

# How Settlement Locations and Local Networks Influence Immigrant Political Integration

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**Abstract:** *To what extent do early experiences in the host country shape the political integration of immigrants? We argue that the initial neighborhoods immigrants settle in establish patterns of behavior that influence subsequent political participation. Using Norwegian administrative register data, we leverage quasi-exogenous variation in the placement of refugees to assess the consequences of assignment to particular neighborhoods. We find that the difference in turnout between refugees initially placed in 20th and 80th percentile neighborhoods is 12.6 percentage points, which represents 47% of the participation gap between refugees and residents. To assess the mechanism, we draw on individual-level data on all neighbors present at the time of each refugee's arrival and then evaluate the relative impact of neighborhood characteristics and available social networks. Our findings suggest that while neighborhood socioeconomic factors play a limited role, early exposure to politically engaged neighbors and peer cohorts increases immigrants' turnout over the long run.*

**Verification Materials:** The 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/IKM2A4>.

In recent years, developed democracies have placed increased emphasis on immigrant integration. Yet while governments have implemented a broad range of policies designed to support immigrant access to welfare programs and the labor market, they have less leverage when seeking to promote civic and political incorporation. Building on the belief that the exercise of political rights will accelerate engagement with the host society, policy makers have identified immigrants' electoral participation as a key integration metric (De Graauw and Vermeulen 2016; Munro 2008; Tillie 2004). However,

immigrant turnout remains low relative to natives across the majority of developed democracies (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wüst 2010), and targeted interventions return inconsistent effects (Bergh et al. 2016; Bhatti et al. 2014; Chong and Junn 2011; Pons and Liegey 2019). Moreover, recent studies have suggested that immigrants' political participation may not significantly improve with length of residence, suggesting a relatively stable equilibrium (Bevelander and Pendakur 2011; Voicu and Comsa 2014).

Weak political engagement among immigrants presents several policy challenges. First, low participation

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We would like to thank Andreas Beerli, Jon Fiva, Maria Hierro, Moritz Marbach, Karl Oskar Lindgren, Oddbjørn Raaum, and Ole Røgeberg; as well as colleagues at the Institute for Social Research, Frisch Centre, and ETH Zurich; and seminar participants at Humboldt University, University of Oslo, and EPSA 2018 for helpful comments. We gratefully acknowledge funding from Norface (project 462-14-082, "Globalisation, Institutions and the Welfare State") and the Research Council of Norway (projects 270687, "Immigration and Support for the Welfare State: Local and Institutional Responses"; 287766, "Field Experiments to Identify the Effects and Scope Conditions of Social Interactions"; and 270772, "Sustaining the Welfare and Working Life Model in a Diversified Society"). Data made available by Statistics Norway have been essential for this research.

*American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 00, No. 0, xxxx 2020, Pp. 1–15

© 2020 The Authors. *American Journal of Political Science* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Midwest Political Science Association DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12532

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might effectively bias public policy against immigrant preferences (see, e.g., Vernby 2013). Second, an absence of political engagement may stymie immigrants' social and cultural integration more broadly, preventing successful adaptation to host societies.<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite the importance of the issue, our knowledge of the factors that shape immigrant political participation remains incomplete. Standard predictors such as socio-economic status typically play a more limited role in predicting immigrants' political participation than among natives (De Rooij 2012; Wass et al. 2015). In response, one promising line of work has highlighted immigrants' experiences prior to arrival, such as cultural background and prior exposure to democracy, as key factors influencing levels of political engagement with the host society (Dancygier 2013; Rapp 2018; Ruedin 2017; Strijbis 2014; Voicu and Comsa 2014; Wass et al. 2015). Other work has moved beyond individual-level predictors to emphasize the importance of context, highlighting the role played by local governments, immigrant associations, and advocates in promoting immigrants' political incorporation within the cities in which they reside (see, e.g., Bloemraad 2005; De Graauw and Vermeulen 2016; Koopmans 2004; Schönwälder and Bloemraad 2013).

This article builds on these lines of inquiry by emphasizing the importance of context and cumulative experience. However, we specifically focus on the initial postarrival context and argue that immigrants' early experiences within the host country play a key role in shaping subsequent trajectories of political integration. Prior research has argued that the period after arrival represents an "integration window," in which immigrants may be open to habit change (Ferwerda, Finseraas, and Bergh 2020; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2015, 2017). During this adjustment period, cues from neighbors and peers may be particularly influential, and immigrants are likely to internalize local expectations related to political participation. Once established, these new modes of behavior may become habituated and persist in a path-dependent manner. While we expect the sociodemographic characteristics of immigrants to remain relevant, we thus hypothesize that immigrants' initial experiences serve as a policy-relevant determinant of long-term integration trajectories.

Although early experiences are shaped by a variety of institutional and contextual factors, we place particular emphasis on the initial neighborhood of residence. Empirical evidence suggests that settlement loca-

tions influence a variety of factors relevant to integration, such as downstream labor market outcomes (Åslund and Rooth 2007; Bansak et al. 2018; Damm 2009, 2014; Edin, Fredriksson, and Åslund 2003; Godøy 2017), crime (Damm and Dustmann 2014), and health (White et al. 2016). However, there is limited evidence concerning whether and to what degree initial settlement locations shape immigrants' political integration at a more granular level, as well as over the long run.<sup>2</sup>

Political integration is a multidimensional concept, ranging from trust in societal institutions to the expression of political preferences within the context of elections (Bloemraad 2006; Hochschild and Mollenkopf 2009; Tillie 2004). As a parsimonious measure, we focus on electoral participation. Studies suggest that turnout tends to be tightly correlated with alternative measures of political integration (Fennema and Tillie 1999), and electoral participation can be considered as the first step toward other types of political behavior, such as party membership or political candidacy. As a result, electoral participation serves as a tangible behavioral proxy for immigrants' sociopolitical integration more broadly.<sup>3</sup>

We hypothesize two mechanisms through which the initial settlement location influences political integration: neighborhood effects and peer effects. Neighborhood effects refer to local sociodemographic characteristics that plausibly influence the transmission of political norms, including material resources, ethnic diversity, immigrant service organizations, and local partisanship (see, e.g., Belletini, Ceroni, and Monfardini 2016; Bhatti and Hansen 2016; Bhatti et al. 2017; Fieldhouse and Cutts 2012; Leighley 1990; Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009; Schönwälder and Bloemraad 2013). Peer effects, by contrast, refer to the direct influence of neighbors on political behavior. Empirically, studies using credible identification strategies have suggested that peer and household

<sup>2</sup>Lindgren, Nicholson, and Oskarsson (2017) highlight a link between ethnic enclaves within the initial location and the decision to run for political office. Our approach differs by examining the effect of neighborhood placement on mass political participation.

<sup>3</sup>We argue that the exercise of voting rights is indicative of political integration, irrespective of the motivation for voting. Nonetheless, building on group-based arguments of immigrant political mobilization (Lee 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2006) and collective grievance (Simon and Klandermans 2001), an alternative perspective has argued that turnout reflects efforts to advance group interests (Giugni, Michel, and Gianni 2014; Pérez 2015). In Norway, however, survey evidence suggests that refugee turnout is positively correlated with self-reported attachment to the host country (see Table A25, SI: 19). In contrast, attachment to the origin country or religiosity are both weakly associated with turnout. These results parallel the findings of Kranendonk, Vermeulen, and van Heelsom (2018) with respect to Muslim immigrants and suggest that within the empirical context we study, turnout can be plausibly considered as a behavioral measure of political integration.

<sup>1</sup>In 2016, the European Commission noted that while "employment is a core part of the integration process . . . actively contributing and being allowed to contribute to the political, cultural, and social life is at least as important."

effects play an important role in shaping patterns of political participation (Bhatti et al. 2017; Foos and de Rooij 2017; Grosser and Schram 2006; Nickerson 2011; Sinclair, McConnell, and Green 2012).

Our approach provides several contributions to the literature. First, while recent research has evaluated whether immigrants' cultural backgrounds shape subsequent patterns of participation, we broaden the scope of inquiry to include formative experiences after arrival. Second, while extant studies examining spatial variation in immigrant participation have largely focused on the *contemporaneous* relationship between context and turnout, we evaluate whether contextual factors exert path-dependent effects on immigrants' political behavior. Moving beyond short-term effects is important from a theoretical and policy perspective, as it highlights the importance of institutional factors that may have cumulative effects on immigrants' political integration.

Our design also addresses a persistent empirical challenge facing prior studies, namely, the bias that results from immigrants self-selecting into particular locales. We identify the causal effect of available neighborhood and peer networks by leveraging the quasi-exogenous placement policy of the Norwegian refugee resettlement program, which directly places refugees aided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) within Norwegian neighborhoods. Linking administrative data on refugee placement with validated individual-level turnout records, we assess the long-term consequences of the initial placement location on electoral participation. Our analysis goes beyond neighborhood-level variation by leveraging administrative registers to identify the individuals who lived within refugee neighborhoods at the time of arrival. By examining different clusters of these individuals, as well as their sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics, we proxy the influence of local peer networks available upon arrival, as delineated by age, gender, and minority status. The data also permit the inclusion of family fixed effects, which allow us to assess the impact of peer networks while holding a range of other variables fixed.

The results suggest that the initial placement neighborhood explains a significant proportion of the variation in refugees' future electoral participation. Investigating the mechanism, we find that although neighborhood sociodemographic characteristics such as poverty or local diversity weakly predict outcomes, the political engagement of peers within the arrival location is strongly linked to refugees' future electoral participation. Refugees placed in neighborhoods where turnout was one standard deviation above the mean were 3 percentage points more likely to participate in subsequent elections.

This estimate increases to 5 percentage points—roughly one-quarter of the gap between refugee and non-refugee turnout—when examining turnout among same-sex and same-age cohorts, suggesting that the downstream influence of networks can be primarily attributed to peer effects rather than to generalized social capital in the arrival location. Finally, the results indicate that the effect of the initial neighborhood persists over the long run, with residual effects observed for refugees who were placed two decades prior to the election we examine.

These findings provide, to our knowledge, the first causal evidence that settlement neighborhoods exert path-dependent effects on immigrant political integration. In doing so, we speak to a larger debate on the relative role played by background characteristics and contextual factors in shaping immigrant's electoral participation (Jones-Correa 2001; Maxwell 2010; Tillie 2004). More broadly, this evidence underscores the importance of initial experiences in shaping the integration trajectories of refugees and immigrants, and it highlights specific pathways through which patterns of political participation are formed after arriving in the host country. In particular, our results suggest that the influence of neighbors and peers plays a central role in establishing modes of behavior within the host society. From a policy perspective, these results suggest that policy makers seeking to promote immigrant integration may observe elevated returns when targeting interventions toward improving immigrants' initial arrival experience and facilitating positive interactions with existing residents. More broadly, as developed democracies grapple with the challenges of increased refugee and asylum seeker flows, our results suggest that moving from a policy regime focused on refugee dispersal to a regime focused on assigning refugees to neighborhoods where they are likely to succeed may be a cost-effective means to promote integration.

## Empirical Setting

Although historically homogeneous, immigration to Norway has increased markedly over the last few decades. As of 2017, 16.8% of the population had an immigrant background. While this trend has largely been driven by labor migration, it has also been shaped by Norway's comparatively generous asylum and refugee resettlement policies.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See Bratsberg, Raaum, and Røed (2017) for a detailed description of recent trends. Figure A1 (SI: 1), displays the proportion of immigrants from each category.

In this article, we focus on UNHCR resettlement refugees admitted to Norway. These refugees are vetted by international agencies prior to arrival and must have a documented claim of persecution. As a result, their demographics differ slightly from other immigrant populations in Norway (Table A1, SI: 2). Nevertheless, because the quota program is not targeted to a particular region, there is overlap in the nationality and background characteristics of UNHCR refugees when compared to the broader population of asylum seekers and immigrants from non-OECD states. Moreover, these groups have similar baseline rates of electoral participation (Table A3, SI: 2). Thus, although this article focuses on a specific group to isolate the causal impact of the settlement location, we expect that the findings may be generalizable to other classes of immigrants from low-income source regions.

In contrast to asylum seekers, the number of resettlement refugees admitted to Norway is decided each year by the Norwegian parliament (Figure A2, SI: 1). Whereas asylum seekers are initially placed in reception centers and only housed in a municipality if their application is accepted, the refugees we focus on are directly placed in Norwegian municipalities from abroad. Although participation among receiving municipalities is voluntary, resettlement refugees cannot select their initial municipality or initial neighborhood of residence, and there is no communication between the refugee and the settlement caseworker prior to arrival in Norway (Godøy 2017).<sup>5</sup>

The Norwegian system for housing resettlement refugees is decentralized. As in the United Kingdom, accommodation is offered on a no-choice basis (Darling 2011), and the resettlement program explicitly focuses on dispersal and desegregation (Phillips 2006; Robinson, Andersson, and Musterd 2003). Rather than being housed within centralized reception facilities, UNHCR refugees are placed within public housing units within each municipality immediately after arrival in Norway (International Federation for Housing and Planning 2015). However, the exact location within the municipality depends primarily on the availability of suitable public housing at the time of arrival. Studies repeatedly find that available housing is a persistent issue municipalities face when housing refugees (Thorshaug et al. 2011, 25). As a result, the local availability of housing at the time of arrival provides quasi-exogenous variation in placement neighborhoods. Our design thus rests on the fact that we empirically

<sup>5</sup>The agency that resettles refugees, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, primarily allocates refugees across municipalities based on capacity. However, the agency also considers the presence of family members already in Norway, special labor market skills, and health conditions when making placements.

demonstrate that within each municipality, the specific neighborhood a refugee is placed in is as-if random conditional on the year of arrival.<sup>6</sup>

Using data on the initial placement location, we measure context at a fine-grained level. To proxy neighborhoods, we rely on the smallest geographical unit constructed by Statistics Norway (*grunnkrets*). These units are nested within municipalities and are constructed so that they cover a contiguous and relatively homogeneous area (with respect to zoning). In 2015, Norway was divided into 13,850 such units, with a median population size of 239.

Our main outcome consists of validated turnout in local elections. Local elections take place every 4 years, midway through the national election cycle. In comparison to other OECD states, Norway is relatively decentralized, and key components of the welfare state, such as social assistance, healthcare, and schooling, are governed by municipalities and funded (in part) via local income and property taxation. As a result, local elections receive significant media attention and are characterized by relatively high participation rates (60% in 2015). In addition, we focus on local elections due to broad eligibility criteria that imply we observe outcomes for all adult refugees within our sample. Voter registration is automatic, and since 1983, all foreign nationals with at least 3 years of continuous legal residence have the right to vote. All voting-age refugees who arrived prior to 2012 were thus eligible to vote in the 2015 elections.<sup>7</sup>

## Research Design

In addition to estimating the aggregate influence of the initial neighborhood on refugees' future political participation, our design explores the influence of various social networks within the arrival neighborhood.

Although granular data on networks are typically unavailable to researchers, the rich administrative data in Norway enable us to individually identify all individuals who resided in the placement neighborhood in the year each refugee was placed. By aggregating different individuals, we flexibly proxy different types of potential

<sup>6</sup>See Beaman (2011) and Damm and Dustmann (2014) for similar identification strategies using refugee resettlement offices in the United States and Denmark.

<sup>7</sup>Election observers describe the 2015 election as a normal election (Christensen and Saglie 2017). In 2015, participation rates among eligible immigrants lagged significantly behind natives; in the municipalities we study, the turnout rate among immigrants was 33.8%, contrasted to a 65.9% turnout rate among nonimmigrants.

social networks within the arrival location. For instance, this approach enables us to focus on all residents in the neighborhood, as well as same-gender, same-age, and immigrant cohorts. It is important to note that an absence of verified ties between individuals implies that we do not directly measure personal relationships or strong ties. Rather, our approach measures characteristics of different residents within the arrival neighborhood to proxy the social interactions available to refugees upon arrival.<sup>8</sup> Our expectation is that these networks provide individuals with information and cues regarding norms of political engagement (Cho, Gimpel, and Dyck 2006; Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009). While political socialization at the neighborhood level is well established (Baker, Ames, and Renno 2006; Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Straits 1990), we expect that these effects will be heightened for new immigrants, who lack established habits of political behavior within the host country.

Our data enable us to measure a range of characteristics of individuals residing in the placement neighborhood during the year of arrival, including ethnic composition, educational achievement, labor market earnings, and reliance on welfare benefits. Given that digitized voter censuses are only available beginning in 2013, our individual-level measurement of neighborhood turnout is measured in the election year rather than in the year in which refugees arrived. Using future outcomes of residents is common when measuring variation in neighborhood quality (see, e.g., Chetty et al. 2014; Chetty and Hendren 2018); moreover, it permits us to expand the sample to assess the effect of peer networks for refugees who arrived as children. To reduce the possibility that contemporary factors affecting both immigrants and natives influence the results, we employ sibling fixed effects, which implies that bias from contemporary factors must be cohort-specific to influence the estimate. We also present findings where we demonstrate that the results remain robust to replacing neighborhood turnout with municipal turnout in the election prior to arrival, and to estimating turnout only among initial network mem-

<sup>8</sup>Our interpretation of the results assumes that refugees engage in some degree with these available social networks. Although interaction cannot be measured directly with administrative data, our analysis of data from the Norwegian Immigrant Living Conditions Surveys, which are targeted to the largest immigrant nationalities and include an oversample of refugee respondents, suggests that recently arrived refugees report interacting with neighbors relatively frequently (Figure A7, SI: 18). Roughly a third of refugees also report having “good” Norwegian-language skills 2–3 years after arrival, which reflects the fact that municipalities had to agree to provide language training courses in order to receive resettlement refugees (NOU 2005).

bers who no longer live in the same neighborhood as the refugee.

If subsequent voting behavior for existing residents is influenced by the fact that an immigrant was placed in the neighborhood—as some work on ethnic diversity might suggest (Enos 2016; Putnam 2007)—our design estimates the total effect of placement and not solely the effect of neighborhood residents on refugees. Although the total effect is arguably the most relevant from a policy perspective, we nevertheless demonstrate that refugee placement within a neighborhood has no substantive effect on residents’ electoral participation.

## Dependent Variable

We measure political integration as the participation of refugees in the 2015 local elections. Our dependent variable consists of a validated individual-level turnout indicator from the 27 municipalities with a digitized voter census.<sup>9</sup> We study the total population of resettlement refugees initially placed in these municipalities from 1990 to 2012.<sup>10</sup> The 27 municipalities include the largest cities in Norway, and together cover 43% of the electorate. Over the period we study, 32.2% of the resettlement refugees were placed in one of these 27 municipalities.<sup>11</sup>

## Empirical Specification

We run regressions of the following form:

$$Y_{in} = \alpha + \beta NT_n + \gamma X_i + \chi V_n^c + \epsilon_{in}, \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes individuals and  $n$  indexes neighborhood.  $Y$  is refugee turnout, whereas  $NT$  represents turnout in the respective neighborhood. It is important to note that  $NT$  measures turnout among those individuals in the neighborhood *in the year of arrival*, irrespective of whether these people still live in the same neighborhood.  $X$  refers to a vector of individual-level controls for each

<sup>9</sup>The 27 municipalities are (ordered by population size, from large to small) Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, Stavanger, Bærum, Fredrikstad, Drammen, Sandnes, Sarpsborg, Asker, Skien, Skedsmo, Bodø, Ålesund, Sandefjord, Larvik, Tønsberg, Karmøy, Porsgrunn, Haugesund, Mandal, Vefsn, Hammerfest, Re, Tynset, Radøy, and Bremanger. Residents in these municipalities have, on average, higher earnings and higher employment levels than residents elsewhere in Norway.

<sup>10</sup>The year 1990 is the earliest year for which the administrative data are available. We end the observation period in 2012 to ensure that all cohorts are eligible to participate in the 2015 elections.

<sup>11</sup>As seen in Tables A3–A4 (SI: 2), UNHCR refugees within these 27 municipalities were broadly similar to UNHCR refugees elsewhere in the country.

refugee measured prior to arrival in Norway, including gender, education, family size, age, and region of origin, whereas  $V$  refers to a vector of neighborhood-level controls.<sup>12</sup> All specifications control for the year of arrival. In some specifications, these vectors also include country-of-origin fixed effects and family fixed effects (comparing siblings).

### Validating the Design

Before presenting the results, we validate the research design. As stated previously, our approach does not rest on the claim that refugees are randomly allocated across the full set of neighborhoods. In the supporting information, we demonstrate that while there is a high degree of variation in the level of education and turnout across refugee-receiving neighborhoods, refugees tend to be placed in neighborhoods that have slightly lower levels of education and turnout. Instead, our design leverages the fact that refugees cannot select their initial neighborhood within a municipality; moreover, limited information and variation in housing availability implies that caseworkers cannot match refugees to specific neighborhoods. This placement process enables us to identify the effect of the initial neighborhood, independent of self-selection.

The empirical implication of this claim is that turnout within the arrival neighborhood should not be strongly related to refugee background characteristics. To examine this relationship, we fit regressions of the following form:

$$NT_n = \alpha + \gamma X_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where  $X$  refers to a vector of individual-level variables measured at time of arrival, including gender, three polynomials of age, and dummies for level of education, family size, region of origin, and year of arrival. After fitting the model, we conduct F-tests to examine how these variables predict neighborhood turnout.

The key results from the F-tests are presented in Table 1, with the full set of coefficients presented in Table A7 (SI: 6). We find that the full vector of refugee background characteristics produces an F-value of 2.87, which is statistically significant. However, this result is driven by the set of arrival year dummies; other covariates produce

<sup>12</sup>Although the literature has identified a variety of other individual-level factors that influence turnout, such as family income and marital status (Ruedin 2017; Smets and Van Ham 2013; Wass et al. 2015), these variables are measured after arrival in Norway and may be a consequence of early experiences within the country. As a result, including them in the specification would result in posttreatment bias.

**TABLE 1 F-tests of Relationship between Initial Characteristics and Neighborhood Turnout**

	F-test	p-value
Full Set of Variables	2.888	.000
All Variables Except Year of Arrival	1.315	.185
Year of Arrival	3.188	.000
Education	1.542	.188
Gender	0.326	.568
Family Size	1.182	.317
Region of Origin	1.661	.174
Three Polynomials of Age	1.121	.339

Note: N of observations = 9,354. N of neighborhoods = 1,395.

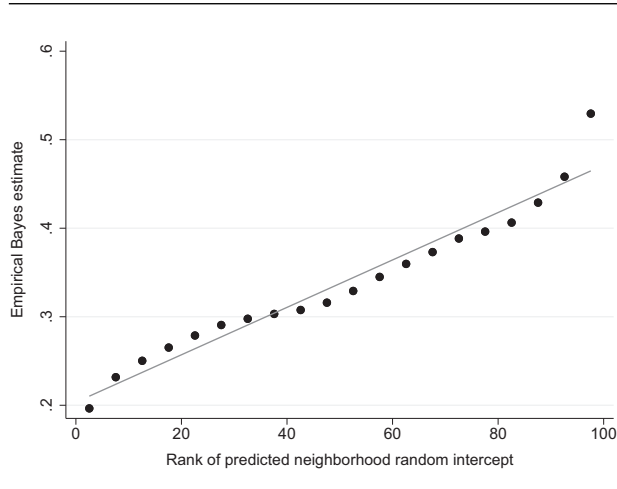
small F-values when year of arrival is included. We therefore consider neighborhood turnout as quasi-exogenous when we control for arrival year fixed effects. These results parallel Godøy's (2017) interviews with placement officers, which suggest that officers do not match refugees to specific neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup>

### Aggregate Effect of the Neighborhood

We first examine whether the initial placement neighborhood explains variation in subsequent electoral participation. We begin by calculating the residual effect of the neighborhood on each refugee's electoral participation, after controlling for the vector of individual characteristics measured at the time of arrival. We then leverage an empirical Bayes procedure to conservatively shrink the estimated impact of each neighborhood toward the sample mean based on how much information we have from a specific neighborhood. The intuition behind the shrinkage procedure is that we have less reliable information about neighborhood effects from neighborhoods that were assigned relatively few refugees. To account for this issue, the procedure uses a weighted average of the specific neighborhood effect and the average neighborhood effect.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>In the supporting information, we consider possible exceptions to this assignment process (Table A16, SI: 14).

<sup>14</sup>The empirical Bayes procedure leads to the best linear prediction in terms of minimizing the mean squared error. See Chetty, Friedman and Rockoff (2014) for a recent application.

**FIGURE 1 Importance of Neighborhoods for Refugee Turnout**

*Note:* Empirical Bayes estimates are predictions of voter turnout for refugees placed in different neighborhoods (y-axis). Estimates are ranked from smallest to largest on the x-axis. Each point represents 5% of the sample neighborhoods, weighted by number of resettled refugees. In total, there were 1,395 neighborhoods in the digitized voter data that received refugees from 1990 to 2012.

Figure 1 summarizes the predictions from this analysis. Each point represents 5% of the sample, ranked according to the expected effect of the neighborhood on refugees' electoral participation. The results suggest that the initial placement neighborhood is associated with wide variation in electoral turnout. Refugees placed in a neighborhood with the median influence on turnout are predicted to have an electoral participation rate 20 percentage points lower than refugees placed in neighborhoods with elevated neighborhood effects (above the 95th percentile). This pattern is not driven by outliers: The gap in expected refugee turnout between the 20th (with a predicted turnout rate of 27.7%) and the 80th percentile neighborhood (predicted turnout rate of 40.3%) is substantial at 12.6 percentage points, which represents 37% of the average turnout in our refugee sample and 47% of the observed turnout gap between refugees and extant neighborhood residents.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>In a separate analysis, Table A10 (SI: 9) regresses individual-level turnout on the set of initial characteristics examined in Table 1, as well as socioeconomic characteristics measured at the neighborhood level. The inclusion of neighborhood fixed effects increases the R-squared from 0.04 to 0.26 (adjusted R-squared increases from 0.03 to 0.12). The addition of municipality fixed effects or country-of-origin fixed effects does not have a comparable effect: The R-squared and adjusted R-squared increase to 0.05 and 0.04 for the former, and to 0.06 and 0.05 for the latter.

**TABLE 2 Linear Probability Models: Voting Propensity**

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Neighborhood Turnout	.018 (.007)	.016 (.006)	.032 (.010)
Year of Arrival	✓	✓	✓
Individual Controls		✓	✓
Neighborhood Controls			✓
N Observations	9,354	9,354	9,354
N Neighborhoods	1,395	1,395	1,395

*Note:* Coefficients represent the change in refugee electoral participation following a one standard deviation change in neighborhood turnout. Individual controls include gender, region of origin, age, educational attainment, and family size at the time of arrival; neighborhood controls include size, average income, the share with an immigrant background, social assistance, and college education. For covariate coefficients, see Table A8 (SI: 7). Standard errors are clustered within neighborhoods. Average turnout: 0.34 refugee, 0.61 neighborhood.

## Decomposing the Neighborhood Effect

Having established that the initial neighborhood shapes refugees' downstream political participation, we next evaluate why local context matters. We begin by regressing refugee turnout on individual characteristics measured prior to arrival, as well as neighborhood-level covariates. As seen in Tables A10 and A11 (SI: 9–10), the results suggest that the socioeconomic characteristics of the initial neighborhood—including income level, the share of individuals with an immigrant background, the percentage of residents on social assistance, and the percentage of residents with a tertiary education—poorly explain variation in refugees' subsequent electoral participation. As a result, in the remainder of the analysis, we focus on the hypothesis that the effect is driven by informal norms and resources transmitted by the social networks available upon arrival. We first examine the political engagement of all residents within the same neighborhood, and we subsequently extend the analysis to fine-grained peer cohorts.

Table 2 presents the results for the full sample. In column 1, we estimate the relationship between neighborhood turnout and an indicator for each refugee's electoral participation, excluding all controls other than year-of-arrival fixed effects.<sup>16</sup> The results suggest that a standard deviation increase in neighborhood turnout increases refugees' subsequent electoral participation by

<sup>16</sup>The results are not sensitive to the exclusion of arrival year effects.

approximately 2 percentage points.<sup>17</sup> As seen in column 2, the estimate is not sensitive to the inclusion of the individual-level controls we use to evaluate the as-if-random assumption. Finally, in column 3, we add neighborhood-level controls at the time of arrival, including the share of residents with a migrant background, neighborhood size, the share of social assistance recipients, average income, and the share with a university education. Controlling for these factors increases the point estimate to 3.2 percentage points. Although the fluctuation in the point estimate suggests that neighborhood turnout is correlated with other neighborhood characteristics, the estimates in columns 2 and 3 are not statistically different from each other, and point estimates for the other neighborhood characteristics remain small.

### Proxying Peer Networks

The results thus far suggest that initial placement within a politically engaged neighborhood is associated with an increase in refugees' downstream electoral turnout. However, if propensity to vote is influenced by social networks, we would expect to observe larger coefficients when measuring the influence of residents who are more likely to engage in social interactions with refugees. Accordingly, we use data on the characteristics of each neighbor to construct plausible peer networks for each refugee.

First, to approximate the peer networks available upon arrival, we construct age-specific cohorts, defined in terms of  $\pm 5$  years around the refugees' year of birth. Column 3 of Table 3 demonstrates that with a saturated specification, a one standard deviation difference in turnout among neighbors from one's age cohort is associated with a 5.6 percentage point increase in the refugee's electoral participation. This effect is substantive and represents 25% of the turnout gap between refugees and non-refugees within the sample.

Second, in columns 4–7, we restrict the sample to siblings below the age of 18 at arrival and then measure turnout among similarly aged members of the network with family fixed effects.<sup>18</sup> In addition to providing estimates for individuals who were children upon arrival,

these models provide a conservative specification by only assessing variation among siblings within the same family. This test accounts for unobserved variables at the neighborhood and family levels, including contemporaneous factors, that affect siblings in the same manner. The remaining variation is due to the fact that siblings belong to different age cohorts that have different propensities to vote.

Although the siblings specification controls for time-invariant confounders, it remains possible that the estimate is biased by other factors that vary across cohorts. We therefore include a similar set of neighborhood controls, defined at the cohort level, to explore robustness.<sup>19</sup> When we tighten the identification in this manner (column 7), we obtain stable estimates that suggest a standard deviation difference in peer cohort turnout is associated with a 3.7 percentage point increase in the probability of voting. This difference represents 20% of the turnout gap within the subsample. In addition to demonstrating an influence of neighborhoods on refugees who arrived as children, these specifications increase confidence that the results are driven by variation in peer networks rather than by unobserved factors at the neighborhood or family level.<sup>20</sup> We also show that the conclusions remain the same if we exclude initial residents who are still living in the neighborhood (see Table A24, SI: 17). This result is reassuring since the approach completely rules out contemporary effects, but the downside is that we condition the network variable on a potentially endogenous variable.

Beyond conceptualizing available peer networks in terms of age cohorts, we further examine networks delineated by sex and minority status. Using the age cohort and sibling samples, we first assess whether the turnout of same-sex neighborhood members drives the observed pattern. If the results reflect the influence of social interactions among peer networks, it is plausible that influence is stronger from those of the same gender. We therefore calculate the turnout of same-sex and opposite-sex members and include both variables in the specification. The point

2 years at the reception school before they are placed with same-age natives in their neighborhood school (see NOU 2010 for details).

<sup>17</sup>As seen in Table A8 (SI: 7), this effect size is on par with that observed for gender, and larger than, for instance, neighborhood education level or family status. Similar to other recent studies, we also find that region of origin is the strongest predictor of turnout.

<sup>18</sup>In this sample, the peer group consists of neighborhood residents born within 1 year of the refugee youth. In Norway, the majority of municipalities have designated a "reception" school with special classes for newly arrived refugee children. The children are prepared for participation in ordinary classes, with a special emphasis on language training. Refugee children typically spend 10 months to

<sup>19</sup>Socioeconomic network variables for youth at the time of arrival are determined using information on parents of their peers.

<sup>20</sup>Table A15 (SI: 13) examines heterogeneity by age at entry. Although results in columns 1–3 indicate that the influence is lower for older refugees than for the younger age groups, the interaction term attenuates and is not significant in columns 4–6 where we examine age cohorts. The implication is that the full neighborhood population represents a poor proxy for the actual network of older refugees, which bolsters our interpretation that the relationship reflects peer influences.



**TABLE 3 Linear Probability Models: Voting Propensity (Peer Cohorts)**

	Age Cohort			Siblings < 18			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Peer Cohort Turnout	.052 (.006)	.044 (.006)	.056 (.007)	.034 (.012)	.041 (.018)	.041 (.018)	.037 (.018)
Year of Arrival	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Individual Controls		✓	✓			✓	✓
Neighborhood Controls			✓				✓
Family Fixed Effects					✓	✓	✓
N Observations	9,197	9,197	9,197	1,696	1,696	1,696	1,696
N Families					705	705	705

*Note:* Coefficients represent the change in refugee electoral participation following a one standard deviation change in neighborhood turnout. For covariate coefficients, see Table A9 (SI: 8). Standard errors are clustered within networks. Observations with fewer than five network members are dropped from the regressions. Age cohort average turnout: 0.34 refugee, 0.58 network. Sibling average turnout: 0.28 refugee, 0.47 network.

estimates in Table 4 suggest that turnout among same-sex members has a stronger influence on subsequent refugee turnout than turnout among opposite-sex members, but they are too imprecise to make strong claims. However, the estimates lend credibility to the claim that the political engagement of peers is important, and, we argue, it weakens the claim that the overall level of social or civic capital in the neighborhood is the main mechanism at work, since such arguments do not have a gender-specific component.

Second, we explore the degree to which the influence of neighbors differs by immigrant background. We

divide neighborhood residents into groups according to whether they are from an immigrant or a native background, and we include turnout from each group within the specification. We find that an increase in the turnout of other residents with an immigrant background has a positive effect on subsequent refugee participation rates, ranging from 2.4 percentage points in the age cohort sample to 5.8 percentage points in the siblings sample. These results, which suggest that the behavior of other minority groups within the neighborhood may have positive spillover effects, are in line with previous research that identifies positive aspects of spatial ethnic networks in

**TABLE 4 Linear Probability Models, by Network Sex and Immigrant Background**

	Age Cohort				Siblings < 18			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Same-sex NT	.036 (.006)	.036 (.007)			.042 (.015)	.028 (.015)		
Opposite-sex NT	.021 (.006)	.025 (.006)			.008 (.017)	.017 (.018)		
Immigrant NT			.027 (.006)	.024 (.006)			.059 (.024)	.058 (.024)
Native NT			.045 (.006)	.047 (.007)			.023 (.026)	.019 (.026)
Year of Arrival	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Individual Controls		✓		✓		✓		✓
Neighborhood Controls		✓		✓		✓		✓
Family Fixed Effects					✓	✓	✓	✓
N Observations	9,192	9,192	8,225	8,225	1,682	1,682	1,052	1,052
N Families					701	701	503	503

*Note:* Coefficients represent the change in electoral participation following a one standard deviation change in network turnout. Standard errors are clustered within networks.

Scandinavian countries (Damm 2009, 2014; Edin, Fredriksson, and Åslund 2003). However, we find a larger effect of native turnout on refugees' subsequent participation within the age cohort sample, suggesting that the behavioral cues of nonimmigrants play an equally important role in shaping refugees' downstream electoral participation. In contrast, the effect of native turnout for the siblings sample is smaller. Given that this latter sample is limited to those who were below the age of 18 at arrival, this may reflect a tendency for children to associate with peers of similar minority status.

### Temporal Factors

Our analysis indicates that the political engagement of neighbors, and in particular peers, within the initial arrival neighborhood explains variation in refugees' subsequent electoral participation. In this section, we examine two additional implications of the argument. First, we assess whether estimates differ between refugees who remained in the placement neighborhood versus those who left shortly after arrival. Our expectation is that individuals who changed their residence were less integrated with local social networks, leading to attenuated effects. Second, we assess the degree to which initial experiences persist by evaluating whether the results differ as a function of the time since resettlement in Norway.

We evaluate how effects vary by level of exposure by dividing refugees into groups according to the length of residence within the initial neighborhood.<sup>21</sup> Table A13 (SI: 12) displays the results from a specification that interacts neighborhood turnout with dummy variables for individuals who relocated within various 2-year intervals after arrival. Consistent with a mechanism that operates through social ties, the coefficients suggest that the relationship between neighborhood turnout and electoral participation is significantly weaker for refugees who did not remain within the initial placement neighborhood. The table also indicates that the largest effect sizes are obtained for refugees who stayed more than 3 years in the initial neighborhood.

To determine whether the influence of the initial placement neighborhood persists, we separate refugee arrivals into 5-year bins. Next, we fit the baseline specification, interacting the effect of neighborhood turnout with each arrival bin. As seen in Table A14 (SI: 13), no statistically significant interaction effect can be observed. In other words, individuals placed within neighborhoods

with high turnout at the start of the period (1990–94) had an expected turnout in 2015 similar to that of individuals placed within high-turnout neighborhoods more recently. Given that the earliest group arrived in Norway over two decades prior to the 2015 election, these results suggest that the effect of the initial neighborhood persists over the long run.

### Robustness Checks: Outmigration and Refugee Influence

Before concluding, we address two remaining issues: First, to what extent does outmigration from the sample influence our estimates? Second, do refugees influence the turnout of people who initially resided in the assigned neighborhood?

Because the individual turnout data are limited to residents in the 27 municipalities with a digitized voter census, we do not observe turnout of refugees who leave their assigned neighborhood for destinations outside the data set. If this mobility depends on neighborhood characteristics, we condition our sample on an endogenous variable. To address this concern, we first evaluate whether sample attrition depends on neighborhood turnout. Among the refugees initially resettled in one of the municipalities with a digitized census and who would have been in the electorate had they remained ( $N = 12,714$ ), 25.3% are missing from the voter data (15.6% moved abroad and 9.7% to a municipality outside our turnout data). When we regress an indicator for whether the refugee has outmigrated on neighborhood turnout, we find that refugees initially assigned to a high-turnout neighborhood are less likely to outmigrate (Table A18, SI: 15). However, the correlation is weak and not statistically significant: A standard deviation increase in neighborhood turnout is associated with less than a 0.5 percentage point reduction in the outmigration rate. Moreover, the correlation changes sign and remains statistically insignificant when we account for other characteristics of the neighborhood. In other words, there is no indication that the final sample is not representative of the original cohort of resettled refugees with respect to neighborhood turnout. A related concern is the outmigration of neighbors. If their propensity to leave the neighborhood is associated with turnout, our measure of turnout will diverge from the initial neighborhood. We examine this issue by studying the correlation between mobility and neighborhood turnout among individuals who were present within the 2015 electorate and resided in one of the 27 municipalities in 1991. When we regress an indicator for mobility on neighborhood turnout, we find that the relationship is negative (columns 1–2 in

<sup>21</sup>Residency data are available on an annualized basis. Depending on the month of arrival, this ranges from 12 months to 24 months.

Table A19, SI: 15). However, the partial correlation changes sign when we account for other neighborhood characteristics, indicating that the negative correlation is driven by other neighborhood covariates. Although there is no indication that the attrition of members biases the results, we nevertheless investigate the sensitivity of the estimates with two different approaches. First, we impute turnout under the alternative assumptions that turnout among movers is zero or complete. Although point estimates differ slightly, we find that the positive association between neighborhood turnout and refugee participation remains robust to such extreme assumptions (Table A20, SI: 16). In the second approach, we treat the outmigration rate as a neighborhood covariate within the regression models. If observed neighborhood turnout relates strongly to outmigration, the coefficient estimate should be sensitive to the inclusion of the additional covariate. As Table A21 (SI: 16) shows, the outmigration rate of neighbors does not appear to influence refugee turnout, and inclusion of the variable in the model has no bearing on our estimates of neighborhood or network turnout on refugee political participation.

Finally, we explore the degree to which aggregate neighborhood turnout is influenced by the refugees placed in their neighborhood (Enos 2016; Putnam 2007). If this is the case, we estimate the total effect of placement and not the pure effect of the neighborhood on refugee political integration. Table A22 (SI: 16) evaluates this possibility. We first identify individuals' neighborhood in 1991 and regress turnout in 2015 on an indicator of whether the neighborhood received any refugees from 1992 to 2012. We find that turnout is 2 percentage points lower among those who resided in refugee-receiving neighborhoods. However, when we control for individuals' age and level of education, as well as two measures of neighborhood wealth (average income and fraction on social assistance), this correlation falls to less than 0.2 percentage points. Moreover, if we replace individual propensity to vote with an indicator of the father's level of education—an outcome that is not affected by refugee inflow to the child's neighborhood—we find coefficients of the same size. This “placebo” exercise suggests that the correlation between refugee settlement and neighbors' turnout is driven by selection and not by a direct effect of refugee settlement.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>As a further test, we exploit the fact that we have individual turnout data from two elections—2013 and 2015—to study the correlation between refugee settlement and turnout (Table A23, SI: 17). We find that in a balanced panel of individuals observed in both elections, the negative correlation between settlement and turnout changes from  $-0.03$  to zero when we add neighborhood or individual fixed effects. We therefore conclude that the effects we

Endogenous mobility and turnout would be less of a concern had we observed the political participation of neighbors prior to refugee arrivals. Unfortunately, historical validated turnout data at the individual level do not exist, nor are aggregate data at the neighborhood level available from past elections. Nevertheless, in Table A12 (SI: 11), we demonstrate that we obtain similarly sized estimates when we rely on municipal-level variation in turnout measured at the time of arrival, instead of the neighborhood turnout measure used above. The effect of municipal turnout is, however, imprecisely estimated as identification draws on variation across a smaller number of units.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

What factors shape the political integration of immigrants? Whereas extant research has largely focused on socioeconomic characteristics, this article demonstrates that early experiences within the host country play an important role in shaping long-term patterns of political engagement. Leveraging a quasi-exogenous placement policy in Norway, we find that the initial neighborhood in which refugees are placed is highly predictive of future electoral participation.

While previous studies have highlighted the importance of the arrival location in shaping integration outcomes, this study is the first to assess the causal impact of initial settlement locations on electoral participation. Given the low baseline rates of immigrant turnout in Norway and other developed democracies, the effect sizes we document for the initial placement location are substantively large. Refugees initially placed within an 80th percentile neighborhood had, on average, turnout rates 12.6 percentage points higher than refugees placed within a 20th percentile neighborhood. Indeed, our results suggest that the initial location holds more explanatory power than many socioeconomic factors in shaping subsequent electoral participation.

The rich administrative data in the Norwegian registers enable an examination of the mechanism underlying this pattern. Drawing on individual-level data on the inhabitants of each neighborhood at the time of each refugee's arrival, we assess the relative influence of neighborhood characteristics on refugees' downstream

identify in Tables 2–4 mainly result from the effects of neighbors on refugees and that refugees have a limited effect on the electoral participation of other residents.

<sup>23</sup>Figure A6 (SI: 11) shows that the two measures of turnout are strongly correlated.

political participation. Our findings suggest that while local sociodemographic characteristics such as income, education, or ethnic diversity do not strongly influence subsequent electoral participation, turnout among neighbors and peers is particularly influential. A one standard deviation increase in the turnout rate of neighbors is associated with an expected 3 percentage point increase in future electoral participation. Larger point estimates, of approximately 5 percentage points, are observed when examining the influence of available peer networks, such as age cohorts. Although the data do not permit us to determine whether these effects are driven by the transmission of political knowledge or by participatory norms, they do suggest that early exposure to politically engaged peer networks plays a key role in shaping political integration over the long run.

Although our analysis is restricted to the Norwegian refugee resettlement program, we expect the findings will be applicable to other contexts. Similar to many other receiving states in Europe and North America, the Norwegian resettlement program disperses refugees across a national territory and relies on the decentralized provision of housing and public services. We expect local networks within the arrival location to play an important role within other countries where refugees are placed directly within host communities from abroad. We also expect that our findings may be generalizable to other groups of immigrants. UNHCR refugees represent a distinct immigrant group with a verified history of persecution, and, in contrast to other immigrants, they do not have the ability to select their initial residence location. Nevertheless, refugees arrive in Norway from a variety of national contexts, with differing levels of political and economic development (Table A1, SI: 2). The consistent effects we observe across demographic groups suggest that the influence of the settlement location may not be strictly confined to a particular subpopulation.<sup>24</sup>

These results contribute to an emerging body of research arguing that the initial experiences of immigrants within host societies play a key role in shaping subsequent civic and political integration (Ferwerda, Finseraas, and Bergh 2020; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2015). Our findings also speak to the literature on social context and turnout (Bhatti and Hansen 2016; Cho, Gimpel, and Dyck 2006; Leighley and Matsubayashi 2009), by demonstrating the importance of using a research

design focused on causal inference. Finally, our results have implications for debates on the relative role of context and sociodemographic characteristics in shaping the political participation of immigrants. While other studies have convincingly argued that local networks and institutions matter (Schönwälder and Bloemraad 2013), our design enables us to fully rule out self-selection and compositional differences as alternative explanations for spatial variation in immigrants' political participation. Moreover, our analysis establishes that initial as well as contemporary contextual effects play a role, and that these formative experiences persist over the long run.

In addition to contributing to our understanding of the factors that shape immigrants' political participation, our findings also have implications for refugee resettlement policies. Over the past decade, developed democracies have observed sharp increases in the flow of refugees and asylum seekers. The majority of countries accepting these vulnerable individuals distribute them across national territories according to dispersion and burden-sharing principles (Darling 2011; Phillips 2006; Robinson, Andersson, and Musterd 2003). However, this approach overlooks the long-term consequences of assigning refugees to particular communities. Our findings indicate that the first 3 years after arrival may constitute a critical "integration window," in which context plays a key role in habituating modes of interaction with the host society. As a result, we expect policy makers will observe elevated returns if they focus on improving levels of support and engagement with host communities during the initial postarrival period. Similarly, the importance of location we document suggests that governments should take factors beyond capacity and dispersion into account when allocating refugees across a national territory. By improving the match between refugees and the initial settlement location, governments have access to a cost-effective policy lever to improve integration outcomes for vulnerable populations.

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<sup>24</sup>One exception may relate to asylum seekers housed within centralized reception facilities. Long stays in reception centers will shape early experiences and effectively constitute the initial placement.

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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