past* behavior to assess how they will react to minority candidates *in the future* (see also André et al. 2017; Crisp et al. 2013). If voters discriminate against minority candidates, this is also reflected in the election results, with such candidates receiving less votes, *ceteris paribus*. Consequently, parties' use of previous election results as a criterion for candidate selection and list placement can result in a considerable disadvantage for minority candidates. In doing so, parties may *indirectly* discriminate against immigrant-origin candidates and consolidate voter discrimination. Indirect discrimination means that an "apparently neutral practice or policy" puts members of minority groups at a "disproportionate disadvantage" relative to the majority (Khaitan 2018, 30). Two defining aspects of indirect discrimination, highlighted in influential theoretical accounts, are present in this type of partisan behavior (Altman 2020; Thomsen 2015). First, the behavior need not be directed against a social group and members of it specifically and need not involve bias or prejudice. Parties may simply apply achievement-based criteria, irrespec-

tive of candidates' minority status (Deiss-Helbig 2018). Second, however, when parties' (rational) information updating includes voter discrimination, it places members of a social group—here individuals with a migration background—at a disproportionate disadvantage.

Background

Municipal Elections in the Canton of Zurich

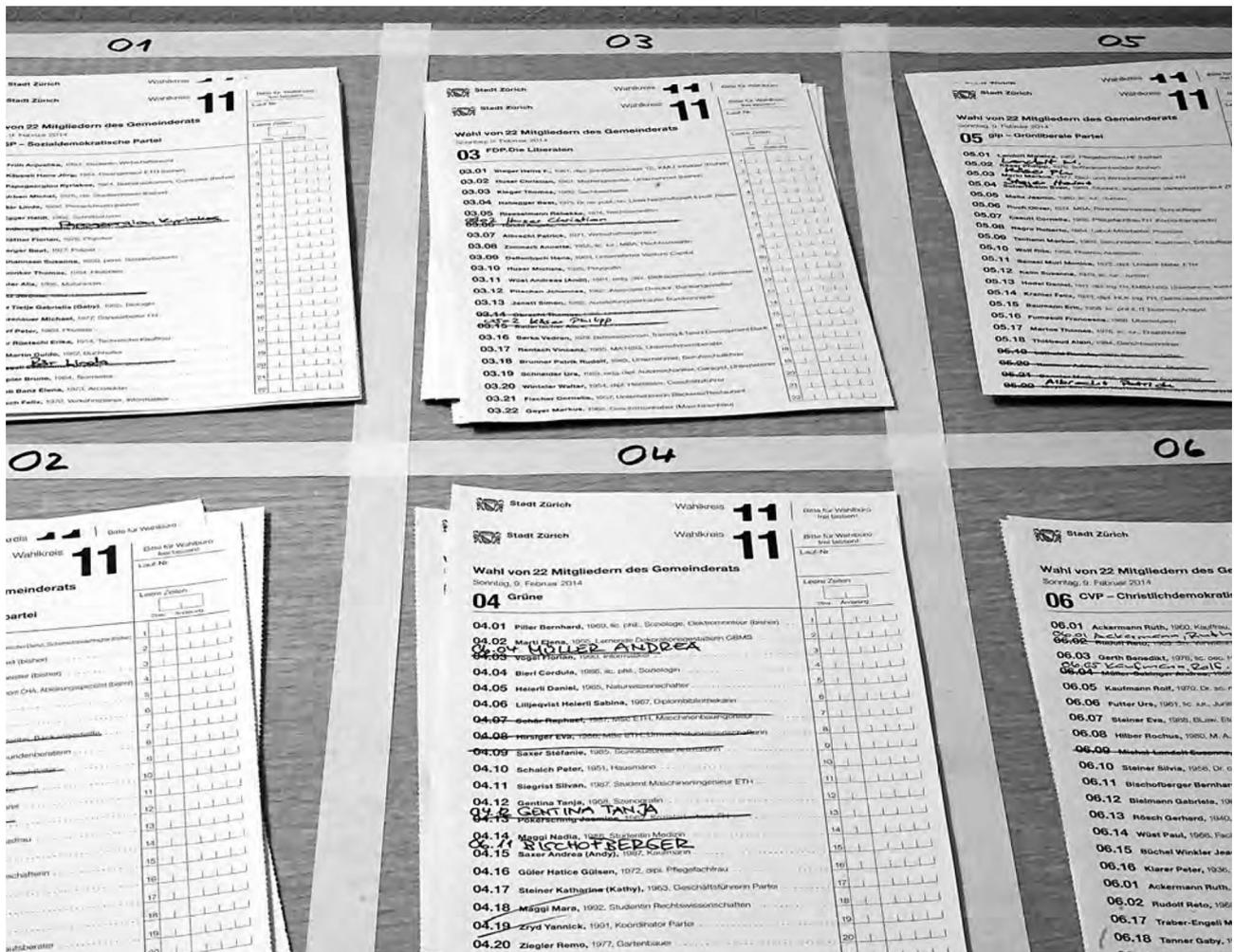
Whereas in most municipalities in Switzerland, enfranchised citizens express their policy views and decide on legislative issues in a town meeting, more populated municipalities regularly elect a parliament. In the canton of Zurich, this is the case in 13 municipalities.² We focus on the canton of Zurich for three reasons: (1) it is Switzerland's largest state; (2) all established parties are represented in its municipal parliaments; and (3) it is monolingual. This ensures that our measure of immigrant origin—foreign-sounding names—is not biased by names from the other national languages in Switzerland. In Section "External Validity and the Role of Context" we assess generalizability by expanding our sample.

When electing the municipal parliaments, local party officials nominate candidates and decide where to place them on the ballot (Vatter 2014). Local party chapters are the main gatekeepers during the nomination process since the Swiss party system is highly decentralized (Ladner 2021). Moreover, in international comparison, Swiss parties are characterized by weak organizational structures and a "militia system," in which nonprofessionals play a significant role (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). So far, however, there are no clear findings as to how the decentralization of candidate nomination and the (weak) professionalization of party organizations affect minority candidates' chances in the candidate-selection process (Deiss-Helbig 2018).

Swiss municipalities apply a free-list PR electoral system to elect their parliament. Enfranchised citizens receive a bundle of party ballots. On each ballot, they find a party list containing the names of candidates and a few background characteristics (municipalities in Zurich list age, professional status, and incumbency). Voters select a party list and have several options to distribute preference votes: they can (a) cast an unmodified ballot by voting for a party list without making any changes, (b) choose a party list and modify the predefined candidate rankings by allocating preference votes to individual

²Approximately 50% of the canton's constituents live in one of these 13 municipalities. The municipal parliaments have 28–125 seats, and foreigners have neither active nor passive voting rights.

FIGURE 1 Example Ballot of the 2014 Municipal Elections in the City of Zurich



Note: Votes cast during the 2014 municipal elections in the city of Zurich sorted before counting. Source: City of Zurich (2016).

candidates, or—an option rarely used—(c) select an empty ballot and fill it with candidates from any of the party lists. These features are not unique to the Swiss electoral system. Many modern democracies allow for some form of individual preference voting. A peculiarity of the Swiss system is that voters can allocate preference votes to both candidates from the party list they have selected (internal preference votes) and those who run on other party lists (external preference votes). Voters can distribute additional votes to any of these candidates (positive preference votes) and can punish candidates from the selected party list by crossing off their names from the ballot (negative preference votes). The maximum number of positive and negative preference votes they may allocate corresponds to the number of seats in their electoral district. However, a voter can give no more than two votes to each candidate (see also Portmann and Stojanović 2022). Figure 1 shows an illustrative example

and how the modifications are done in practice. Seats in parliament are first allocated to the parties according to their vote share. Then, within the party lists, the candidates with the most votes are determined. A candidate's total votes consist of the votes from the unmodified ballot and the individual preference votes. The parties, in turn, receive votes if their list is selected by voters. Parties' chances of winning a parliamentary seat increase if a popular candidate can persuade voters to select the entire party list. In addition, parties' votes change if, through preference voting, a candidate on their list is crossed off and replaced by a candidate from another list (in which case the party loses one vote). Hence, candidates play an important role: they can attract or discourage voters to select a party list, and they contribute additional party votes from external preference votes. Therefore, candidates' ability to gain votes is a key factor and has the potential to substantially

influence candidate selection, as has been observed in other countries (Folke, Persson, and Rickne 2016).

In sum, the Swiss electoral system is exceptionally suitable to examine the link between potential voter and party discrimination for two main reasons. First, taking into account preference votes allows us to measure the electability of single candidates in more detail than in systems in which votes are cast for entire (closed) lists or single candidates. Second, local elections in Switzerland can be considered low-information elections because voters are unlikely to hold much information about single candidates on large ballots. Most candidates running for local office are politically unknown and unlikely to have a personal network large enough to influence electoral outcomes, especially in cities with more than 16,000 inhabitants, as in our case. Crucially, we observe all relevant information about parties and candidates that voters can derive from the ballot. This allows us to control for observable intervening factors that may bias our findings, because the information voters are likely to consider in their electoral choice can be substantially narrowed down.

Switzerland in Comparison

In the following, we outline why our study has relevance beyond the Swiss context, but also how our theoretical assumptions may differ across countries. First, we use candidate names as an indicator of minority status (i.e., migration background). A person's name is relevant in various societal contexts (Gaddis 2017) and in many elections, most notably in open-list PR systems—used in about 70 countries worldwide—or block voting systems, which allow voters to allocate preference votes to individual candidates. In these contexts, the media rarely cover individual candidates, especially in local elections. Hence, the easiest way for voters to obtain information about the candidates is from the electoral ballot, such as from their names (Bowler 2016). Studies conducted in Belgium, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, focusing on different groups of minority candidates and electoral systems, have indeed shown that voters draw inferences about the ethnicity or migration background of candidates from their names, which thus influences their voting behavior (Dancygier 2014; Dancygier et al. 2015). Yet, in strongly candidate-centered systems—such as in the United States, Canada, or India—in which candidates are heavily covered by the media, or in elections that feature pictures on the ballot, additional characteristics such as skin color may become more important (Leigh and Susilo 2009). Furthermore, in some contexts, names may not necessarily be a clear

signal of minority status. In these cases, we expect that name-based discrimination—by voters and indirectly by parties—will be less pronounced.

Second, the Swiss electoral system is exceptional because it provides voters with many options to modify the party lists. Closed-list PR systems and plurality/majority systems typically provide fewer possibilities to directly support individual candidates within a party (Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis 2008). In consequence, in these systems, parties may run a higher risk that prejudiced voters will not vote for the party altogether if they disagree with the candidate selection (Dancygier 2014). Hence, we assume that our findings of strategic party behavior are conservative estimates and that parties may take voter preferences into account even more when the options to allocate individual preference votes are limited, such as in closed-list PR and majoritarian systems. Evidence regarding voters' willingness to switch parties, and hence parties' incentives, is mixed and likely depends not only on the electoral system but also on the polarization of the party system and competition between parties (Fisher et al. 2015; Hood and McKee 2015; Juenke and Shah 2016). In international comparison, Switzerland is characterized by moderate to high party polarization (see Figure A1 in the online supporting information), which should lead to fewer voters switching between parties and thus, if at all, to an underestimation of strategic party behavior under voter discrimination (Gidron, Adams, and Horne 2020; Hayes and Lawless 2016; Hood and McKee 2015). This assumption is further strengthened by the fact that—on top of a relatively polarized party system—Swiss voters are on average more likely to be affiliated with a party than voters in other OECD countries, as shown in Figure A1, which makes vote switching in elections less likely. Nonetheless, it is possible that in heavily polarized party systems, where the risk of vote switching is sufficiently low, parties have a lower incentive to take candidate popularity via prior electoral performance into account when nominating minority candidates.

Third, based on the assumption of coethnic voting, we expect that voter discrimination and our mechanism of parties' strategic reaction to it is less pronounced when the relative strength of the immigrant-origin electorate is high (Dancygier 2014, 2017; Nadler 2021) and when the overall anti-immigrant sentiment in the population is low (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Rydgren 2008). This is precisely the setting we consider. Immigrants in Switzerland make up a significant share of the population (25% as of 2019 compared to 8% in the European Union, on average; Eurostat 2021). In addition, xenophobic attitudes tend to be below average compared to the other OECD countries, as shown in Figure A1. This pattern is further reinforced in our study because

we sample only more populated (urban) municipalities that elect a parliament. Given that constituents in urban areas tend to hold more liberal values, any observed discrimination should be biased downward (Maxwell 2019), which we confirm below. In other contexts, with a smaller immigrant-origin population and stronger xenophobic attitudes, direct discrimination by voters and indirect discrimination by the parties will be even more pronounced.

Overall, there is much to suggest that our findings are generalizable to many other contexts (Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013). If anything, the greater threat of vote switching in other countries, the relatively large share of immigrant-origin constituents in Switzerland, and the below-average anti-immigrant attitudes among the Swiss population should contribute to ensuring that the estimates of electoral discrimination and strategic party behavior are located at the lower end. In candidate-centered, highly polarized systems however, our theoretical argument of indirect party discrimination may be less accurate.

Empirical Strategy

Considering our setting of low-information, second-order elections, we expect that voters rely heavily on heuristics. Based on this premise, we focus on how voters consider information provided on the ballot when casting their vote (Bowler 2016). While it is plausible to apply this *selection-on-observables approach* to measure voter behavior, assessing party behavior becomes more challenging: party gatekeepers likely acquire private information in the run-up to an election. For instance, they might monitor the commitment and ideological beliefs of potential future candidates. To overcome this limitation, we leverage the longitudinal nature of our data. That is, we follow candidates over time and explore how parties react to past election performances. For this purpose, we obtained the official election results from the cantonal statistical office together with the complete set of candidate characteristics that are visible on the ballot (party affiliation, name, age, profession, academic titles, and incumbency).

Definition of Preference Votes

We distinguish two main outcomes of voter behavior: first, *internal preference votes* (v^{int}) capture the number of votes that a candidate i receives from constituents who chose the candidate's party ballot b in election t and

modified it. The internal preference votes consist of votes for the candidate's party from ballots that were *actively modified*. These include votes cast by copying or crossing off the candidate's name or votes allocated automatically if the candidate's name was not changed (but another candidate's name was) on a modified ballot. These votes represent the electorate that also reflects on the party's candidate pool and makes specific amendments. Second, *external preference votes* (v^{ext}) are defined as the number of additional votes a candidate receives from a voter who *did not vote for the candidate's party but modified another party's ballot by adding the candidate's name*.

On average, 41% of all votes during our observation period stem from modified ballots, and each of the 9,404 candidates in our sample received at least one internal or external preference vote. The total number of votes (v^{total}) a candidate i on ballot b in election t receives can thus be calculated by adding the internal and external preference votes to the unmodified list votes (v^{list}):

$$v_{ibt}^{total} = v_{bt}^{list} + v_{ibt}^{int} + v_{ibt}^{ext} \quad (1)$$

Measuring Party Reactions

Parties are important gatekeepers because they decide on the nomination of candidates and have the means to promote candidates who run on their lists. Parties determine the list ranking on the ballot, which serves as our first measure of party reactions. A high position on the party list creates visibility and makes voters believe that the party chapter representatives recommend this candidate. Therefore, the list ranking is an important predictor of candidate success (Lutz 2010). However, candidates' chances of being elected depend not only on their list position but also on the list on which they run. This is because seats are first allocated to parties (or to parties running under the same list alignments) according to their electoral strength, before the office-winning candidates within each party list are determined based on their preference votes. To account for this aspect, we include as a second measure whether a candidate runs on a *promising list position*. We define a promising list position as one that would have secured a seat in the previous election on the party list on which the candidate runs (e.g., if a party won three seats in the previous election, we code positions 1–3 as promising and 4 and higher as not promising). Furthermore, we assess dynamic party reactions to voter behavior in previous elections. To this end, we measure previous electoral performance by including list jumps, that is, the difference between the ranking according to votes received and the original

list position, which has been used previously to capture candidate performance (Dancygier 2017).

Coding of Candidate Names

We identify candidates with a migration background by their last names as listed on the ballots. The advantage of this strategy is that it allows us to code numerous candidates (more than 9,000) and include them in our analysis. However, this also means that we may not capture all candidates with a migration background, for example, due to name changes after a marriage. Validating this coding scheme, Portmann and Stojanović (2022) find that 85% of the candidates with non-Swiss names according to this coding approach indeed have roots abroad (i.e., the candidates themselves or at least one of their parents were born abroad).

We use the Register of Swiss Surnames (RSS), which includes all surnames registered in a Swiss municipality until 1964 listing year and municipality of registration.³ Using web scraping, we extract the year of the candidate names' first registration in the RSS. We split candidate names into typically Swiss names if registered before 1939 and foreign-sounding names if registered in or after 1939 or if they do not appear in the RSS at all (registered after 1964). We chose 1939 as threshold because immigration patterns changed considerably during and after World War II (for a similar approach see Portmann and Stojanović 2022).

Alternative approaches to study immigrant-origin politicians have either focused on visible minorities (Dancygier 2017) or examined the migration background of MPs by explicitly searching their profiles online (Van De Wardt et al. 2020). The former is problematic in the Swiss context for two reasons: first, voters are unlikely to know what the candidates look like. There are no pictures provided on the ballots, and candidates running for municipal office are largely unknown among the public. Second, individuals from large immigrant groups (Western/Southern Europe, the Balkans) are often not recognizable by physical markers—but usually by their name. Alternatively, searching candidates' online profiles for evidence of a migration background allows for a more direct measurement but is not convincingly feasible for candidates in the local elections in Zurich. Again, these candidates hardly campaign, and only some front-runners appear in the media or have some form of online presence, which makes the retrieval of this information difficult for voters but also for researchers.

³See <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/famn/> [2022/10/09].

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the key aspect in measuring voter discrimination and parties' strategic response is whether voters *perceive* candidates to have a migration background.⁴ As voters are unlikely to hold candidate-specific knowledge beyond the information on the ballot, the printed name is likely to be the decisive cue from which voters infer candidates' origins. Accordingly, to be precise, we measure the effect of *perceived* or *likely* migration background on electoral outcomes.

Identification

To capture voter discrimination, we estimate the following specification:

$$\widehat{votes}_{ijbt} = \beta_{name}x_{ijbt} + \beta_kX_{ijbt} + \gamma_j + \gamma_t + \gamma_b + (\gamma_j * \gamma_t) + \varepsilon_{ijbt}, \quad (2)$$

where *votes* refer to the total votes or external/internal preference votes of candidate *i* in district *j*,⁵ year *t*, and on list *b*. Our parameter of interest is β_{name} , which is the coefficient for the dummy variable measuring immigrant origin. X_i is a vector including all candidate characteristics indicated on the ballot, that is, gender, age, list position, whether the candidate runs as an incumbent, occupation, academic titles, and whether a candidate is retired or still in training.⁶ The summary statistics are presented in Table A1 in the online supporting information. Furthermore, we add fixed effects for district (γ_j), year (γ_t), and party list (γ_b). We further interact year and district fixed effects to include district-specific time trends. Finally, by applying negative binomial regressions, we account for the fact that our dependent variables are count data.⁷

To capture parties' reactions to candidates, we focus on candidates who ran in the previous election and control for previous placement on the party lists

⁴Studies have shown that individuals with foreign-sounding names in Switzerland experience discrimination in other domains as well (Auer and Fossati 2019; Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013)—irrespective of whether they actually have a migration background.

⁵The municipality corresponds to the electoral district for the local parliament. Only in the larger cities of Zurich and Winterthur, seats in the parliament are allocated according to population size across nine and seven electoral districts, respectively.

⁶We code the candidates' reported profession using the 10-dimension scale of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (see Appendix B1 in the online supporting information).

⁷Figure A2 in the online supporting information displays the distribution of (internal, external, and total) votes by candidate name, showing that the dependent variables are indeed highly right skewed.

($\beta_{place\ t-1}$) and electoral performance (list jumps $\beta_{jumps\ t-1}$). Furthermore, we adjust for personal characteristics, as in Equation (2), and include the same fixed effects:

$$\begin{aligned} \widehat{Party\ reaction}_{ijbt} &= \beta_{name_i} x_{ijbt} + \beta_{jumps\ t-1} x_{ijbt} \\ &+ \beta_{place\ t-1} x_{ijbt} + \beta_k X_{ijbt} + \gamma_j + \gamma_t + \gamma_b \\ &+ (\gamma_j * \gamma_t) + \varepsilon_{ijbt}. \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

This time, we replace the dependent variables of electoral performance with two outcomes capturing ballot composition: first, we estimate the effect of a candidate's name on the candidate's list position, with a higher number indicating a lower/less promising position on the ballot. Second, we construct a dummy variable taking the value 1 if a candidate's position would have yielded a seat in the municipal parliament in the previous election. Note that we do not adjust for incumbency, because list jumps and previous list positions strongly predict incumbency and because the estimates are potentially biased due to intermediate confounders (Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen 2016). We run ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions for models with the dependent variable capturing list position and logit regressions when focusing on promising list positions.

Results

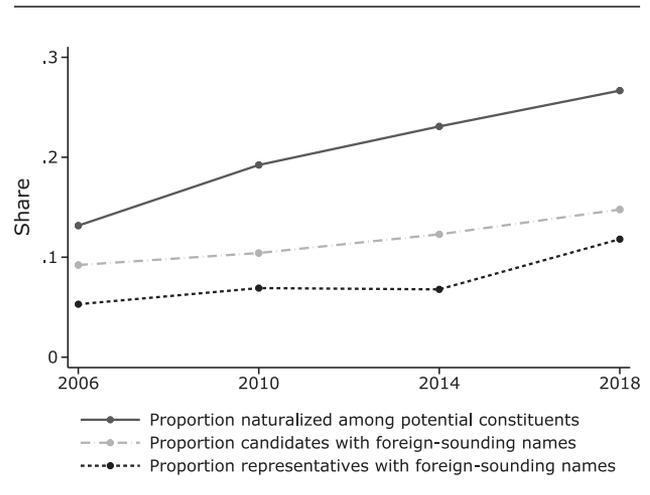
Underrepresentation of the Immigrant-Origin Population

Figure 2 compares the average share of candidates and representatives bearing foreign-sounding names in the local parliaments in the canton of Zurich with the proportion of naturalized individuals since 1991 among the overall electorate. The latter serves as an approximation of the share of the enfranchised population with a migration background. The estimated proportion of immigrant-origin citizens has continuously increased during our observation period from 2006 to 2018. Despite a relative increase of immigrant-origin politicians, that is, candidates and elected parliamentarians with foreign-sounding names, it is evident that the representation gap in Swiss local politics has widened. We aim to explain whether this gap is partly due to the behavior of party leaders, who may perpetuate voter discrimination.

Electoral Discrimination

Table 1 shows that electoral discrimination is widespread in our sample. We find that candidates with foreign-

FIGURE 2 Underrepresentation of the Immigrant-Origin Population in the Canton of Zurich



Notes: Comparison of the population share of naturalized citizens in the canton of Zurich, the share of candidates with foreign-sounding names in municipal elections in the canton of Zurich, and the share of representatives with foreign-sounding names in municipal parliaments in the canton of Zurich

sounding names receive significantly fewer votes than candidates with identifiable Swiss names. To explain this in more detail, we estimate the marginal effects of our negative binomial regression. Based on model 6 (full model, total votes), immigrant-origin candidates receive about 57 votes less on average than native candidates. This corresponds to approximately 5% of the average number of total votes. The negative effect of having a foreign-sounding name is present for both internal preference votes and external preference votes.

The coefficients for candidate characteristics listed on the ballot have the expected sign, which increases our confidence that our overall results are reliable: a lower list position is associated with fewer votes, incumbents receive a sizable bonus (Lee 2008), and retirement is negatively rated. Precumulated (twice listed) candidates benefit because they receive two votes for each ballot from which they are not crossed out. Furthermore, older candidates seem to perform better, although this positive effect decreases (as shown by the negative effect of age squared), indicating that middle-aged candidates are the most preferred. Finally, in line with recent studies, female candidates do not seem to suffer electoral penalties (Kjaer and Krook 2019).⁸

These results hold in several robustness checks: neither using alternative outcomes such as the logged

⁸We also adjust for occupation. The coefficients are reported in Table B1 in the online supporting information.

TABLE 1 Voter Discrimination of Candidates with Foreign-Sounding Names

	Internal Preference Votes		External Preference Votes		Total Votes	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Foreign-sounding name	-0.081** (0.013)	-0.053** (0.012)	-0.359** (0.039)	-0.156** (0.025)	-0.081** (0.012)	-0.048** (0.010)
Age at election		0.008** (0.002)		0.006 (0.004)		0.004** (0.001)
Age squared		-0.000** (0.000)		-0.000** (0.000)		-0.000** (0.000)
Female		0.009 (0.008)		-0.012 (0.017)		0.003 (0.007)
Incumbent		0.359** (0.012)		1.346** (0.022)		0.381** (0.010)
List position		-0.007** (0.000)		-0.043** (0.001)		-0.002** (0.000)
Precumulated		0.143** (0.012)		0.340** (0.026)		0.369** (0.011)
In training		0.012 (0.021)		0.139** (0.045)		0.025 (0.018)
Retired		-0.112** (0.034)		-0.292** (0.070)		-0.052 [†] (0.027)
Academic title		0.024 (0.019)		0.042 (0.050)		0.016 (0.016)
Constant	4.074** (0.069)	3.820** (0.077)	4.880** (0.203)	4.659** (0.189)	5.260** (0.067)	4.747** (0.068)
Inalpha	-1.566** (0.014)	-1.799** (0.015)	0.220** (0.011)	-0.540** (0.015)	-1.755** (0.015)	-2.089** (0.016)
Observations	13,125	13,125	13,125	13,125	13,125	13,125
ISCO fixed effects	-	✓	-	✓	-	✓
List fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
District fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year × district fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Negative binomial regression. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Last name defined as foreign sounding if registered in the RSS after 1939.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

number of votes or *relative* preference votes used by Portmann and Stojanović (2019, 2022) (Tables B2 and B3 in the online supporting information, respectively) nor controlling for name familiarity (Appendix B2 and Table B4) and name popularity via the Internet search results (Appendix B3 and Table B4) or alternative definitions of foreign-sounding names (Appendix B4 and Table B5) changes our main result of electoral discrimination. Using subsamples (Appendix B5), we find evidence of electoral discrimination among voters of all parties across the spectrum of ideological orientations, although it becomes more pronounced toward the political right (Tables B6 and B7). Moreover, both candidates with Western and candidates with non-Western foreign-sounding names⁹ face electoral discrimination (Table B8). Table B9 shows that internal migrants (candidates with Swiss names who are not from the canton of Zurich) do not suffer electoral disadvantages. This suggests that the electoral disadvantage for immigrant-origin candidates is due to discrimination rather than to the size of their social networks assuming that internal and external migrants have smaller social networks. Eventually, addressing potential self-selection, in Table B10, we show that electoral discrimination based on the candidates' name has no influence on their probability to run again in subsequent elections.

Party Strategy and Candidate Performance

How do parties take account of this competitive advantage for candidates with typically Swiss names? How does it affect the composition of party lists? We explore the two outcomes capturing list composition as described above: first, candidates' probability to secure a promising list position, and second, the list position as a continuous measure. We expect the associated coefficient of having a foreign-sounding name to be negative for the binary indicator of running on a promising list position and positive for the overall list position¹⁰ if parties discriminate against immigrant-origin candidates. To measure previous electoral performance, we focus on list jumps. It is important to note, however, that the results remain the same when alternative performance measures (i.e., the log of total candidate votes in $t-1$ and positive list jumps as a binary indicator; see Table C2 in the online supporting information) are used.

⁹The name classification is shown in Table A3 in the online supporting information.

¹⁰Because the front-runner holds list position 1, a higher position—closer to the bottom of the ballot—decreases the chance of being elected.

In Table 2, three patterns stand out: first, the foreign-sounding name dummy is statistically significant in Models 1 and 5. The coefficients indicate that, in the absence of performance signals, party gatekeepers disadvantage candidates with foreign-sounding names by placing them in lower list positions. Calculating marginal effects for Model 1 reveals that candidates with foreign-sounding names are 5.3% less likely to be placed in a promising position. Second, previous list positions cannot explain the entire gap between candidates with foreign-sounding and candidates with Swiss names, at least for more competitive spots (Model 2). Third, only when additionally accounting for list jumps (i.e., performance), the coefficients of the name dummy drop and become statistically insignificant (Models 3 and 7, and when interacting name and performance in Models 4 and 8). Hence, conditional on their electoral performance, immigrant-origin candidates are not systematically placed in worse list positions than other candidates. Taken together, these findings show that voter discrimination has important consequences for immigrant-origin candidates, as their lower performance in prior elections leads to lower list positions in subsequent elections. These observed patterns appear to point to strategic reactions rather than biased party behavior because we find that parties reward the performance of immigrant-origin and native candidates equally in almost all model specifications.¹¹

These main findings raise the question of how parties place candidates in the absence of performance cues. To explore this aspect, we focus on candidates running in local elections for the first time and analyze how the list placement of these candidates differs depending on their last names. Table C4, in the online supporting information, shows that first-time candidates with foreign-sounding names are significantly less likely to be placed in a promising list position than otherwise similar candidates with typically Swiss names. However, there is no systematic disadvantage regarding list position in general. This finding is consistent with both the behavior of party selectorates, who anticipate discrimination, and with taste-based discriminatory behavior by

¹¹The coefficient of the interaction term is statistically insignificant in all other model specifications (see Tables C1 and C2 in the online supporting information). One potential concern is that smaller parties may not have the means to recruit from a large candidate pool. However, the results are robust when restricting the sample to major parties—represented in the national parliament (Table C1). Interestingly, we find that while voters do not additionally discriminate against female immigrant-origin candidates, female candidates with foreign-sounding names still perform significantly worse than their male counterparts when we control for previous performance and list position (Table C3).

TABLE 2 Party Reactions to Previous Candidate Performance

	Promising Position				List Position			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Foreign-sounding name	-0.386* (0.163)	-0.330 [†] (0.182)	-0.044 (0.192)	-0.043 (0.192)	1.107* (0.527)	0.427 (0.445)	-0.030 (0.436)	-0.061 (0.445)
Age at election	0.094** (0.025)	0.072** (0.027)	0.056* (0.028)	0.056 [†] (0.028)	-0.059 (0.079)	0.082 (0.061)	0.121* (0.058)	0.125* (0.058)
Age squared	-0.001** (0.000)	-0.001** (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)	0.001 [†] (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Female	-0.001 (0.100)	0.115 (0.116)	0.222* (0.120)	0.223 [†] (0.120)	0.190 (0.347)	-0.170 (0.276)	-0.395 (0.266)	-0.387 (0.266)
In training	0.147 (0.354)	0.340 (0.426)	0.554 (0.516)	0.529 (0.518)	0.636 (1.294)	1.093 (1.209)	0.345 (1.115)	0.377 (1.115)
Retired	-0.512 (0.422)	-0.159 (0.401)	0.002 (0.434)	0.024 (0.436)	2.869* (1.167)	2.279** (0.823)	1.716* (0.758)	1.718* (0.761)
Academic title	0.347 (0.268)	0.518 (0.334)	0.505 (0.347)	0.508 (0.348)	-2.173 [†] (1.223)	-0.777 (0.989)	-0.667 (0.971)	-0.658 (0.970)
List position _{t-1}		-0.240** (0.014)	-0.309** (0.018)	-0.308** (0.018)		0.635** (0.020)	0.716** (0.021)	0.716** (0.021)
List jumps _{t-1}			0.234** (0.023)	0.228** (0.023)			-0.363** (0.039)	-0.355** (0.040)
Foreign Name × List Jumps _{t-1}				0.063* (0.036)				-0.094 (0.118)
Constant	-5.578** (0.958)	-4.272** (1.114)	-3.546** (1.154)	-3.557** (1.155)	7.921** (2.488)	-0.136 (1.961)	-1.583 (1.902)	-1.634 (1.900)
Observations	3610	3610	3610	3610	3610	3610	3610	3610
ISCO fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ideology	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
List fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
District fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year × district fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Logit in models 1–4; OLS in 5–8. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Last name defined as foreign sounding if registered in the RSS after 1939.

[†] $p < .1$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

party selectorates (Dancygier 2017; Deiss-Helbig 2018). Importantly, this indicates that the form of indirect discrimination we have uncovered in our study adds to the already existing disadvantages faced by immigrant-origin candidates at candidate entry. Eventually, in Table C5, we demonstrate that candidates with foreign-sounding names are neither more likely to drop out nor to run for higher-level office than native candidates. For a detailed discussion of potential self-selection and higher-level recruitment, see Appendix C1.

Overall, our results reveal that immigrant-origin candidates are structurally disadvantaged. Local party chapters are less likely to place them in promising list positions when they enter the electoral arena. In subsequent elections, parties do not directly discriminate against these candidates but strategically reward electoral performance. Since voters prefer candidates with typically Swiss names, candidates with foreign-sounding names are indirectly disadvantaged.

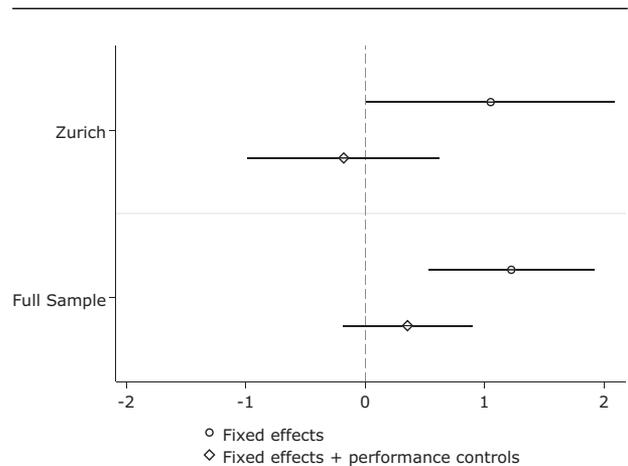
External Validity and the Role of Context

To explore whether our findings hold beyond the canton of Zurich, we have digitized additional election results from 16 municipalities across eight cantons, including 8,650 candidates and covering multilingual and French-speaking regions (see Appendix D1 in the online supporting information for a description).

First, we compare voter discrimination across Swiss cantons. Since the candidate characteristics on the ballot vary considerably across cantons, we estimate parsimonious models that regress the preference votes on candidates' names and a limited set of control variables. We show that the level of voter discrimination in Zurich is about average compared to other Swiss municipalities (Figure D2). Additionally, we validate these findings with data by Portmann and Stojanović (2022) for the 2015 Swiss national parliamentary elections, obtaining similar results (Figure D3). These additional analyses suggest that, in terms of electoral discrimination, Zurich is not an outlier (see Appendix D2 for a detailed discussion).

Second, we confirm that our main results on party behavior are robust to the inclusion of elections in additional regions. We again estimate parsimonious models that regress the ticket position in election t on the candidate name, previous ticket position and performance in election $t-1$, and fixed effects as specified in Equation (3). In line with our findings, the coefficient for having a foreign-sounding name is positive, meaning that parties across a variety of Swiss municipalities, situated in different cantons, place immigrant-origin candidates

FIGURE 3 Party Reaction beyond the Canton of Zurich



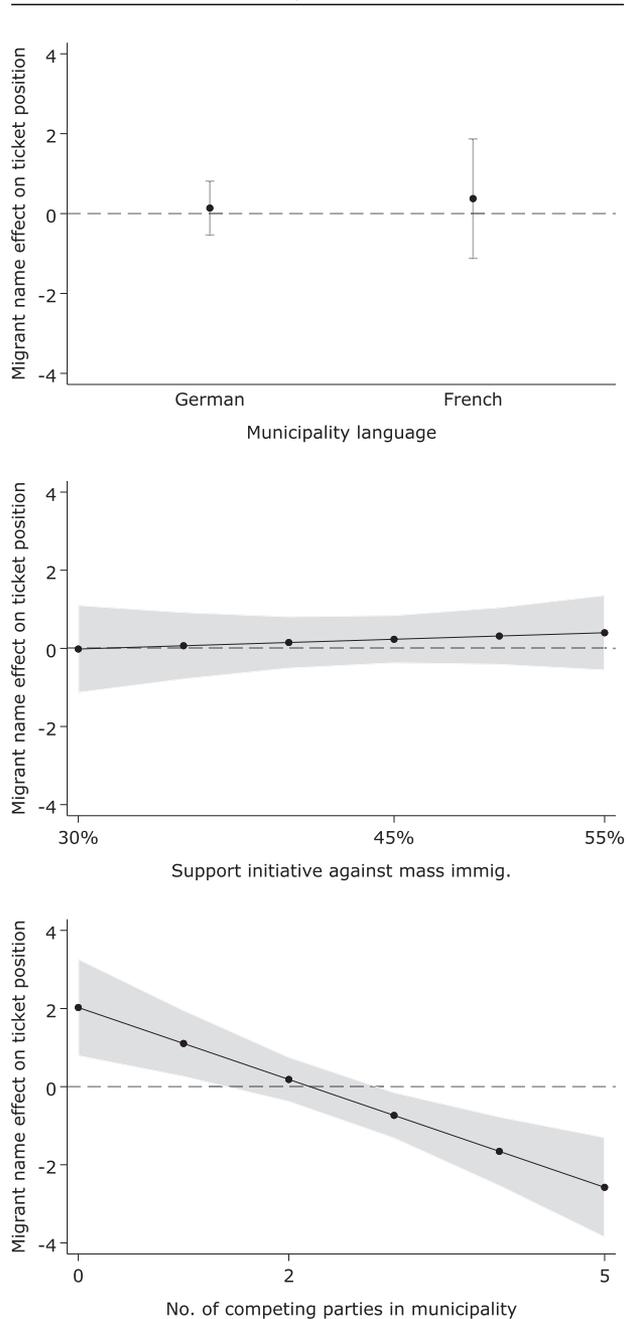
Notes: Effect of candidates' foreign-sounding name on ticket position. OLS. Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals are displayed.

in lower ballot positions. Again, this disadvantage disappears when controlling for candidate performance in the previous election (Figure 3).

Third, to assess how local context affects party behavior, we interact the dummy for immigrant-origin candidates with three municipality-level characteristics that may impact our findings: level of xenophobia, party competition, and dominant language. As we outlined in section entitled "Switzerland in Comparison," widespread xenophobic attitudes could influence party behavior by altering party gatekeepers' perception of backlash against immigrant-origin candidates. Furthermore, highly competitive elections can create stronger incentives for parties to consider voter preferences for candidates, which in turn can affect where parties place immigrant-origin candidates on the ballot. Finally, last names might be perceived differently in other language regions, thus potentially altering party behavior.

We focus on the main outcome of our analysis, namely the extent to which the disadvantage for immigrant-origin candidates in the selection by the parties is eliminated when we control for performance. Figure 4 shows that, after controlling for candidates' previous performance, the dominant language of the local population does not affect parties' placement of immigrant-origin candidates. We observe a slight albeit statistically insignificant increase in party discrimination with higher electoral support for the 2014 initiative against mass immigration—a proposal to drastically restrict migration to Switzerland that was initiated by the political right and thus plausibly approximates xenophobia. Finally, parties react to the number of

FIGURE 4 Party Reaction with Performance Controls, by Local Context



Notes: Predicted difference in ticket positions between candidates with native and candidates with foreign-sounding names for a given level of local characteristics (Equation (3); higher values indicate worse ticket positions). *Municipality language* refers to the dominant language spoken in the municipality. *Support initiative against mass immigration* shows the vote share in favor of a more restrictive immigration policy. *Number of competing parties* indicates the number of parties in the municipality with the same political orientation (left, center, and right). OLS. Markers are point estimates, bars/areas are 95% confidence intervals.

competing parties sharing the same political orientation (left, center, right; Table A2). In less competitive elections, with few competing parties, candidates with a migration background receive significantly fewer promising list positions, while they are even positively discriminated on average in very competitive elections. Importantly, this positive discrimination of immigrant-origin candidates under intense competition is driven by left and center parties, which may want to signal cosmopolitanism and additional commitment to representing the interests of immigrant-origin voters (Fraga and Hassell 2021), whereas we find no variation for right-wing parties (Figure D1).¹²

In sum, extending the sample to different cantons and linguistic regions corroborates our main findings regarding voter discrimination and party behavior. Sociodemographic and political factors play a minor role at best in the behavior of parties, except for local party competition.

Conclusion

Our study explores why immigrant-origin citizens are still underrepresented in the political sphere and finds that the interplay between electoral discrimination and parties' candidate selection strategies is an important driver in this process. Analyzing a comprehensive dataset of over 9,000 candidates running in Swiss local elections between 2006 and 2018, we first provide evidence that voters discriminate against immigrant-origin candidates. Second, we show that party gatekeepers incorporate this voter discrimination in their candidate-selection strategy by relying on information about previous electoral performance. In doing so, they perpetuate the structural discrimination of immigrant-origin candidates. Such behavior by party officials need not be targeted at immigrant-origin individuals nor involve any bias, prejudice, or intentionally harmful actions against immigrant-origin candidates. However, it puts them at a "disproportionate" disadvantage and decreases their electoral prospects.

We complement our main findings in three ways: first, we show that party gatekeepers discriminate against first-time immigration-origin candidates, that is, in the absence of information about electoral performance.

¹²We tested a number of additional local sociodemographic factors but found no relevant variation.

Second, we explore channels that may alter the candidate pool but find no evidence that our results are due to differences in dropout rates or different patterns of higher-level recruitment. Finally, we confirm our results using a larger sample of elections in different Swiss cantons. Here, we observe some variation in party behavior under intense competition. Taken together, we show that the electoral playing field is not (yet) leveled and that discrimination by voters *and* indirect, strategic discrimination by party officials contribute to explaining the persistent underrepresentation of the immigrant-origin population.

Our research expands recent studies on parties' strategic behavior toward minority candidates by showing that parties strategically nominate and place immigrant-origin candidates on the ballot not only by *anticipating* voter behavior (Dancygier 2017) but also by considering *prior* voter behavior and thus voter discrimination against candidates with a migration background. Our study thus links to work on electability and strategic discrimination (Bateson 2020; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2019) by showing that information about electoral performance affects party behavior in subsequent candidate-selection processes.

This research bears important practical implications. The finding that parties respond to discriminatory voting behavior suggests that addressing voter discrimination also helps reduce discrimination in selection processes. On the other hand, parties already have the possibility to promote minority candidates. If they uphold equality and nondiscrimination as essential aspects of democracy, they should provide minority candidates with real electoral chances. Yet, party leaders who fear a backlash among voters may have no incentive to take such measures. In such a situation, they could still field immigrant-origin candidates in constituencies in which the risk of voter discrimination is comparatively low (English 2020). Here, our exploratory findings on the role of local party competition are promising.

We acknowledge several limitations that warrant further research: first, we do not directly measure the motives of party gatekeepers but observe behavior. While our findings are in line with a concept of rational, vote-maximizing party gatekeepers, we cannot fully rule out that taste-based discrimination also occurs among party selectorates in the absence of performance information, that is, against first-time immigrant-origin candidates. Further studying the motives and beliefs of party gatekeepers about candidates' electability is important because the underlying rationales might also determine how and to what extent the behavior of party officials can be changed. Second, future research could investigate

in more depth which contextual and institutional factors shape party gatekeepers' perceptions of the electability of immigrant-origin candidates. We have presented initial evidence on the influence of context on parties' selection of minority candidates, but further analysis will be necessary to better understand these relationships. Third, the nomination and placement of candidates on the ballot depends on the internal organization of a party and how the recruitment process is put into practice. In international comparison, the Swiss party system is characterized by strong local parties, a low level of professionalization, and limited resources (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). Given conflicting claims on the role of organizational factors (Deiss-Helbig 2018), to what extent these organizational aspects of parties influence our findings remains an open question. Fourth, we find evidence for an intersectional penalty disproportionately disadvantaging female immigrant-origin candidates in party nominations, although not in elections. Future research should investigate whether this pattern might be driven by different rationales of party gatekeepers in nominating female and male immigrant-origin candidates (Dancygier 2017).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Appendix A: Additional Background Information

Appendix B: Additional Results on Voter Discrimination

Appendix C: Additional Party Reaction Results

Appendix D: Additional Sample Results