FREE NETWORK
POLICY BRIEF SERIES #AcademicsStandWithUkraine

Olle Folke, SITE
November 2026

The seniority ceiling: Why some immigrants struggle to rise in office

Immigrants are underrepresented in political office around the world. This policy brief summarizes new research from Sweden showing that seniority-based promotion in political parties explains about half of this representation gap, and most of the reason why immigrants are especially rare in the highest positions. The effect is strongest for immigrants who have lived in the country for only a few years and for those who arrived as adults. These groups are almost absent from the most influential political offices.

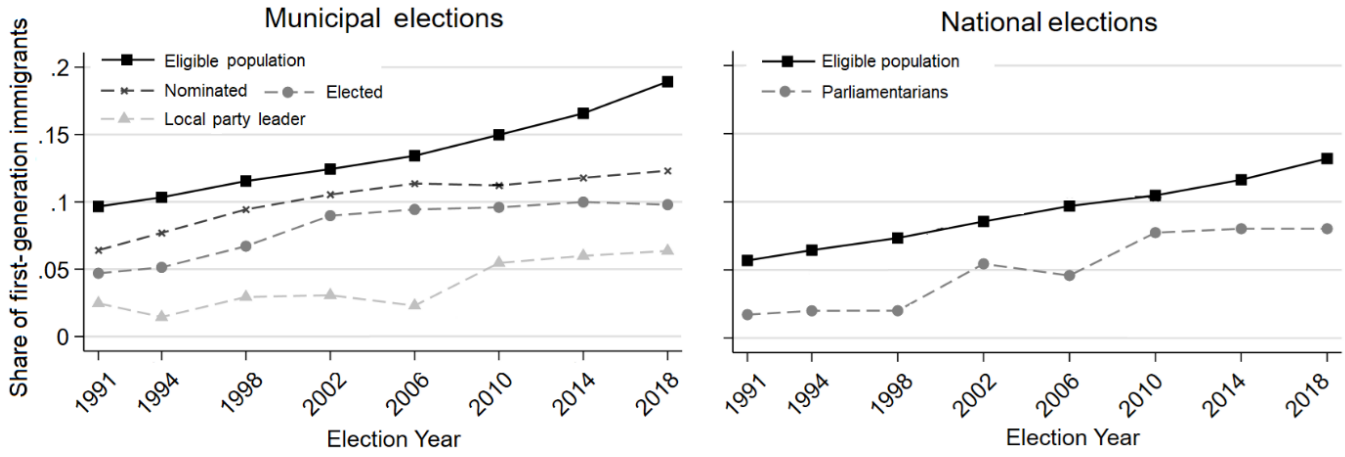
Immigrants rarely become political candidates or officeholders. This group typically accounts for 15–20% of the population in OECD countries, but just 5% of these countries' parliamentarians (Hänni and Saalfeld 2020; see also Bird et al. 2011; Bloemraad and Schönwälder 2013). This deficit in political representation raises concerns about political decisions that fail to adequately reflect immigrants' collective interests and about lower legitimacy of the democratic system (Dahl 1971; Bloemraad 2006; Bird et al. 2011; Wüst 2014).

Improving immigrants' political incorporation requires understanding which factors drive their absence. In a new study, "The seniority ceiling: Why some immigrants struggle to rise in office", we propose and use Swedish data to test a novel explanation for first-generation immigrants' under-representation in political office: seniority-based career advancement creates a structural barrier—a seniority ceiling—for first-generation immigrants. This happens through two mechanisms. First and foremost, immigrants who arrived more recently have had fewer years to accumulate qualification time for higher office. Second, and perhaps less obviously, people who immigrate at an older age have smaller time windows for accumulating qualification time before "aging out" of the political career ladder.

We study this using Swedish administrative data that link all residents to electoral ballots for eight elections between 1991 and 2018. In Sweden, building seniority at lower levels is central for advancing to higher positions. The median parliamentarian has spent about 15 years at lower levels in politics before advancing to parliament.

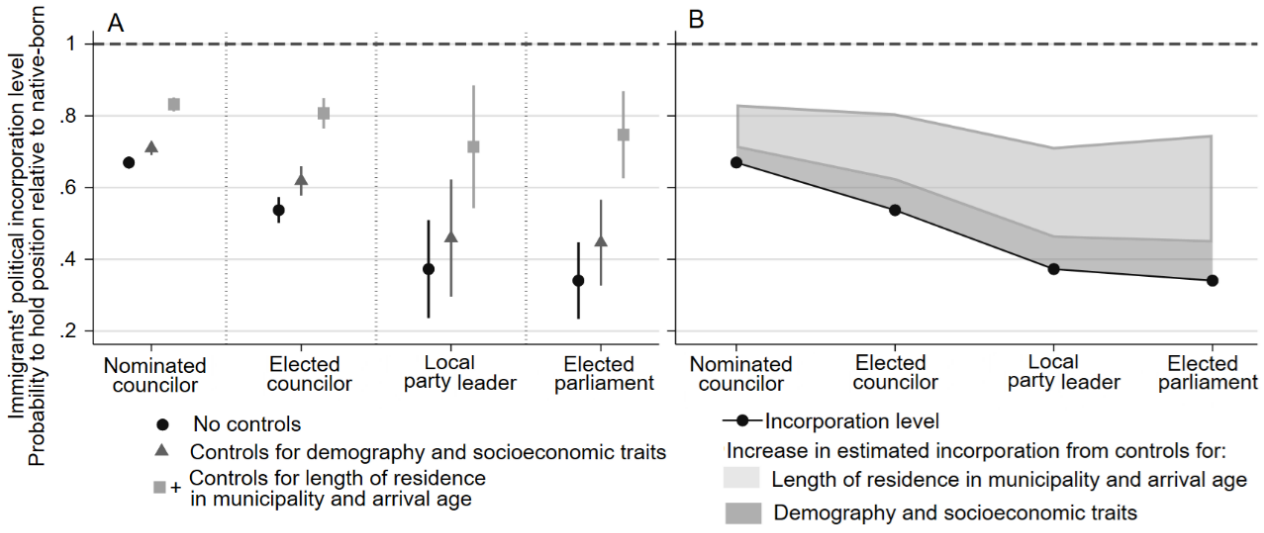
To isolate the impact of seniority-based career advancement on immigrants' political incorporation, we compare immigrants with native-born Swedes who move between municipalities. These native-born movers face the same participation constraints from seniority-based career advancement as immigrants, but are not affected by immigrant-specific constraints such as language barriers or negative treatment by voters or parties based on immigrant status.

Figure 1. Immigrant shares among eligible and actual political position-holders.



Source: Figure 4 in Folke & Rickne (2026). Notes: N(population, left graph)=57,239,192; N(nominated councilors)=324,133; N(elected councilors) =97,346; N(local party leaders) =6,794; N(citizens, right graph)=54,230,031; N(Parliamentarians)=2,794. To make the data nationally representative, we weigh the municipal positions by the number of individuals eligible for positions in the municipality.

Figure 2. Explanations for immigrants' political incorporation.



Source: Figure 5 in Folke and Rickne (2026). Notes: The left side shows point estimates of the coefficient on the binary indicator for being a first-generation immigrant from Equations (1) and (2), capturing immigrants' probability of holding the position relative to native born. Vertical lines are 95% confidence intervals based on standard errors clustered at the individual level. Black markers on the right side repeat the estimates from the bivariate regression. Gray shaded areas show reductions in the estimates from adding the two sets of controls listed in the legend.

The results show a pattern of worse political incorporation of immigrants at higher career steps. They are 50–70% as likely as natives to occupy lower positions (e.g., candidates or elected councilors in local politics), but only 35% as likely to be local party leaders or parliamentarians.

Based on our comparison of immigrants with native-born movers, we attribute about half the deficit in incorporation at each career step to the seniority ceiling, and almost the entire gradient of worse incorporation at higher positions. Two placebo tests strengthen this interpretation. The seniority ceiling has no impact on voting in elections (a participation behavior outside the political career ladder) or on the likelihood of candidacy or officeholding among second-generation immigrants (whose "arrival" at birth makes them immune to its constraints).

We also show that the seniority ceiling is particularly important for certain immigrant groups. The impacts concentrate among those with recent experiences of navigating a country's immigration systems and establishing themselves in the labor market: immigrants who arrived more recently in the country, and those who immigrated as adults rather than children. For example, immigrants with under 15 years in Sweden are 47% of immigrants but only 11% of immigrant local party leaders and MPs; those who arrived after age 40 are 12% of immigrants but under 1% of these positions. These selection effects might have important policy implications. As many countries struggle with establishing well-functioning immigration systems, the people most intimately familiar with these processes are largely absent from the formal policy-making process in local and national political assemblies.

Our results show that historical variation in immigration timelines across groups can create systematic variation in lengths of residence and, in

turn, widely different impacts on incorporation from the seniority ceiling. These results can inform future research seeking to understand why some groups have worse incorporation than others. A clearer understanding of these explanations can inform interventions by governments, civil society, or political parties for more equal participation.

Designing interventions to address the seniority ceiling is far from straightforward. Affirmative action that fast-tracks immigrants with shorter qualification times might cause backlash and implementation difficulties associated with record-keeping on minority status (illegal in Sweden, for example) or challenges in deciding which immigrant individuals should be subject to the policy (Folke et al. 2015). Uprooting parties' seniority principles might involve trade-offs with benefits for democracy stemming from this institution. Predictable career ladders make political parties more stable and cohesive (Huntington 1968; Dix 1992; Mainwaring 1999) and give politicians more time to learn on the job before they advance.

Despite the potential perils of interventions, there are several relevant avenues for action. Introducing term limits for higher positions cuts "wait times" in lower positions and the associated reliance on qualification times as a criterion for advancement. Increasing the number of immigrants on parties' selection committees might increase efforts to recruit immigrant candidates and recognize their qualifications.

References

Bird, Karen, Thomas Saalfeld, and Andreas M. Wüst, eds. 2011. *The Political Representation of Immigrants and Minorities: Voters, Parties and Parliaments in Liberal Democracies*. London: Routledge.

Bloemraad, Irene. 2006. "Becoming a Citizen in the United States and Canada: Structured Mobilization and Immigrant Political Incorporation." *Social Forces* 85 (2): 667–95.

Bloemraad, Irene, and Karen Schönwälder. 2013. "Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Representation in Europe: Conceptual Challenges and Theoretical Approaches." *West European Politics* 36 (3): 564–79.

Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dix, Robert H. 1992. "Democratization and the Institutionalization of Latin American Political Parties." *Comparative Political Studies* 24 (4): 488–511.

Folke, Olle, Lenita Freidenvall, and Johanna Rickne. 2015. "Gender Quotas and Ethnic Minority Representation: Swedish Evidence from a Longitudinal Mixed Methods Study." *Politics & Gender* 11 (2): 345–81.

Folke, Olle, and Johanna Rickne. 2026. "The Seniority Ceiling: Why Some Immigrants Struggle to Rise in Political Office" Journal of Politics, accepted for publication

Hänni, Miriam, and Thomas Saalfeld. 2020. "Ethnic Minorities and Representation." In *Research Handbook on Political Representation*, edited by Maurizio Cotta and Federico Russo, 222–35. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1968. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Mainwaring, Scott. 1999. *Rethinking Party Systems in the Third Wave of Democratization: The Case of Brazil*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wüst, Andreas M. 2014. "A Lasting Impact? On the Legislative Activities of Immigrant-Origin Parliamentarians in Germany." *Journal of Legislative Studies* 20 (4): 495–515.



Olle Folke

SITE
olle.folke@hhs.se
https://sites.google.com/site/folkeolle/

Olle Folke is a Professor of Political Science and a full-time researcher at SITE. His research focuses on political economics and gender & politics, with a particular emphasis on gender equality in the labor market and political representation. His work has been published in leading journals across economics, political science, sociology and business administration, and he has previously taught at Columbia University and Yale University.

freepolicybriefs.org

The Forum for Research on Eastern Europe and Emerging Economies is a network of academic experts on economic issues in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union at AUA (Yerevan), BEROC (Vilnius), BICEPS (Riga), CenEA (Szczecin), ISET-PI (Tbilisi), KSE (Kyiv) and SITE (Stockholm). The weekly FREE Network Policy Brief Series provides research-based analyses of economic policy issues relevant to Eastern Europe and emerging markets. Opinions expressed in policy briefs and other publications are those of the authors; they do not necessarily reflect those of the FREE Network and its research institutes. AI tools may have been used in the preparation of this brief. Where used, they were applied responsibly and in accordance with appropriate scientific and ethical standards. The authors and editor remain fully responsible for their respective contributions

FREE NETWORK