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The Electoral Effects of State-Sponsored Homophobia

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Do strategies of state-sponsored homophobia translate into electoral gains? While a growing body of literature documents the increasing politicization of LGBTQ- and gender-related issues by illiberal elites, little is known about the electoral effects of these strategies. We address this important question by studying whether anti-LGBTQ mobilization pays off electorally for the initiating party. Empirically, we study the adoption of anti-LGBTQ resolutions in many Polish municipalities prior to the 2019 parliamentary election. Using a synthetic difference-in-differences design, we find that these resolutions significantly depressed turnout in affected municipalities, with opposition parties showing less mobilization capacity. By contrast, turnout for the incumbent Law and Justice Party increased substantially. Overall, this study's findings are relevant for understanding the electoral consequences of both elite-led mobilization against stigmatized and discriminated groups, and policies of subnational democratic backsliding.

Keywords— LGBTQ rights; sexuality and politics; political homophobia; political competition; political participation

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Introduction

“Our [party] alliance would never be pro-LGBT, because family is sacred to us. We will bury those pro-LGBT in the ballot box”

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Speech at an election rally on May 7, 2023 (Reuters [2023](#)).

This quote by Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, exemplifies a broader trend: autocratic leaders and radical right parties have intensified their campaigns against LGBTQ communities. Across the globe, illiberal actors – mostly from the right – have used political homophobia in rhetoric and policy in remarkably congruent ways (Bosia and Weiss [2013](#); Ayoub and Stoeckl [2024](#)). Repressive anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ policies have become common practice in many countries, with laws such as “sexual propaganda” statutes enacted in Russia and Hungary, and numerous US states restricting gender-affirming care. In Western Europe and Latin America, radical right parties and religious groups increasingly focus on an anti-LGBTQ agenda (Abou-Chadi, Breyer, and Gessler [2021](#); Corrales [2019](#); Payne and Santos [2020](#); Magni and Reynolds [2023](#); Smith and Boas [2024](#)). While scholars have engaged with the discursive and institutional meaning of state-sponsored homophobia, we know much less about its effects on political behavior.

A growing literature on LGBTQ politics has studied how progressive change such as marriage equality legislation (Abou-Chadi and Finnigan [2019](#); Flores and Barclay [2016](#)) or pride events (Ayoub and Kollman [2021](#)) can affect attitudes toward the LGBTQ population. While we have overall seen a remarkable positive shift in attitudes towards homosexuality, a crucial finding of this literature is that elite-led progressive change will not necessarily lead to more progressive and inclusive attitudes but also potentially to backlash (Ayoub [2016](#)). In addition, stated, progressive LGBTQ attitudes might be instrumental rather than genuine (Turnbull-Dugarte and Ortega [2024](#)).

Studies on the electoral effects of specifically anti-LGBTQ measures have almost exclusively focused on direct democracy initiatives in the US context (Camp [2008](#); Campbell and Monson [2008](#); Donovan, Tolbert, and Smith [2008](#); Garretson [2014](#); Hillygus and Shields [2005](#); Lewis [2005](#); Smith, DeSantis, and Kassel [2006](#)). These studies reveal the significant impact of ballot measures

seeking to prohibit marriage equality on turnout and vote choice. For instance, Campbell and Monson (2008) demonstrate that anti-marriage equality ballot initiatives in 2004 spurred evangelical Christians to mobilize in support of George W. Bush while diminishing turnout among secular individuals.

In this research note, we argue and empirically demonstrate that adopting measures of state-sponsored homophobia can increase support for authoritarian government parties. We expect that such measures can mobilize supporters of the governing party while at the same time decreasing turnout for the opposition. Ayoub and Page (2020) and Page et al. (2022) show that more inclusive LGBTQ rights are associated with higher levels of political participation by individuals who have more tolerant positions on sexuality. This is linked to perceptions of political efficacy.

Hence, we argue that political homophobia is a powerful tool for authoritarian leaders to affect their fortunes at the polls. Introducing anti-LGBTQ measures can help to suppress turnout among their opponents, while mobilizing their own supporters. This, in turn, should increase their electoral support overall. The effects of such measures go beyond standard ideas of issue-voting. Political homophobia cannot be reduced to a programmatic offer that creates varying party support based on attitudes toward these policies. As Ayoub and Page (2020) demonstrate, political homophobia goes deeper and affects perception of political efficacy itself. Authoritarian parties can thus use these tools to tilt the electoral playing field in their own favor.

We use one of the most prominent cases of contemporary state-sponsored homophobia to study its electoral effects: the establishment of so-called “LGBT-free zones” in hundreds of municipalities in Poland (Rafałowski 2023). Beginning in March 2019, seven months prior to the parliamentary election, local authorities in parts of Poland started adopting resolutions that declared them disapproving of and free from what they described as “LGBT ideology.” Following our argument, we expect relative decreases in opposition party turnout and higher mobilization for the governing Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) in “LGBT-free zones.”

The Polish case is ideal to study the electoral effect of political homophobia for several reasons. First, the rare subnational variation in anti-LGBTQ policies mitigates concerns about unobserved confounders, allowing comparisons between regions that are similar to each other within the same country. Second, the uniform treatment of the resolutions avoids pitfalls related to lumping together very different anti-LGBTQ policies. Third, PiS’s explicit association with the promotion

and implementation of these resolutions allows for clear responsibility attribution in vote choices.

Our empirical strategy relies on a synthetic difference-in-differences (sDiD) design (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021). Since we know that municipalities did not declare anti-LGBTQ resolutions at random and trends could influence adaptation, we cannot simply compare these municipalities to others in a classic treatment-control framework, or even use standard difference-in-difference approaches. We instead use a sDiD design that allows us to compare municipalities with anti-LGBTQ measures to synthetic ones that had similar pretreatment voting outcome trajectories but have not been treated. In line with our expectations, we study three outcome variables: turnout, opposition party turnout (opposition party votes divided by total eligible votes) and government party turnout. We also present evidence on how these dynamics translate into vote shares.

We find significantly lower turnout in municipalities that passed anti-LGBTQ resolutions compared to the synthetic control group. This is due to the fact that opposition party turnout is significantly lower in these municipalities. Opposition parties were significantly less able to mobilize here. In contrast, party turnout for the governing PiS is significantly higher. These findings hold when limiting our sample to areas in a 50-kilometer (km) radius of treatment-control boundaries, strongly suggesting that we are not capturing broader geographic differences between East and West Poland.

With these findings, we make an important contribution to research on state-sponsored homophobia and LGBTQ politics more generally. We provide the first study to causally identify an effect of state-led anti-LGBTQ policies on electoral outcomes. We thus contribute to a growing body of work that has demonstrated how sexuality policies shape political behavior. It is especially remarkable that we find behavioral effects of “soft laws” that in principle only have symbolic character.

Our article also contributes to a better understanding of the mechanisms behind democratic backsliding. Anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ policies have become an important part of the toolkit of wannabe autocrats. We can show how these policies, indeed, help authoritarians electorally. As such, this study also connects to the literature on subnational authoritarianism and subnational democratic backsliding (Gibson 2005; Grumbach 2023; O’Dwyer and Stenberg 2022) by demonstrating the effects of local-level institutionalization of illiberal agendas and policies. Political homophobia should thus be seen more clearly as part of the authoritarian tool kit to

tile the electoral playing field.

Research Design

Background

Starting in March 2019, around seven month prior to the parliamentary election, dozens of local anti-LGBTQ resolutions were adopted in parts of Poland. These resolutions were passed at three different administrative levels - municipalities (gminas), counties (powiats) and provinces (voivodeships) - and with a few customized exceptions were generally presented in two different variants - “Charter of the Rights of the Family” and “Resolution against LGBT ideology.” While resolutions were adopted on local levels, their striking resemblance and synchronized adoption in PiS-controlled areas have been interpreted as evidence of a “nationwide, coordinated anti-LGBTQ campaign” (Bogatyrev and Bogusz 2025, 2).

Notwithstanding slight variations in wording and titles across administrative units, both types of resolutions exhibit clear aversion towards non-heteronormative relationships and family models. In addition, both variants can be understood as soft laws, i.e., agreements, principles, and declarations that are of symbolic significance rather than legal force, do not entail any binding obligations and are thus unable to be enforced in court.

By the time of the 2019 parliamentary election, a quarter of the Polish population resided in areas where either of the two anti-LGBTQ proposals had been approved.¹ Figure 1 shows the geographic coverage of anti-LGBTQ resolutions prior to the 2019 parliamentary election. Adoptions were primarily concentrated in conservative, rural regions to the southeast of the country.

The parliamentary election held in October 2019 was fiercely contested, with LGBTQ rights emerging as a highly salient issue. The ruling PiS party, in particular, made its devotion to “traditional” family models and opposition to LGBTQ rights one of the main themes of its campaign. For instance, in April 2019, PiS party chairman Jarosław Kaczyński labeled the LGBTQ rights movement a “threat” to Polish identity and the state (Associated Press 2019).

1. Local authorities persisted in passing resolutions after the 2019 parliamentary election. A detailed case description as well as a map showing the distribution of anti-LGBTQ resolutions before and after the 2019 parliamentary election, can be found in Appendix Section C.

PiS also portrayed itself as the defender of “traditional” family values against this perceived threat (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Illustrating this stance, the then-president of the Polish Senate, Stanisław Karczewski, shared an image on Twitter depicting PiS as a protective umbrella for the heteronormative Polish family amidst a storm of rainbow-colored rain (see Appendix Section A). In contrast, the centrist-liberal Civic Coalition (KO), as the main opposition force, expressed support for LGBTQ rights, condemning the enactment of anti-LGBTQ resolutions. Meanwhile, the left-wing alliance (Lewica) also advocated for LGBTQ rights in their campaigns. The centrist-conservative Polish Coalition (KP), on the other hand, being PiS’s main competitor in rural constituencies, has largely avoided LGBTQ issues in their campaign, while the far-right challenger Confederation (Konfederacja) echoed the anti-LGBTQ platform of the ruling PiS party (Gwiazda 2023).²

The election resulted in a landslide victory for PiS, which captured 43.6% of the popular vote, the most substantial mandate attained by any party since Poland’s transition to democracy. At the same time, voter turnout surged, hitting a three-decade high of 61.7%.

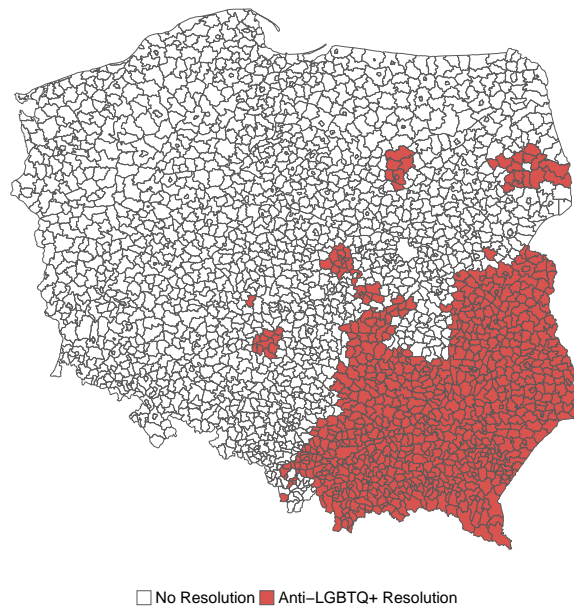


Figure 1: Geographic distribution of municipalities with anti-LGBTQ resolutions before the 2019 parliamentary election.

2. Further information on party positions towards LGBTQ rights in 2019 can be found in Appendix Section B.

Data and Method

Treatment

To identify regions with anti-LGBTQ resolutions in place, we rely on the “Atlas of Hate,” an interactive map of Poland developed by activists (Pajak and Gawron 2020).³ Defining the treatment is not straightforward. Resolutions were adopted across various levels of government using two different document types. The “Atlas of Hate” provides detailed information about the status (adopted/not adopted/retracted), subnational unit (municipality/county/province), type (“Resolution against LGBT ideology”/“Charter of the Rights of the Family”), and date of each instance. For our main analysis, we rely on data at the municipality level, defining a municipality as treated if either its local council or a superior subnational unit passed any anti-LGBTQ resolution.

The adoption of resolutions through two distinct documents and across varying (sometimes multiple) levels of government creates conditions for potential heterogeneity in treatment effects based on signaling strength and mobilization dynamics. On the one hand, the “Resolution Against LGBT Ideology” may constitute a stronger treatment, given its explicit targeting of LGBTQ communities. On the other hand, the adoption of resolutions at lower government levels could reflect a process of grassroots mobilization. By contrast, in cases where municipalities were affected by adoptions on higher-level entities (i.e., county or province level), mobilization dynamics may have been predominantly top-down. This distinction may plausibly have implications for the salience of these resolutions across treated municipalities. Specifically, we might expect voters in municipalities directly adopting resolutions to be better informed about the initiatives compared to those in municipalities subjected to top-down implementation. Similarly, municipalities affected by both types of resolutions or across multiple administrative levels may have received a stronger signal. We address these considerations in the robustness section, where we evaluate variation in outcomes by resolution type and administrative level separately, as well as by cumulative adoption patterns.

Additionally, in a small subset of cases, anti-LGBTQ resolutions were proposed but not adopted. In these municipalities, resolutions were discussed (debated but not brought to a vote), rejected (voted on but ultimately not passed), or dismissed (placed on the agenda but

3. For details on this data source and its quality, see Appendix C.3.

neither debated nor voted on). A potential concern is that including these cases in the control group may contaminate it, contributing to any observed differences between the treatment and control groups. We address this issue in the robustness section.

Outcomes

We collect municipality-level data for parliamentary elections from the National Electoral Commission. To study pre-treatment trends in voting behavior, we use data on all parliamentary elections going back to 2001, when PiS was founded. We focus on three primary outcomes. First, we consider overall turnout, defined as the number of ballots received divided by the number of eligible voters. Second, we present the combined vote shares for opposition party lists relative to the vote-eligible population (i.e., opposition turnout) to facilitate interpretations of (de)mobilization patterns. Finally, we also calculate government turnout (i.e., PiS vote share relative to vote-eligible population). While traditional measures of vote shares ignore turnout, offering insights solely into the relative proportions of votes, analyzing opposition/government-specific turnouts allows us to directly test the mobilizing and demobilizing effects of anti-LGBTQ resolutions. We show further evidence on vote shares in Appendix section G.⁴

Sample

The full sample includes all 2,477 municipalities in Poland, observed across six parliamentary elections held between 2001 and 2019 ($N = 14,862$).⁵ Among these, 741 municipalities were affected by anti-LGBTQ resolutions during the 2019 parliamentary election, while the remaining 1,736 municipalities were untreated. We exclude the untreated city of Warsaw due to its unique status as the capital, with a population of 1.8 million, making it hardly comparable to any single Polish municipality. Furthermore, votes cast by Polish citizens residing abroad and by personnel stationed on maritime vessels are omitted. As a result, the sample of analysis consists of 14,856

4. For party alliances where individual parties ran on separate lists or were nonexistent in elections prior to 2019, we defined pre-treatment outcomes as the vote share of the leading party. In addition, while theoretically appealing, including Confederation as the fifth party alliance running in 2019 is empirically unfeasible due to insufficient pre-treatment observation periods in outcomes.

5. Since 2001, various regional reforms have altered the boundaries of municipalities, primarily through mergers. To ensure comparability across time, we reconstructed the 2,477 municipalities as of 2019 for the parliamentary election of 2001, 2005, 2010, and 2015 by retrospectively merging municipalities. In the event of a split, we retrospectively divided all absolute vote indicators proportionally to the vote-eligible populations of each part.

municipality-year observations.

Identification Strategy

Evaluating the causal effect of introducing anti-LGBTQ resolutions on our outcomes of interest comes with a key challenge. The observed spatial patterns of municipalities that adopted anti-LGBTQ resolutions are hardly exogenous or random. Treated regions are heavily clustered in the more conservative PiS strongholds within the southeast of Poland (see Figure 1). These regions differ considerably from the rest of the country in ways potentially threatening assumptions of traditional causal inference designs, like difference-in-differences (DiD).

Standard DiD estimation compares the changes in vote shares and turnout before and after the introduction of resolutions in municipalities that implemented them (treatment group) versus those that did not (control group), and then calculates the difference in changes between the two. The identification assumption of DiD designs requires parallel trends, which implies that in the absence of anti-LGBTQ resolutions, both groups of municipalities would have experienced similar trends in voting. In practice, verifying this assumption is impossible, and it may be violated when pre-existing differences between treatment and control municipalities affect post-exposure outcomes. This is likely to be the case with our geographically clustered treatment. Previous evidence shows that anti-LGBTQ resolutions were more likely to be proposed and adopted by PiS-controlled local governments (Rafałowski 2023; Stenberg and O'Dwyer 2023). Indeed, raw data seldom supports parallel trends between treatment and control groups, and our case is no exception. The red and dotted grey lines in Figure 2 show the observed (unweighted) pre-treatment trends of the three primary outcome variables - overall turnout and government/opposition turnout - for all parliamentary elections between 2001 and 2019, by treatment group. Neither for overall turnout nor opposition and government turnout do pre-treatment trends move in parallel between observed groups. Both levels and trajectories in the pre-treatment period show clear discrepancies. In such scenario, the observed control group may not serve as an accurate counterfactual for the treated group.

We address this concern in two ways. First, we use synthetic difference-in-differences (sDiD), a generalized version of the DiD and synthetic control methods that weakens the reliance on parallel trend type assumptions (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021). The sDiD approach constructs

a synthetic control group that closely resembles the treatment group. Specifically, synthetic controls are generated using a weighted mixture of observed control units that are similar to the treatment group in terms of pre-intervention outcome trends.⁶ Second, we repeat our analysis on a restricted sample of municipalities within a 50 km radius of treatment-control boundaries.⁷ By limiting our sample to communities around the treatment-control boundary, we ensure that the observed effects are primarily attributable to anti-LGBTQ resolutions rather than simultaneous but unrelated events happening in the southeast of Poland. Furthermore, this approach also addresses potential confounding factors related to the region’s historical and path-dependent political legacies, which continue to influence varying levels of alignment with liberal values today (Charnysh 2024; Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya 2015, e.g.).

As described in Appendix Section C, resolutions continued to be passed after the 2019 parliamentary election, but were largely rescinded by the time of the 2023 parliamentary election (Bogatyrev and Bogusz 2025). Our approach for generating synthetic control weights draws on all municipalities that had not yet implemented anti-LGBTQ resolutions by the 2019 parliamentary election. Including control units that enacted resolutions post-2019 parliamentary election presents a hard empirical test, as it requires effects to hold even when compared to municipalities that subsequently selected into treatment.⁸ Moreover, to address the fluctuations in treatment caused by the subsequent withdrawal of resolutions, we refrain from analyzing the effects on the 2023 parliamentary election. In doing so, we recognize that outcomes in formerly treated municipalities are likely shaped by the subsequent rejection of EU funding and the repeal of resolutions rather than the initial adoptions at this point in time. The blue line in Figure 2 displays the synthetic trends over time, calculated using the weighted average of control municipalities. The graphical evidence illustrates how the sDiD approach mitigates concerns about parallel trends and aligns the time trends of unexposed control units with those of treated municipalities through re-weighting. In what follows, we report on the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) that is, the average effect of introducing an anti-LGBTQ resolution among receiving municipalities. Following Arkhangelsky et al. (2021), we use jackknife variance estimation to calculate standard errors.⁹

6. Appendix Section D shows the geographic distribution of synthetic control weights by outcome.

7. Appendix Section E shows a map of municipalities within this 50 km distance. The results remain robust across various bandwidths.

8. We note that results remain robust when using never-treated units (see Appendix Section J.1).

9. Additionally, in Appendix Section K.1, we report results using the “placebo method,” instead. The standard errors show only minimal variation across specifications.

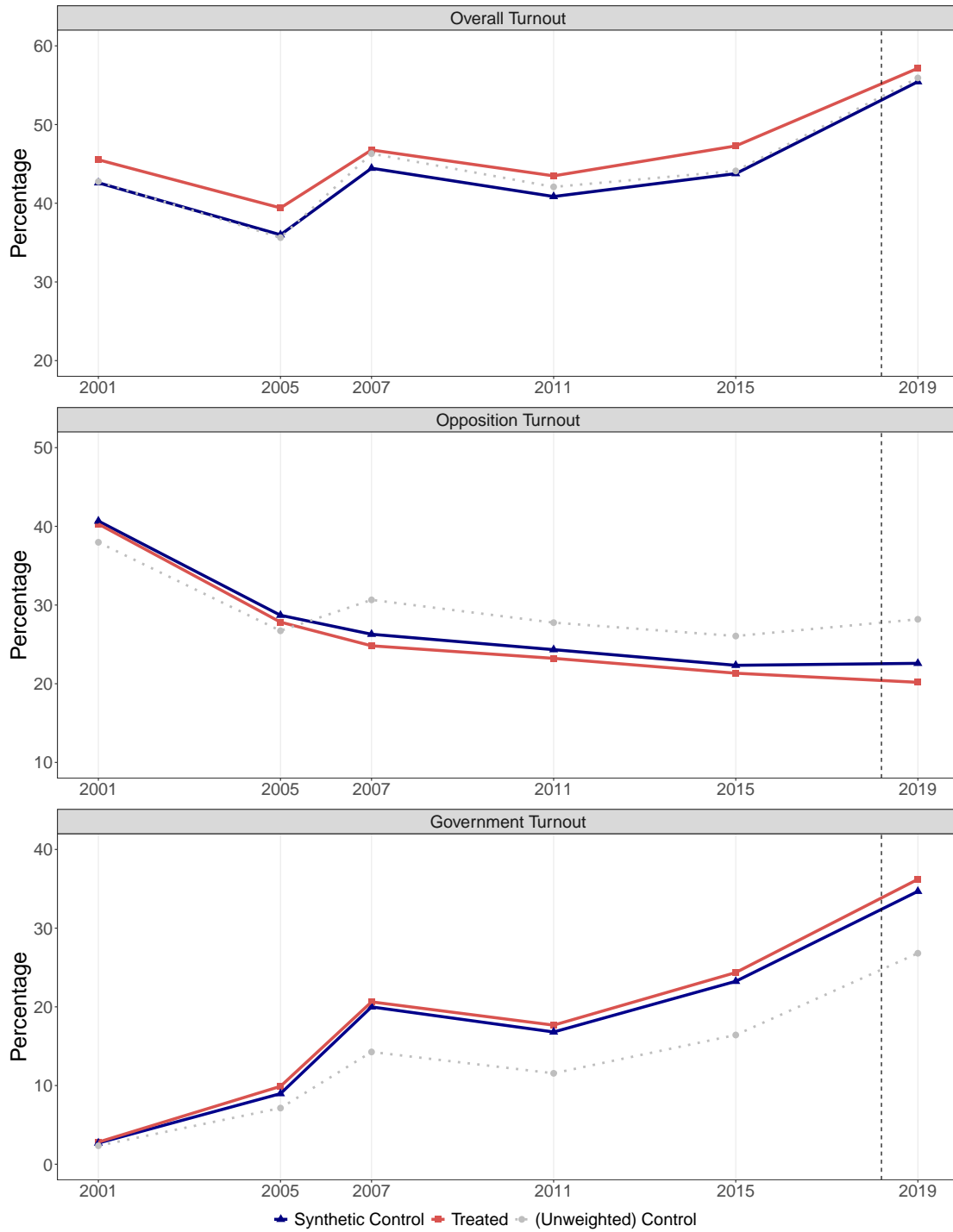


Figure 2: Average overall, opposition, and government turnout (%) among municipalities for all parliamentary elections between 2001 and 2019 with the red line indicating treated, the dotted grey line observed (unweighted) control, and the blue line synthetic control municipalities.

Results

The Electoral Implications of Anti-LGBTQ Resolutions

Figure 3 shows the sDiD estimates for overall, opposition, and government turnout for the 2019 parliamentary election. The estimates from both the full sample and the restricted sample within a 50 km radius of treatment-control boundaries generally align in magnitude and direction.

Starting with overall turnout, we find that municipalities adopting anti-LGBTQ resolutions experienced a substantial and statistically significant negative effect on participation during the 2019 parliamentary election. Municipalities with anti-LGBTQ resolutions in place registered changes in turnout that were, on average, 1.69 percentage points lower than those in our synthetic control group. Although voter turnout generally surged in the 2019 parliamentary election (see Figure 2), this trend was less pronounced in areas that adopted anti-LGBTQ resolutions.

Moving to our main outcomes of interest, evidence suggests that the observed negative effect on overall turnout within municipalities adopting anti-LGBTQ resolutions is predominantly driven by the relative demobilization of opposition party supporters. Turnout for opposition par-

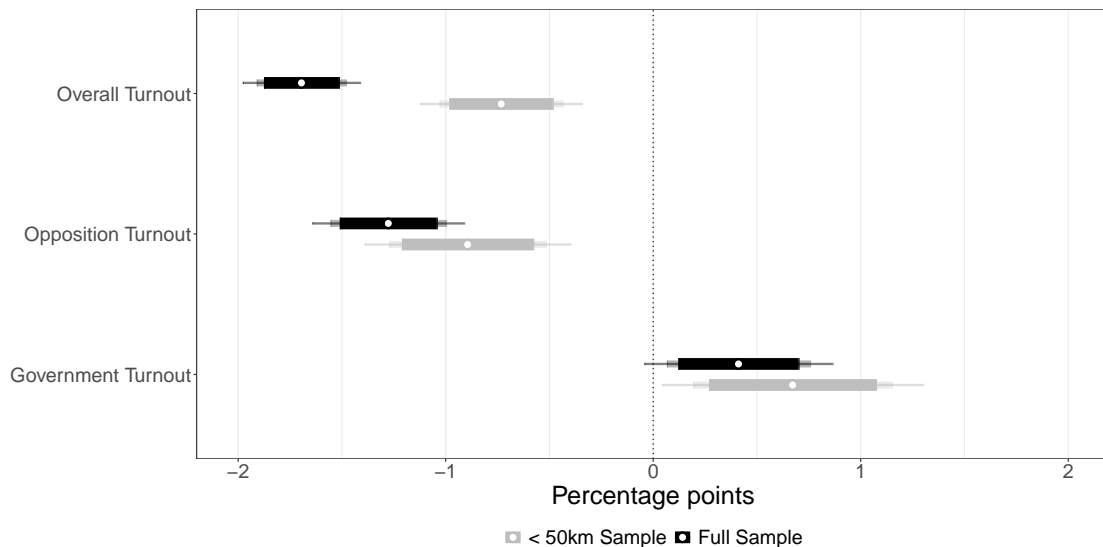


Figure 3: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout in the 2019 parliamentary election by sample. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Section F.

ties, including KO, KP, Lewica, and Konfederacja, was, on average, 1.28 percentage points lower in these municipalities compared to the synthetic control group. At the same time, the ruling PiS party appears to have secured a mobilization advantage from the adoption of anti-LGBTQ resolutions despite the overall decline in voter turnout observed in affected municipalities. Government turnout in these areas was, on average, 0.41 percentage points higher compared to the synthetic control group, meaning that PiS successfully mobilized a larger share of its potential electorate where such resolutions were enacted. These dynamics translate into overall higher vote shares for PiS. Municipalities with anti-LGBTQ resolutions experienced, on average, a 0.82 percentage point increase in support for PiS (see Appendix Section G). This underscores the potential for such measures to significantly alter electoral outcomes, particularly within Poland’s highly polarized political environment.

The meaningful magnitude of these findings is further reinforced when the effects are expressed as percentage reductions relative to pre-treatment turnout levels in the affected municipalities. The estimated 1.69 percentage point decline in overall turnout corresponds to a 3.57% reduction. Similarly, opposition turnout experienced a 6% reduction.

Additional Analysis and Robustness Checks

To test expectations concerning heterogeneity in treatment effects stemming from signaling strength and mobilization dynamics across different (and multiple) resolution types and administrative levels, we perform several additional tests.

We first account for heterogeneity in signaling strength by examining the effects of cumulative exposure, defined as the sum of resolutions covering a municipality or the sum of administrative levels at which a municipality is treated (see Appendix Section H). Consistent with theoretical expectations, municipalities exposed at multiple levels or by multiple resolution types reveal the strongest negative effect on turnout. For opposition and government turnout, estimates also generally align with these patterns. However, the number of observations becomes small for cases involving cumulative exposure, limiting precision.

Second, in Appendix Section I, we present results using alternative treatment definitions to capture potential variation in both mobilization dynamics and signaling strength. We begin by examining the impact of defining treatment at distinct levels of adoption, i.e., resolutions passed

at the municipality, county, or province level only (see Figure 12 in the Appendix for a graphical illustration of this test). While treatment effects exhibit minimal variation across administrative levels, the most substantial effects on both turnout as well as opposition and government turnout are observed at the municipality level. Again, statistical significance diminishes considerably at the municipality level due to the relatively small sample size, with only 52 out of 2,477 municipalities directly adopting anti-LGBTQ resolutions. Overall, these findings provide empirical support for the theorized distinction between grassroots-driven and top-down mobilization processes. Additionally, separate analyses by resolution type reveal comparable effects for both the “Resolution Against LGBT Ideology” and the “Local Government Charter of the Rights of the Family,” suggesting that neither resolution type emerges as the primary driver of the observed outcomes.

Finally, we perform three additional tests to assess the robustness of our findings. First, in Appendix Section K.1, we report results from alternative estimators, namely simple Difference-in-Differences (DiD) and Matrix Completion (MC) (Athey et al. 2021). Second, we examine the robustness of our results by excluding the ten largest municipalities with over 300,000 inhabitants, addressing the likely large heterogeneity in election outcomes within these units (see Appendix Section K.2). Third, we re-run the analysis with a refined control group, excluding municipalities that discussed, rejected, or dismissed resolutions (see Appendix Section K.3). Estimates from alternative estimators for overall, opposition, and government turnout consistently support our findings. Moreover, results remain unchanged when excluding the largest municipalities or municipalities that proposed but did not adopt resolutions.

In summary, our findings paint a worrying picture of how anti-LGBTQ resolutions affect electoral outcomes. The findings suggest that anti-LGBTQ resolutions demobilized opposition voters and benefited the governing radical right PiS.

Conclusion

In this study, we provide a first systematic test that causally identifies the electoral consequences of state-sponsored homophobia. Using the case of Poland, we find that anti-LGBTQ resolutions increased support for the governing party, PiS, in the 2019 parliamentary election. PiS was able to mobilize higher levels of turnout among its supporters, while turnout for opposition parties

overall decreased. These findings are in line with Ayoub and Page (2020), who demonstrate the important role of sexuality politics for perceived political efficacy and turnout.

Our findings thus provide an important insight into global anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ strategies. Simply put: these strategies work. We can causally identify an effect of exclusionary anti-LGBTQ measures on mobilizing support for authoritarian governments. Beyond the purely academic assessment, this should be worrying for two reasons. First, if political homophobia is indeed an electorally beneficial strategy - and has remained one despite overall more progressive attitudes toward sexual minorities - then we will likely see more of these strategies. The current wave of anti-LGBTQ measures would then not be a backlash but the start of a new era of state-supported exclusion and oppression. Importantly, domestic contexts may affect how these signals affect political behavior. Further research is needed to causally identify the effects of state-sponsored homophobia in, for example, more liberal societies.

Second, the fact that authoritarians can rile up support through political homophobia is not only bad news for the groups most adversely affected by these policies, but also for democratic support more generally. Autocrats around the globe have found an instrument that seems to work to create additional support. This is even more worrying as we have studied the effects of a “soft law” largely of symbolic nature. Such measures are relatively easily implemented and have become a common strategy among radical right politicians. They complicate oversight and sanctioning from international actors and are more difficult to challenge in court. National and international proponents of liberal democracy, thus, need to find ways to address state-sponsored homophobia, not only in the interest of marginalized minorities but also liberal democracy itself.

That said, the Polish case also provides some reason for optimism. The recent electoral defeat of PiS in the 2023 parliamentary election shows that anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ strategies may not yield benefits in the long-run. These electoral losses, possibly fueled by (international) pressure from LGBTQ activists and, eventually, EU authorities, may thus also suggest one potential avenue for addressing strategies of state-sponsored homophobia.

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A. Parliamentary Election 2019: Anti-LGBTQ Campaign



Figure 4: Example for anti-LGBTQ campaign by the then-president of the Polish Senate, Karczewski, Stanisław (@StKarczewski) in the run-up to the 2019 parliamentary election. English translation: “Chairman PiS J. Kaczyński in Rzeszów: We say No! to the attack on children. We will not be intimidated. We will defend the Polish family” Twitter/X, March 10, 2019, 6:53am.

B. Party Positions on LGBTQ Issues in 2019

Table 1: Party Positions in the 2019 Polish Parliamentary Election

Party / Alliance	Ideology	CHES 2019 Social Lifestyle (0-10)	V-Party 2019 LGBT Equality (0-4)
<i>Government Party</i>			
Law and Justice (PiS)	radical right	8.7 (strongly opposed)	0.4 (strongly opposed)
<i>Opposition Parties</i>			
Civic Coalition (KO)	centrist-liberal	4.1 (moderate)	2.5 (moderate)
Polish Coalition (KP)	centrist- conservative	6.9 (opposed)	1.4 (opposed)
The Left (Lewica)	left	1.4 (strongly in favor)	3.0 (in favor)
Confederation	extreme right	9.7 (strongly opposed)	0.4 (strongly opposed)

Note: The third column represents party scores for item 25 “Position on social lifestyle policy (e.g., rights for homosexuals, gender equality)” from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019 (Jolly et al. 2022). The fourth column represents party scores on the original scale for item 3.2.8 “What is this party’s position toward social equality for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community?” for 2019 from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization (V-Party v2) dataset (Düpont et al. 2022). Both datasets are expert-coded. For party alliances, scores were obtained by weighting party positions present in the data by the party’s share in the alliance.

C. Case and Data Description

C.1. Political Homophobia in Poland

Political homophobia in Poland, as in many other countries, is not a new phenomenon. During the communist era, the state and society systematically repressed gay individuals, enforcing elevated ages of consent, engaging in secret police persecution, and perpetuating pervasive social stigma (O’Dwyer 2012). Even before the communist regime ended, the Catholic Church had already

emerged as a powerful authority reinforcing homophobia in Poland, framing homosexuality as a moral threat to traditional family values (Ayoub 2016). However, the topic was largely sidelined from the political debate during the 1990s (O'Dwyer 2012), a period dominated by the challenges of democratic and economic transition.

With the EU accession process in the early 2000s, LGBTQ issues in Poland became politicized (Ayoub 2016). While LGBTQ activists gained public visibility and increasingly claimed rights and protections for the community, the 2000s also witnessed a backlash and a rise in political homophobia (O'Dwyer 2012). The framing of homosexuality as a moral failing and a threat to national identity was readily adopted by anti-LGBTQ forces (Ayoub 2016). Equality marchers have been repeatedly attacked and injured by countermobilizations, denied police protection and also banned in Warsaw in 2004 and in Poznan and Warsaw in 2005 (Ayoub 2016)¹⁰. The PiS-led national government also attempted to ban “homosexual propaganda” in schools in 2007. While no further anti-LGBTQ policies were pursued before PiS returned to power, little progress in LGBTQ rights was made during the first two Tusk governments (2007-2014).

After its return to office, PiS repeatedly engaged in anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, including statements from high-profile politicians starting from 2018 (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). In 2018, the government also pressured 211 schools to withdraw from a “Rainbow Friday” event aimed at supporting LGBTQ students’ wellbeing (ILGA-Europe 2019).

The anti-LGBTQ resolutions starting in 2019 can be understood as escalating these earlier strategies. At the same time, civil society responses, including the efforts of grassroots activists and legal challenges at the European level, underscore the contested nature of political homophobia in Poland.

C.2. Anti-LGBTQ Resolutions in 2019

Beginning in March 2019, seven months prior to the parliamentary election, local authorities in Poland started adopting resolutions that declared them disapproving of and free from what they describe as “LGBT ideology.” Internationally, these regions became known as “LGBT-free zones,” a term popularized by both right-wing actors, like the weekly magazine *Gazeta Polska* (Bucholc 2022), and activists who strategically positioned city signs in affected regions

10. Another ban was attempted in Lublin in 2018 and overturned by a court.

to highlight the social and political ramifications of these policies (Stenberg and O'Dwyer 2023). The associated documents were widely perceived as a direct response by PiS to the earlier signing of the "LGBT+ Declaration for Warsaw" by the city's mayor and later presidential candidate of the Civic Platform, Rafał Trzaskowski (Rafałowski 2023). Although the resolutions were symbolic and legally non-binding, defended by provincial legislatures as neither acts of local law nor public administration and as imposing no obligations or conferring any rights (Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship Assembly 2019), they nonetheless raised serious human rights concerns regarding the safety and well-being of Poland's LGBTQ population. By encouraging local governments to refrain from promoting tolerance, supporting LGBTQ rights organizations, or implementing anti-discrimination education, the resolutions intensified minority stress with tangible harm. Most dramatically, recent research indicates that anti-LGBTQ policies in Poland increased suicide attempts by 16 percent (Meyerhoefer, Xue, and Poznańska 2025).

Anti-LGBTQ resolutions were typically initiated by two groups of documents. The first and most prevalent group of resolutions consists of those opposing and proclaiming freedom from "LGBT ideology." They contain statements denouncing "political correctness," condemning efforts to educate about non-heterosexual relationships, and include warnings against radicals seeking "cultural revolution" (Bucholc 2022). The second variant, titled "Local Government Charter of The Rights of The Family," features more nuanced appeals for preserving "traditional" family models and shielding children from the influence of "various ideologies" that challenge the established social order, clearly alluding to LGBTQ issues (Rafałowski 2023). The Charter was drafted and lobbied for by the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture, an ultra-conservative think tank and advocacy group that thrived during the PiS government and played a significant role in shaping policies against abortion, sex education, and LGBTQ rights (Hennig 2023).

Shortly after the parliamentary election 2019 and the release of an interactive map by Polish LGBTQ activists documenting the spread of anti-LGBTQ resolutions, international outcry over these policies grew rapidly. In December 2019, the European Parliament (EP) passed a resolution, condemning the anti-LGBTQ resolutions and urging action to safeguard the rights of LGBTQ people in Poland. The EP's resolution also called on EU authorities to use tools such as infringement procedures and budgetary procedures "to ensure the full and proper application of Treaty principles and values" (European Parliament 2019). International pressure continued to mount, when numerous cities across Western Europe threatened to terminate their partnerships

with their concerned sister cities in Poland (Rafałowski 2023).

Despite these efforts, local councils persisted in passing resolutions in the month following the 2019 parliamentary election. By mid 2020, even larger parts of the Polish population resided in areas where anti-LGBTQ proposals had been approved. As such, the adoption of anti-LGBTQ resolutions follows a wave-like pattern, wherein a first round of municipalities (N=741) was covered by resolutions enacted before the 2019 parliamentary election, and a second, smaller round of municipalities (N=164) was affected by resolutions passed after the 2019 parliamentary election. Figure 5 shows the geographic coverage of anti-LGBTQ resolutions by wave. The overlap of these areas with PiS strongholds in the 2019 election is remarkable (see Figure 6).

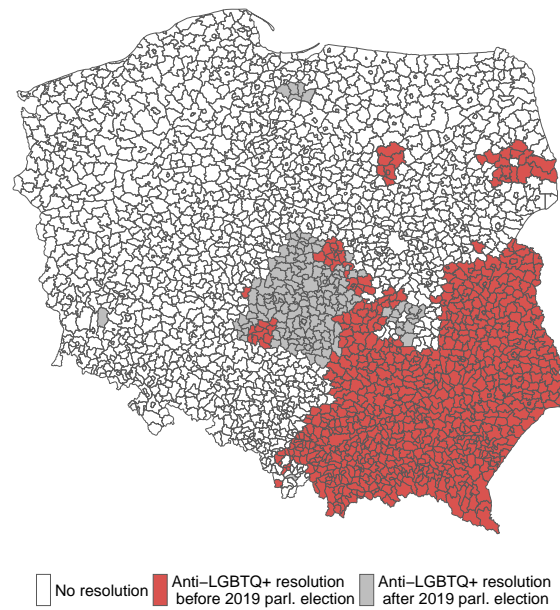


Figure 5: Geographic distribution of municipalities with anti-LGBTQ resolutions by wave.

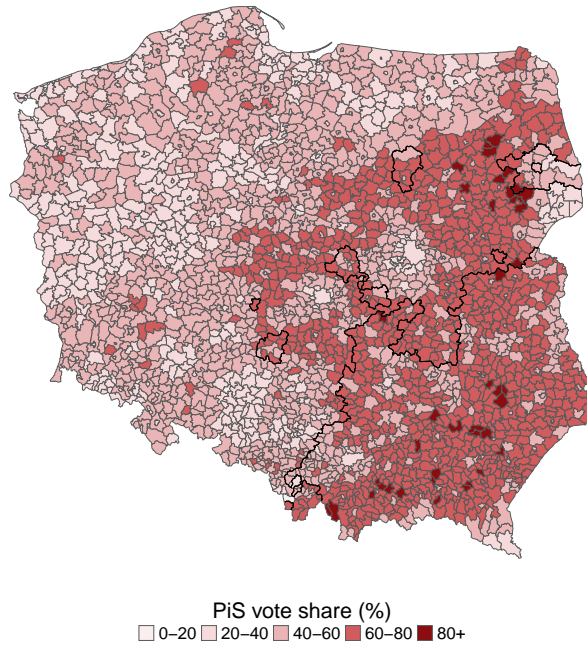


Figure 6: Geographic distribution of PiS vote share in the 2019 parliamentary election. Solid lines indicate the boundaries of anti-LGBTQ resolution coverage.

In July 2020, the EU followed through on their warnings, denying funding to six Polish towns that had adopted anti-LGBTQ resolutions (Wanat 2020). This constituted a major threat for Poland, which, at the time, was the largest net beneficiary of EU funds and relied heavily on financial support. In response to the heightened risk of funding rejections and potential EU infringement proceedings, nearly all local anti-LGBTQ resolutions were ultimately rescinded before the 2023 parliamentary election (Bogatyrev and Bogusz 2025).

C.3. Data on Anti-LGBTQ Resolutions

To construct the treatment variables based on the adoption of anti-LGBTQ resolutions in particular parts of Poland, we rely on the “Atlas of Hate” (Pajak and Gawron 2020) as the data source. The Atlas of Hate is an interactive online map of Poland plus a publicly available underlying dataset, which has been maintained by Polish human rights activists since 2019. Due to the way the data gets updated in case of repeals (by erasing the previous status), we use several versions of the same dataset downloaded at different times since 2020 to construct the full data.

This dataset provides extensive details about the status (adopted/not adopted/retracted), administrative unit (municipality/county/province), type and date of each anti-LGBTQ resolution passed in Poland since 2019. Virtually every case also includes links to the official sources of the resolution text, meeting agenda, minutes, video record and voting results on the resolution as well as press information about the decision. This allows for verification of each case through public sources. Our own cross-references of randomly sampled entries have validated the accuracy of the data.

The reliability of the dataset is corroborated by the reputation of the “Atlas of Hate”. In 2020, the project was nominated for the EU’s most prestigious human rights award – the Sakharov Prize (European Parliament 2020). Even within Poland, the credibility of the “Atlas of Hate” was supported by court decisions against local authorities who sued to get removed from the map (Ptak 2022). Notably, the “Atlas of Hate” data have been previously used for academic research (Rafałowski 2023; Stenberg and O’Dwyer 2023; Meyerhoefer, Xue, and Poznańska 2025; Bogatyrev and Bogusz 2025).

D. Synthetic Control Weights

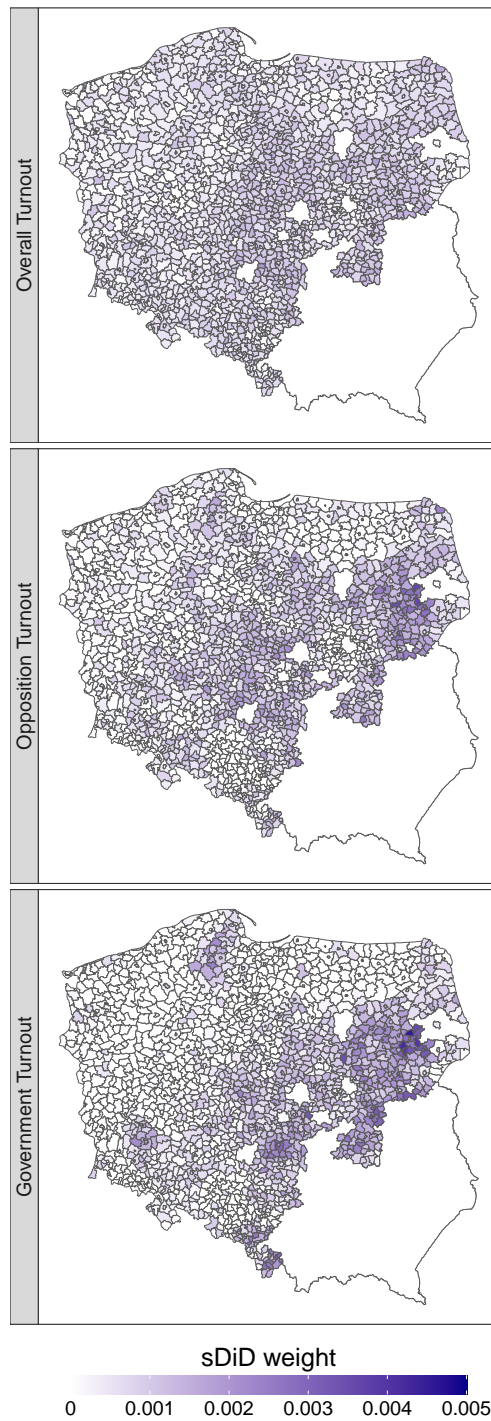


Figure 7: Geographic distribution of synthetic control weights for overall, opposition, and government turnout.

E. Restricted Sample

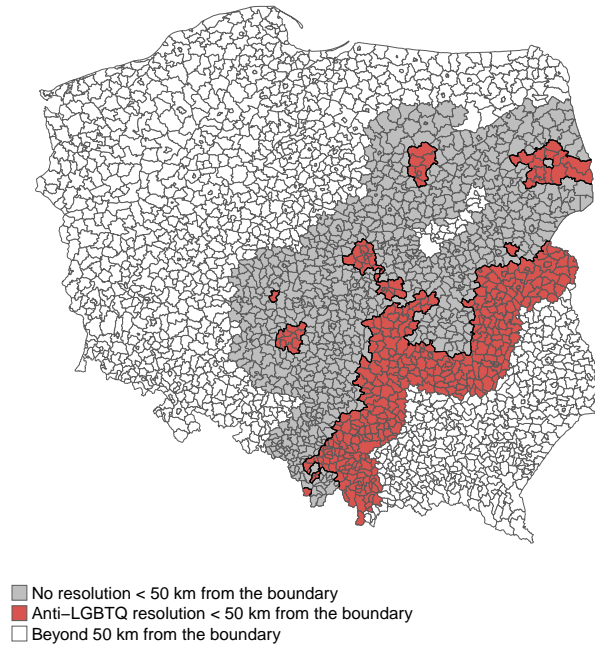


Figure 8: Geographic distribution of municipalities within 50 km distance from treatment-control boundaries.

F. Full sDiD Output

Table 2: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout by sample.

Outcome	Sample	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	Full Sample	-1.69 (0.11)	14856
	< 50km Sample	-0.73 (0.15)	6594
Opposition Turnout	Full Sample	-1.28 (0.14)	14856
	< 50km Sample	-0.89 (0.19)	6594
Government Turnout	Full Sample	0.41 (0.18)	14856
	< 50km Sample	0.67 (0.24)	6594

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

G. Effects on Vote Shares and Turnout by Party

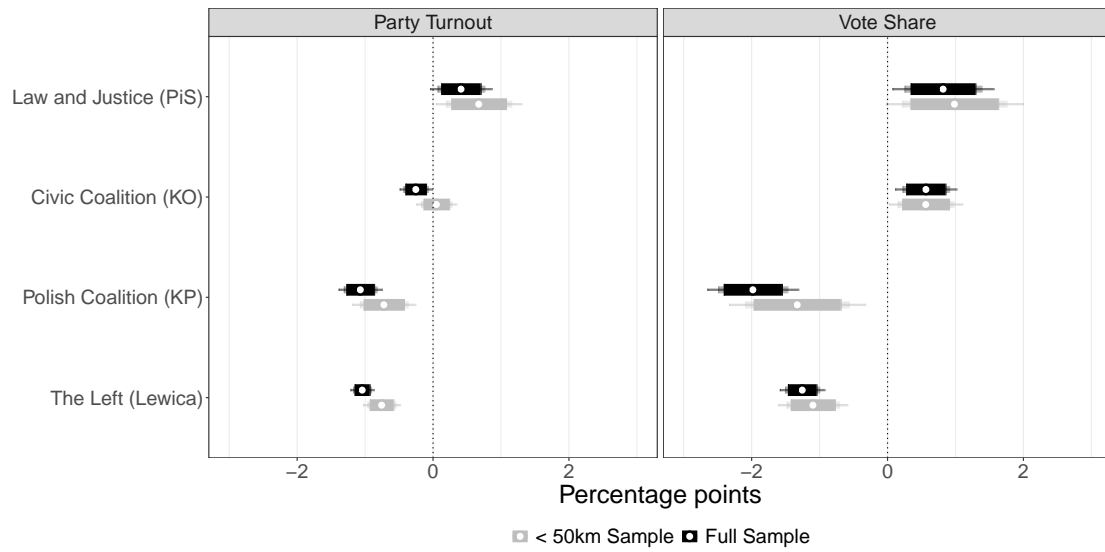


Figure 9: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on party-specific turnout and vote shares in the 2019 parliamentary election by sample. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Table 3.

Table 3: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on party-specific turnout and vote shares by sample.

Party	Sample	Estimate (SE)	N
<i>Party Turnout</i>			
Law and Justice (PiS)	Full Sample	0.41 (0.18)	14856
	< 50km Sample	0.67 (0.24)	6594
Civic Coalition (KO)	Full Sample	-0.25 (0.09)	14856
	< 50km Sample	0.05 (0.11)	6594
Polish Coalition (KP)	Full Sample	-1.07 (0.12)	14856
	< 50km Sample	-0.72 (0.18)	6594
The Left (Lewica)	Full Sample	-1.04 (0.07)	14856
	< 50km Sample	-0.76 (0.11)	6594
<i>Vote Share</i>			
Law and Justice (PiS)	Full Sample	0.82 (0.29)	14856
	< 50km Sample	0.98 (0.39)	6594
Civic Coalition (KO)	Full Sample	0.56 (0.18)	14856
	< 50km Sample	0.56 (0.21)	6594
Polish Coalition (KP)	Full Sample	-1.98 (0.26)	14856
	< 50km Sample	-1.33 (0.39)	6594
The Left (Lewica)	Full Sample	-1.26 (0.13)	14856
	< 50km Sample	-1.10 (0.20)	6594

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

H. Varying Treatment Intensity

H.1. ATT by Sum of Government Levels

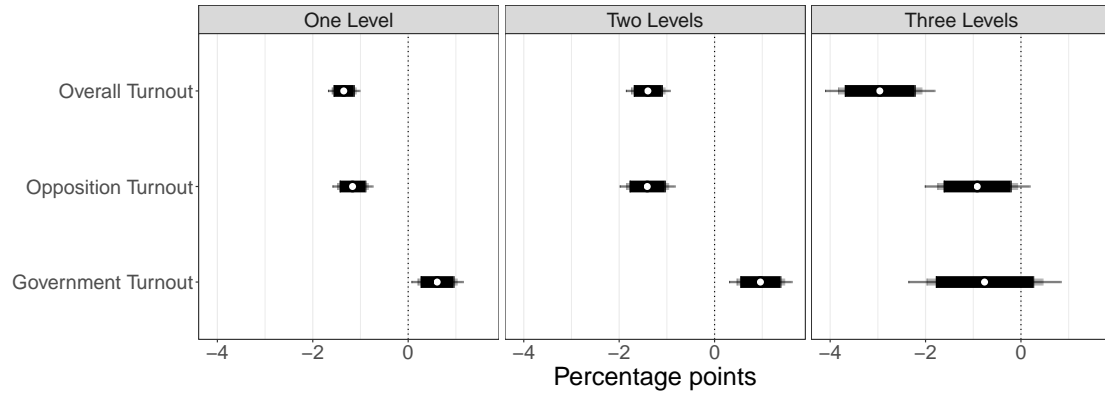


Figure 10: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout in the 2019 parliamentary election by sum of treatment levels. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Table 4.

Table 4: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout by sum of treatment levels.

Outcome	Sum Level	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	One Level	-1.35 (0.13)	12114
	Two Levels	-1.40 (0.18)	11034
	Three Levels	-2.96 (0.45)	9576
Opposition Turnout	One Level	-1.17 (0.16)	12114
	Two Levels	-1.41 (0.22)	11034
	Three Levels	-0.92 (0.43)	9576
Government Turnout	One Level	0.61 (0.21)	12114
	Two Levels	0.96 (0.25)	11034
	Three Levels	-0.76 (0.62)	9576

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

H.2. ATT by Sum of Resolutions

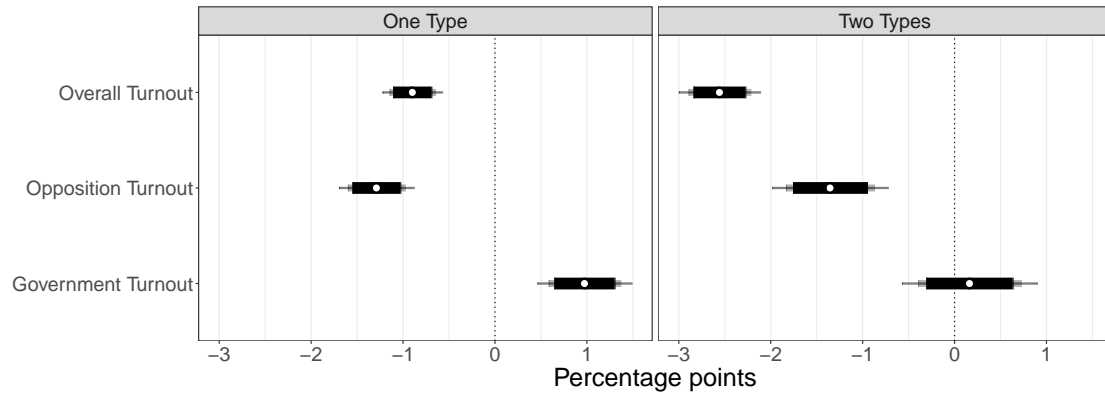


Figure 11: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout in the 2019 parliamentary election by sum of treatment resolutions. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Table 5.

Table 5: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout by sum of treatment resolutions.

Outcome	Sum Type	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	One Type	-0.90 (0.13)	12402
	Two Types	-2.56 (0.17)	10752
Opposition Turnout	One Type	-1.29 (0.16)	12402
	Two Types	-1.35 (0.24)	10752
Government Turnout	One Type	0.97 (0.20)	12402
	Two Types	0.16 (0.29)	10752

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

I. Alternative Treatment Definitions

I.1. Geographic Distribution of Treatment by Government-Level

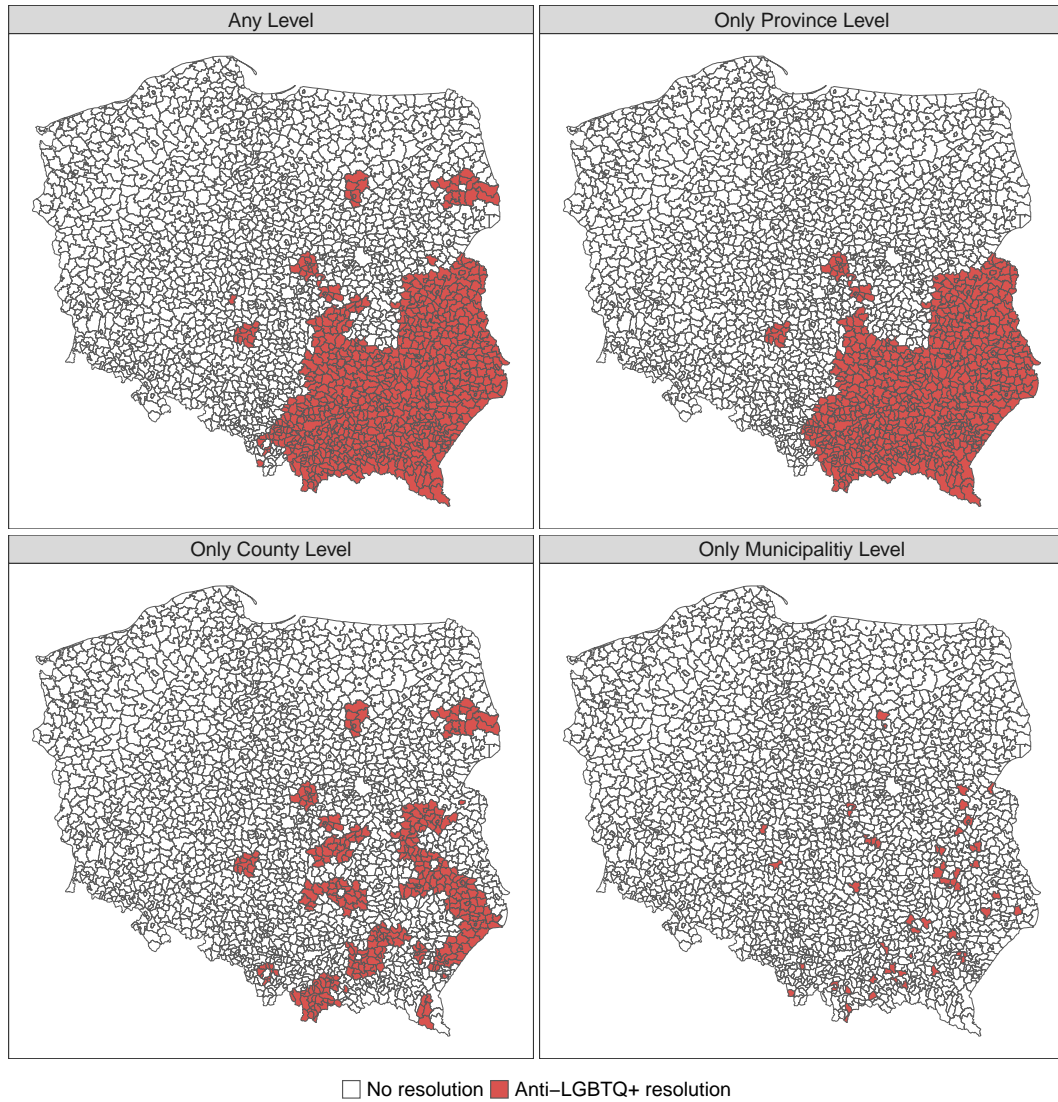


Figure 12: Geographic distribution of municipalities with anti-LGBTQ resolutions in effect prior to the 2019 parliamentary election by government level passing the resolution. A) any government-level, B) only province-level, C) only county-level, D) only municipality-level.

I.2. ATT by Government-Level

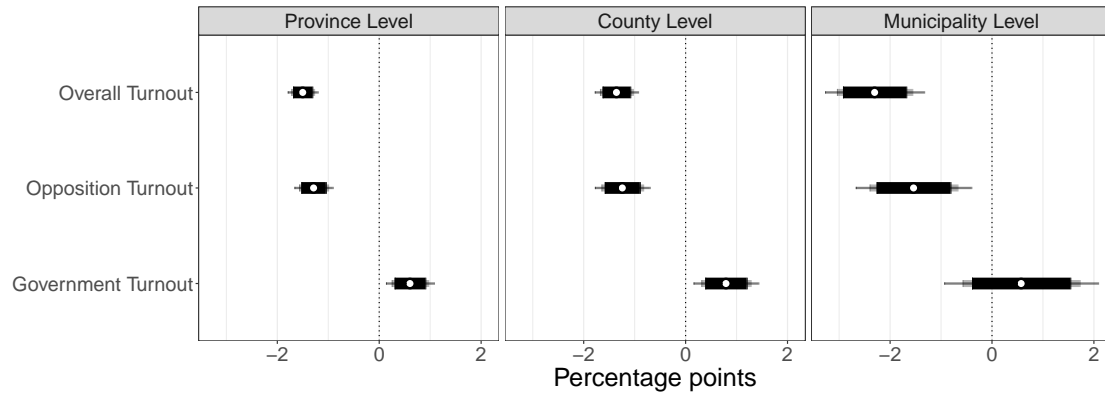


Figure 13: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout in the 2019 parliamentary election, separated by government unit passing the resolution. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Table 6.

Table 6: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout, separated by government unit passing the resolution.

Outcome	Level	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	Province Level	-1.50 (0.11)	13578
	County Level	-1.36 (0.17)	11316
	Municipality Level	-2.30 (0.38)	9738
Opposition Turnout	Province Level	-1.29 (0.15)	13578
	County Level	-1.24 (0.21)	11316
	Municipality Level	-1.54 (0.44)	9738
Government Turnout	Province Level	0.60 (0.18)	13578
	County Level	0.79 (0.25)	11316
	Municipality Level	0.57 (0.59)	9738

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

I.3. ATT by Resolution Type

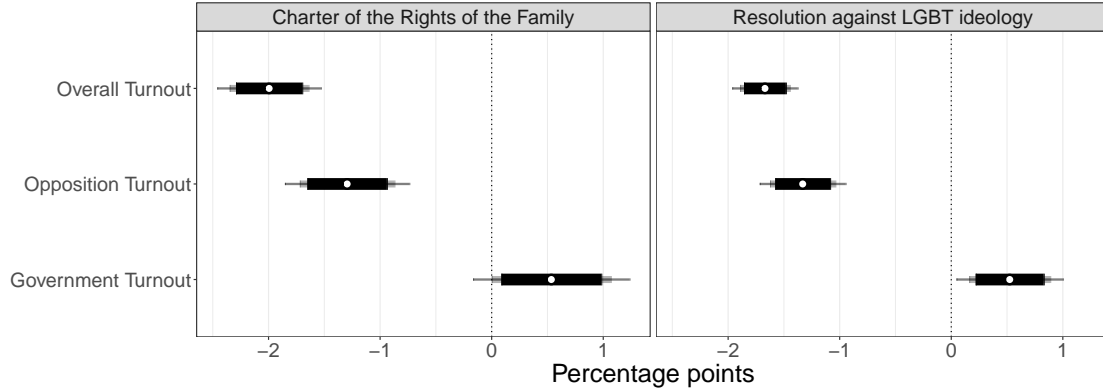


Figure 14: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout in the 2019 parliamentary election, separated by type of resolution. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Table 7.

Table 7: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout, separated by type of resolution.

Outcome	Resolution Type	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	Charter of the Rights of the Family	-1.99 (0.18)	12066
	Resolution against LGBT ideology	-1.67 (0.11)	13398
Opposition Turnout	Charter of the Rights of the Family	-1.30 (0.22)	12066
	Resolution against LGBT ideology	-1.33 (0.15)	13398
Government Turnout	Charter of the Rights of the Family	0.53 (0.27)	12066
	Resolution against LGBT ideology	0.52 (0.19)	13398

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

J. Alternative Control Sample

J.1. Never-Treated Synthetic Control Group

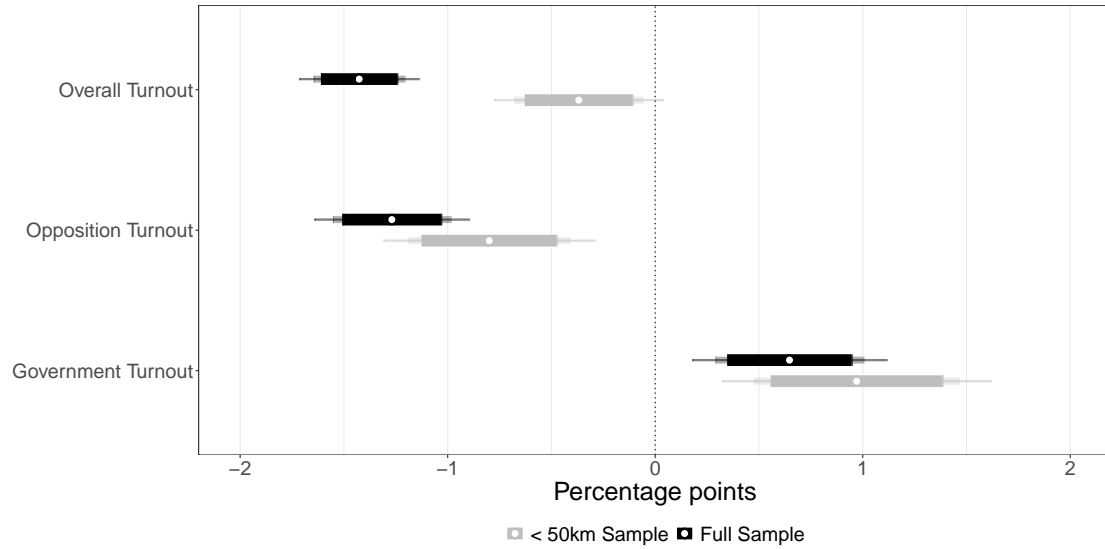


Figure 15: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 95% confidence intervals. The synthetic control-generating process draws on never-treated units. Full output in Appendix Table 8.

Table 8: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout using the never-treated control unit pool.

Outcome	Sample	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	Full Sample	-1.43 (0.11)	13872
	< 50km Sample	-0.37 (0.16)	5658
Opposition Turnout	Full Sample	-1.27 (0.14)	13872
	< 50km Sample	-0.80 (0.20)	5658
Government Turnout	Full Sample	0.65 (0.18)	13872
	< 50km Sample	0.97 (0.25)	5658

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

K. Additional Robustness Checks

K.1. Alternative Estimators

Table 9: Estimated effects of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout in treated municipalities in the 2019 parliamentary election by estimator.

Outcome	Sample	DiD	MC	sDiD
Overall Turnout	Full Sample	-1.09 (0.15)	-1.29 (0.11)	-1.69 (0.1)
	< 50km Sample	-0.56 (0.24)	-0.59 (0.16)	-0.73 (0.15)
Opposition Turnout	Full Sample	-5.68 (0.24)	-2.24 (0.13)	-1.28 (0.1)
	< 50km Sample	-2.26 (0.41)	-1.12 (0.19)	-0.89 (0.16)
Government Turnout	Full Sample	4.67 (0.24)	2.19 (0.18)	0.41 (0.13)
	< 50km Sample	1.77 (0.38)	1.14 (0.28)	0.67 (0.22)

Note: Placebo standard errors (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021) in parentheses. $N = 14,856$ for all models. DiD stands for "difference-in-differences", MC stands for "matrix completion", sDiD stands for "synthetic difference-in-differences".

K.2. Excluding Municipalities with over 300,000 Inhabitants

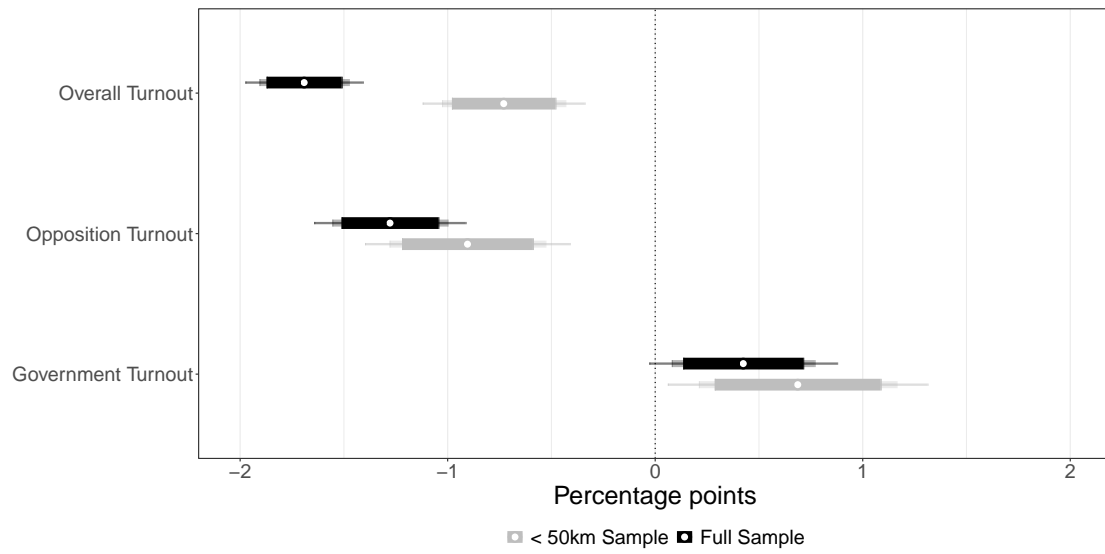


Figure 16: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout, excluding the ten largest municipalities with over 300,000 inhabitants. We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Table 10.

Table 10: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout, excluding the ten largest municipalities with over 300,000 inhabitants.

Outcome	Sample	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	Full Sample	-1.69 (0.11)	14820
	< 50km Sample	-0.73 (0.15)	6576
Opposition Turnout	Full Sample	-1.28 (0.14)	14820
	< 50km Sample	-0.90 (0.19)	6576
Government Turnout	Full Sample	0.42 (0.18)	14820
	< 50km Sample	0.69 (0.24)	6576

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

K.3. Excluding Municipalities Proposing but not Adopting Resolutions

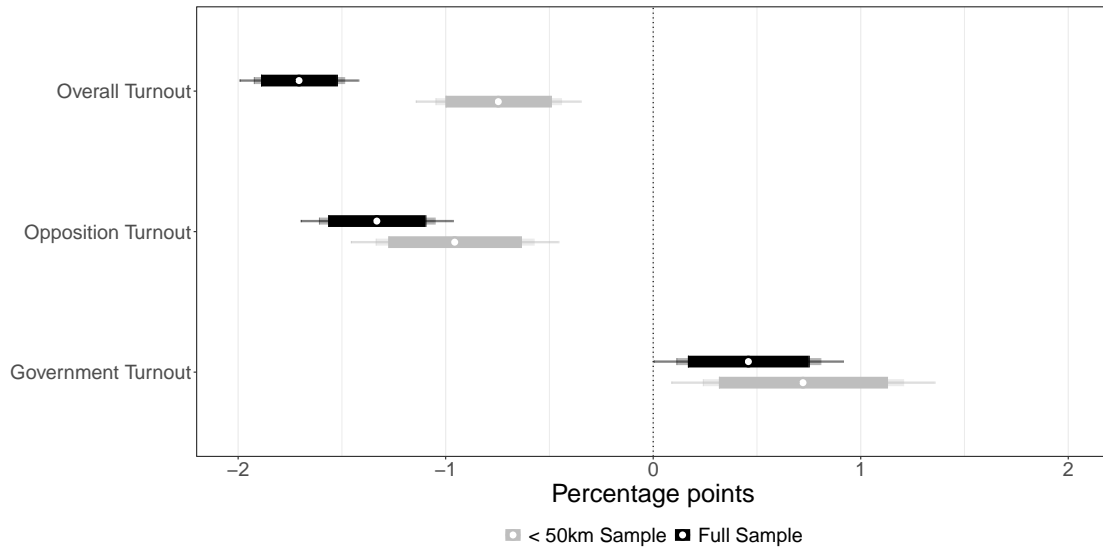


Figure 17: Effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout, excluding municipalities that proposed but did not adopt resolutions (i.e., discussed, rejected or dismissed proposals). We report point estimates from synthetic difference-in-differences estimates along 95% confidence intervals. Full output in Appendix Table 11.

Table 11: Synthetic difference-in-differences estimates for the effect of anti-LGBTQ resolutions on overall, opposition, and government turnout, excluding municipalities that proposed but did not adopt resolutions (i.e., discussed, rejected or dismissed proposals).

Outcome	Sample	Estimate (SE)	N
Overall Turnout	Full Sample	-1.71 (0.11)	14466
	< 50km Sample	-0.75 (0.15)	6396
Opposition Turnout	Full Sample	-1.33 (0.14)	14466
	< 50km Sample	-0.96 (0.19)	6396
Government Turnout	Full Sample	0.46 (0.18)	14466
	< 50km Sample	0.72 (0.25)	6396

Note: Standard errors (in parentheses) were estimated using jackknife variance estimation (Arkhangelsky et al. 2021).

L. Number of Municipalities by Treatment Status and Sample

Sample	Never Treated	Treated before 2019 election	Treated after 2019 election	Total
Full Sample	1572	741	164	2477
One Level	”	448	152	600
Two Levels	”	268	11	279
Three Levels	”	25	1	26
One Type	”	448	152	600
Two Types	”	268	11	279
Province Level	”	692	142	834
County Level	”	315	29	344
Municipality Level	”	52	6	58
Resolution against LGBT ideology	”	662	0	662
Charter of the Rights of the Family	”	276	164	440
No municipalities > 300,000	1567	740	163	2470
No proposing municipalities	1521	728	163	2412
< 50km Sample	586	357	156	1099
One Level	”	218	144	362
Two Levels	”	126	11	137
Three Levels	”	13	1	14
One Type	”	218	144	362
Two Types	”	126	11	137
Province Level	”	308	142	450
County Level	”	173	24	197
Municipality Level	”	28	3	31
Resolution against LGBT ideology	”	278	0	278
Charter of the Rights of the Family	”	85	156	241
No municipalities > 300,000	585	356	155	1096
No proposing municipalities	564	347	155	1066

Note: The column "Treated after the 2019 election" only counts the newly treated municipalities, i.e. those not treated before the election by any resolution type adopted at any administrative level.

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