

# Reproducing white normativity in parties' candidate recruitment: Evidence from the 2017 Finnish municipal elections

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## Abstract

This study approaches the underrepresentation of ethnic and migrant minorities (EMMs) in political assemblies from the perspective of candidate recruitment and examines how white normativity as an ideal shapes the recruitment process. The article draws on empirical interview data from the 2017 Finnish municipal elections. Through a qualitative analysis of parties' recruiting agents' ( $n = 24$ ) and EMM candidates' ( $n = 12$ ) interviews, the article provides nuanced insights into the informal aspects of candidate recruitment and more perspectives into the discussions of 'ideal' and 'acceptable' candidates. The analysis identifies four discursive strategies that the parties use to describe their (lack of) efforts to recruit EMM candidates. The analysis of these strategies deepens the analytical understanding of the persistent underrepresentation of EMMs in candidate lists by explaining how recruitment is shaped by white normativity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Underrepresentation of ethnic and migrant minorities (EMMs) in political assemblies in several European countries is a widely acknowledged democratic deficit (e.g., Ashe, 2020; Bird et al., 2011; Saalfeld, 2011). Whereas descriptive representation likely improves social cohesion in many ways (Banducci et al., 2004; Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Gay, 2001; Mansbridge, 1999; Pantoja & Segura,

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2003; Phillips, 1995; Verba et al., 1997), exclusion and alienation from politics may result in political animosity among the marginalized groups (e.g., R. Dancygier, 2010). Descriptive representation also has symbolic value, for it reflects a multivoiced society, in which people have equal opportunities to have a say on decisions that affect their lives.

Political parties hold a key gatekeeping role in determining who represents the party in political institutions. Although voters make the final selection in elections, in reality voters select their candidates from lists preselected by parties. A range of studies confirm that discrimination by party gatekeepers plays a significant role in perpetuating the underrepresentation of EMMs: they may be placed on nonwinnable seats on candidate lists, nominated only in certain districts, or not targeted at all in parties' recruitment of candidates (R. M. Dancygier et al., 2015; Durose et al., 2013; Mügge, 2016; Sipinen, 2021; Sobolewska, 2013; Soininen, 2011; van der Zwan et al., 2019; Van Trappen, 2021a, 2021b). By analysing parties' candidate recruitment processes in the 2017 Finnish municipal elections, this study contributes to the recent scientific literature that aims to identify barriers for EMMs in access to political assemblies.

Finnish municipal elections provide an excellent case study, since in these elections the barrier of access to candidate lists is low, and the list composition depends much on who the parties target in their recruitment (for an overview of the Finnish municipal election context, see Sipinen, 2021, pp. 89–99). Underrepresentation of EMMs on candidate lists is much explained by parties' lack of active recruitment of EMM candidates, although most parties in almost all municipalities struggle to achieve full (or even half full) lists. There seems to be an imbalance between the parties not putting more effort into including more EMM candidates, although that would be an important strategy in reaching towards voters otherwise not mobilized at all.

We examine gatekeeping in candidate recruitment through a lens of critical whiteness studies—an aspect much neglected in political science outside the United States context. More specifically, we answer the question ‘what kind of explanations the parties' give to EMMs' underrepresentation and how are those explanations shaped by whiteness as a norm?’ Whiteness refers to a hierarchical construction that somewhat discreetly marks power and privilege also in the Nordic societies (Dahlstedt & Hertzberg, 2007; Keskinen, 2013; Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017), and thus, it shapes the perceptions of the members of the political community, that is, the white nation-state. An analysis of whiteness reveals more subtle patterns of discrimination that are beyond explicitly hostile attitudes, for example, against ‘immigrants’. This article contributes to knowledge of white normativity in a Nordic context, where ethnic discrimination and racism have been underaddressed topics in comparison to Anglo-phonous ones. We also provide new perspectives on the informal aspects of

candidate recruitment and into the discussions on ‘ideal’ and ‘acceptable’ candidates (Ashe, 2020; Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015; Durose et al., 2013).

With the term EMMs, we refer to groups that can be distinguished from the majority population based on their origin or language. This corresponds to the categories used in the official population registry data in Finland (origin or status as a foreign-language speaker), which overlook native-born citizens belonging to religious or visible minorities, for instance, as well as many ‘old’ minorities (e.g., the Roma).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the theories of candidate selection and white normativity. This is followed by a contextualizing discussion on Finnish parties' stances towards migration and multiculturalism as well as underrepresentation of EMMs in the 2017 Finnish municipal elections. Here we draw on parties' municipal election programmes as well as statistics on foreign-language speakers as candidates. Next, we present our analysis of the discursive strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) used in the qualitative interview data (party representatives [ $n = 24$ ] and EMM candidates [ $n = 12$ ]). We identify four discursive strategies parties adopt when discussing about underrepresentation of EMM candidates: white supremacy; nonperformative diversity; diversity tokens; and striving for conviviality. We conclude by arguing that the distinctive discursive strategies demonstrate how whiteness as a norm hinders the recruitment of diverse candidates, and, thus, EMMs' political representation.

## NURTURING WHITE NORMATIVITY IN THE SECRET GARDEN OF POLITICS

Since Gallagher and Marsh (1988) candidate selection has been described as the ‘secret garden’ of politics, for it is an obscure process, often hidden from public view, that is regulated largely by internal party rules, informal practices, and unequal power relationships (see also Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015). Outsiders have very little public material other than the final ballot lists from which to draw a picture of the candidate selection process. Even within parties, it may be difficult to define the exact nomination criteria. Existing research shows that seeking prospective candidates in Finnish elections often depends on parties' recruiting agents' ‘gut feeling’ and accumulated personal experience of elections as well as their personal networks, from which potential candidates are searched (Sipinen, 2021, pp. 209–213). Candidate recruitment is a large-scale classification and screening process, in which parties engage in explicit profiling to find a wide selection of candidates with social backgrounds that are considered relevant among the parties' established and potential supporters. For example, by nominating man and woman candidates from all age groups with varying occupational backgrounds parties try to provide voters with candidates they can identify with. Arter (2013, p. 104) calls this a *balanced list strategy*, and it

also involves nominating candidates from various geographical areas of the municipality (see also Kuitunen, 2008; von Schoultz, 2018).

In the Finnish candidate-centered electoral system, a voter must always indicate both a preferred party (or a constituency association) and one candidate representing that party (or group). While parties seek candidates with various social backgrounds, they also need to make sure that candidates on their lists attract votes. Therefore, parties evaluate aspirants' resources and skills for planning and running effective electoral campaigns, their reputation, popularity and public image and personal social networks (Cutler, 2002; Ruostetsaari & Mattila, 2002). However, candidate recruitment is not only about seat maximization but also about securing parties' ability to promote values and issues important to them. Parties control recruitment processes because their candidates send a public message about the party's goals and ideology. Parties not only provide access to newcomers, but they may also shut them out in the fear that they change not only the party's public face but also ultimately its ideological orientation (Michon & Vermeulen, 2013).

Finally, parties' candidate recruitment strategies are also affected by their interest to look after intraparty cohesion. As Hazan and Rahat (2010, p. 112) note: 'exclusive candidacy requirements reflect an attempt by the party to control the supply side of potential candidates (...) so that those who fulfill the enhanced eligibility criteria (...) will behave according to party dictates once in office'. To ensure this, parties need information on their candidates' trustworthiness and loyalty. Recruiting candidates from new EMM communities may be hindered due to a lack of familiarity between party organization and ethnic minorities. Lack of familiarity might result in a reluctance of recruiting EMM candidates. If parties are internally divided in terms of their attitudes towards diversity and multiculturalism, recruiting EMM candidates may also create internal conflicts.

Selecting EMM candidates has the potential of increasing a party's appeal in the eyes of EMM voters, because EMM candidates act as links or brokers by providing parties an access to EMM voters, who parties would not otherwise reach (Ames, 1995, p. 414). In previous literature, the nomination of EMM candidates on party's lists has been regarded as a strategic dilemma for some parties (e.g., da Fonseca, 2011). This discussion suggests that while minorities' support may help a party to win elections, it may also result in the loss of native support either because EMM candidates do not attract as many votes as majority candidates, or because their presence on a party's list may result in some ethnic majority voters turning their backs to the party altogether (da Fonseca, 2011, p. 112). Our analysis contradicts this to some extent, for we find how EMM candidates are presented as an asset to certain parties. Yet, as we show, some recruiters rely on culturalizing views on EMMs—assumptions about culture that supposedly solely shapes the behaviour of ethnic minorities (see Keskinen, 2011)—and, thus, regard EMMs as homogenous groups, whose

views deviate sharply from those of the party's electorate (cf. R. M. Dancygier, 2017, pp. 1–8).

In Finnish municipal elections, parties' local organizations are almost independently responsible for candidate recruitment, to which parties' national leadership intervenes very little or not at all (Sipinen, 2021, p. 209). Given that 295 municipalities participated in the 2017 Finnish municipal elections, informal recruitment practices as well as ideas of 'an ideal candidate' may be expected to vary a lot. Thus, even if some parties' national leadership would hold more multicultural values and encourage local party selectors to consider list diversity in candidate recruitment, local selectors decide themselves on their recruitment strategies. Thereby, the attitudes of local selectors may constitute a significant barrier to include candidates from underrepresented groups. Durose et al. (2013) find that the undervaluing of diversity by local selectors is at least partly a result of limited contact between local (white) selectors and ethnic minorities. They also note that for EMMs, working in high-prestige labour market positions may function as a pathway to politics since high labour market status brings them closer to the characteristics of the 'archetypal candidate' despite their minority background.

Above all, existing literature on EMMs' political representation emphasizes the importance of parties' attitudes towards diversity and multiculturalism (da Fonseca, 2011; Durose et al., 2011; Sobolewska, 2013; Soininen, 2011; van der Zwan et al., 2019). If the parties do not systematically start to develop recruitment strategies for finding EMM candidates, the barriers to access will likely stay high. We consider whiteness as a norm to be one of the major hindrances to EMMs' pathways to representative bodies (Keskinen, 2013; Keskinen et al., 2019; Leinonen, 2012). White normativity, consisting of a set of distinct attributes (both phenotypical and 'cultural' features as well as religious commitment, see Hage, 2000), guides perceptions of who are (not) regarded as legitimate, credible and trustworthy members of the community. While the term 'whiteness' is rarely explicitly invoked in Finnish language discussions (Seikkula, 2019), the euphemistic distinction between 'Finns and immigrants' suggests a space divided by white, native citizens and often non-European and non-white migrants (see also Mulinari et al., 2009; on the term 'immigrant' Leinonen, 2012). Further, previous research has shown that the category of the 'immigrant other' is not to be reduced to the phenotype. For example, also post-Soviet migrants in Western Europe (such as Russians in Finland) struggle to pass as 'white' (Krivonos, 2020). Our discussion on whiteness resembles what Dahlstedt and Hertzberg (2007, p. 175) term as a 'perceived closeness to a Swedish normality' shaping participation in public life. Our point of departure is that it might shape, for instance, the recruiting agents' perceptions of aspirants' resources and skills for candidacy and understandings of party cohesion.

## EMM REPRESENTATION IN THE 2017 FINNISH MUNICIPAL ELECTION AND PARTIES' STANCES ON MIGRATION

Prior research suggests that parties' ideological position affects their views on EMM aspirants vis-à-vis majority aspirants. In her study on Flemish party selectors, Van Trappen (2021a) finds that discrimination against ethnic minority aspirants based on their ethnic background is likely to occur especially among rightist party selectors. Therefore, in this section, before presenting our qualitative data on parties' discursive strategies, we discuss Finnish parties' attitudes towards migration and multiculturalism and briefly describe the composition of EMM representation across Finnish parties from left to right.

### **Parties' attitudes towards migration**

Finnish parties differ from each other when it comes to migration and multiculturalism as political questions—and migration was a salient topic in political debates in 2017. On the one hand, the political debates at the time reflected the aftermath of the 2015 European border crisis, when an unprecedented number of people fleeing from war-affected countries sought refuge in Europe. Of the 1.25 million people who reached Europe, ca. 32,000 sought asylum in Finland, which constituted nearly a 10-fold increase in comparison to the previous year Eurostat (2016). While the crisis mobilized many Finns into voluntary work for helping the refugees, it also amplified tensions among citizens and political parties, and fuelled both xenophobic political movements and anti-racist protests (Seikkula, 2022). On the other hand, an intense debate on migration and multiculturalism has characterized Finnish politics already since 2008. Although the anti-immigration racist political rhetoric has often been connected to the Finns Party, previous research has shown that politicians from the liberal-conservative National Coalition Party (NCP), the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) and the agrarian Center Party have also made use of anti-immigration arguments (Keskinen, 2013).

The salience of immigration as a theme is visible in parliamentary parties' programmes of the 2017 municipal elections (available at Finnish Social Science Data Archive). Of the eight parliamentary parties' programmes, six mentioned the issue. The ones that had no reference to the issue were the SDP and the Left Alliance, which generally are known to emphasize egalitarianism and universal rights to welfare. Municipal election programmes are targeted to a wider audience, and thereby, these parties may have kept silent about immigration in order not to expel leftist voters with anti-immigration views. The Green League, generally presenting liberal values, highlighted Finland's global responsibility in the management of the refugee issue and had a detailed list of actions on how

migrants' integration can be supported at the local level. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Swedish People's Party of Finland (SPP), which mainly represents the Swedish speaking minority, welcomes diversity and emphasizes that integration must be possible both in Finnish and Swedish. The Christian Democrats and the Centre Party referred to the refugee issue and the increased number of immigrants and emphasized that investing resources in integration brings profit in the long run. The Centre Party, however, had included a specific notion that those refugees planning to stay in Finland needed to adhere to the customs and values of Finnish society. The NCP's programme had only a short notion of municipalities' important role in the integration of migrants without any further statements on how it should be organized in practise. The Finns Party differs from the other parties with a specific anti-immigration agenda, and thus, it is not surprising that this view was carefully documented also in the party's municipal election programme. The Finns Party stressed prioritizing native Finns over migrants and demanded assimilation to 'Finnish values'. Further, they framed migration as a question of security.

### **EMM representation across Finnish parties**

In 2017, the share of foreign-language speakers out of all eligible persons for the municipal election was 5.7%. The share of foreign language-speaking candidates was 2.2%, and the share of elected foreign language-speaking councillors 0.7%. In other words, EMMs were heavily underrepresented in the 2017 elections. At the same time, the share of EMM candidates varied between the parties. As Table 1 shows, the Green League had the highest proportional share of EMM candidates (i.e., foreign language-speaking candidates). The Christian Democrats had the second most (3.4%) and the SPP the third most (3.3%). The share of EMM candidates also exceeded the average share (2.2%) in the Left Alliance (2.7%). In absolute terms, however, the SDP had the largest number of EMM candidates. The NCP, the Finns Party, and the Centre Party—all parties from center to right—had less than the average share of EMM candidates.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of foreign language-speaking candidates across parties according to their native language. The largest language groups among the candidates correspond to the largest foreign-born groups in Finland as one-fifth of the foreign language-speaking population had Russian as their native language, 13.3% were Estonian-speaking, and 7.1% spoke Arabic. Russian and Arabic speakers consist of people from several countries of origin. Most Russian speakers in Finland have moved from the Former Soviet Union and Russia, and some from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Arabic speakers' countries of origin include Iraq, Egypt, Algeria,

**TABLE 1** The number and relative proportion of foreign language-speaking candidates across parties in the 2017 Finnish municipal elections.

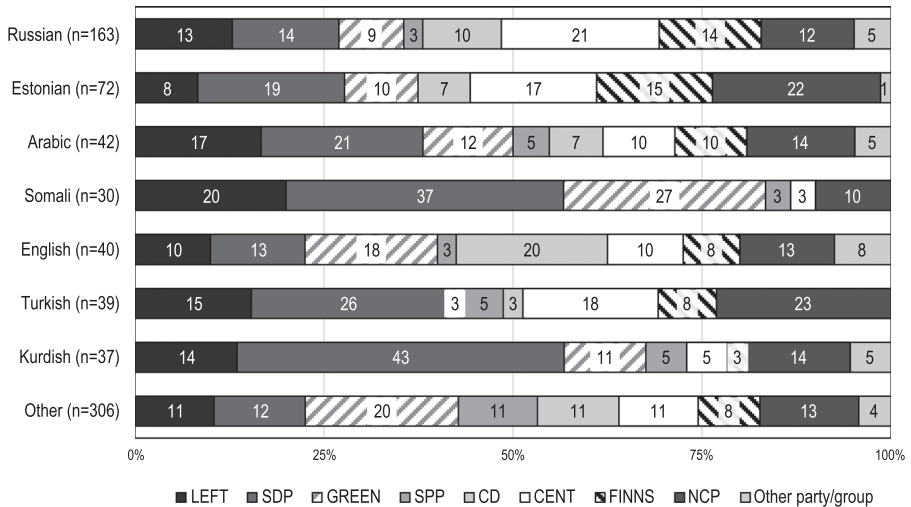
	Share of foreign language-speaking candidates (%)	Number of foreign language-speaking candidates	Number of all candidates
Green League	4.2	108	2600
Christian Democrats of Finland	3.4	67	1971
Swedish People's Party of Finland	3.3	44	1324
Left Alliance	2.7	87	3203
Other party	2.5	13	513
Social Democratic Party of Finland	2.0	125	6132
Constituency association	1.9	16	844
National Coalition Party	1.8	104	5739
Finns Party	1.8	69	3831
Centre Party	1.3	96	7461
Total	2.2	729	33,618

Source: Sipinen (2021, p. 185).

Morocco, Syria, Turkey, Tunis and Jordan (Statistics Finland, 2021). Figure 1 shows how left-leaning parties (Left, SDP, Greens) attracted, especially Arabic, Somali and Kurdish speaking, that is, 'non-White' minority candidates, whereas those migrants who are more likely to pass as white, that is, Russian, Estonian and English speakers, were evenly distributed across parties. Around 60% of Russian- and Estonian-speaking candidates represented the centre to right parties against 36%–37% representing the leftist parties.

Against this background, we now discuss the analysis of qualitative interviews with both parties and EMM candidates. We argue that the qualitative analysis provides more nuanced perspectives on underrepresentation of EMMs in the 2017 Finnish municipal election. We show that both anti-immigration racist rhetoric and its contestation might in some cases assume whiteness as a norm in a way that fails to recognize EMMs' (and other minorities') political agency (Seikkula, 2019; on diversity work's failures see Ahmed, 2012). Concomitantly, we also consider the cases where the advancement of diversity on the ballot lists is considered as part of enhancing the collective capacity to live together and contesting the dichotomous division between 'us and them' (cf. Gilroy, 2004).





**FIGURE 1** Distribution of foreign language-speaking candidates by language across parties. *Source:* Sipinen (2021, p. 186).

## PARTY AND CANDIDATE INTERVIEWS

To understand how Finnish political parties contest or affirm whiteness as a norm in their recruitment of electoral candidates, we rely on two types of interview data gathered by the first author. Our primary focus is on *party interview data*, which consists of 24 thematic semistructured interviews conducted in 2018–2019 that cover three officers/municipal council chairpersons from each parliamentary party. Eight interviews were conducted at party headquarters in Helsinki and eight at local offices in the city of Vantaa and eight in the city of Turku either in person or via phone. Both cities have a large proportion of foreign-origin population (Vantaa 17.7% and Turku 11.1% in 2017). The interviewees were personally involved in the candidate recruitment of the 2017 elections or at least in numerous previous elections. The interviews covered topics such as how candidate recruitment was organized, by whom, and according to which criteria. The interviews were not recorded, because it was presumed that this way the interviewees would be more open to discuss about the informal practices that guided candidate selection within their party. Our analysis is based on detailed notes from the interviews that were written up immediately after the interview was over. The interviewees had a double role as both experts of the phenomenon under study as well as research subjects. They had first-hand expert knowledge of their party's recruitment practices and

decision-making structures and were gatekeepers who had personally made the decisions on candidate recruitment.

We complement our analysis of the party interview data with a set of *candidate interview data*, which entails 12 interviews conducted in 2018 among EMM candidates of the 2017 elections. The purpose of these interviews is to contextualize the party interviews by bringing in the candidates' perspectives on how they consider being welcomed by their party. The interviewees were born in different countries and had different ethnic backgrounds (Russian, Estonian, Somalian, Nigerian, Kurdish, Turkish, Bosnian, Indian and Vietnamese). One of them had been born in Finland to migrant parents. Six of the interviewees were elected to the municipal council, one was a deputy and five were not elected. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the recorded interviews were transcribed.

In the analysis of the interview data, we studied the distinct discursive strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), or rhetoric patterns, that the parties' recruiting agents used to explain EMM's underrepresentation on the ballot lists. First, we observed the recruiting agents' use of a particular set of repetitive speech patterns. More specifically, we identified rhetorical patterns (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) that the interviewed recruiting agents used to describe first, potential candidates, voters and inhabitants of the municipality (referential and nomination strategies); second, EMM candidates (evaluative attributions); and finally, their party's chosen code of conduct in regard of diversity (justification strategies). Next, we analysed further our observations on the repetitive patterns through perspectives provided in previous scholarship on whiteness, racism and multiculturalism (Ahmed, 2012; Gilroy, 2004; Hage, 2000; Puwar, 2004), and we distinguished four strategies that stress distinct attitudes and responsibilities in regard of EMM underrepresentation. Finally, we compared the recruiting agents' descriptions to the candidate interview data for corresponding or contrasting views—this entailed comparing a thematic analysis of the candidate interviews to the discursive strategies we identified. In addition to the previous literature, the repetitive themes in the candidate interviews contributed to our interpretation and discussion of the discursive strategies that we identified in the party interview data. In order to demonstrate the significance of the discursive strategies in candidate selection, we also quote the interviewed candidates in connection to our analysis of the identified strategies.

## **FOUR DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES ON GATEKEEPING IN CANDIDATE RECRUITMENT**

We identified four distinct discursive strategies, through which the parties' recruiting agents reasoned the (lack of) EMM representation in the municipal elections. By discursive strategies, we refer to relatively coherent patterns of

language use that were intentionally applied in presenting diversity in an ideal way from each party's perspective (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The strategies, which we next discuss in more detail, are white supremacy, nonperformative diversity, diversity tokens and striving for conviviality.

### White supremacy

We term the first discursive strategy as *white supremacy*. Although none of recruiting agents said that they would directly discriminate against a group of people—as expected—in this discursive strategy EMMs are constructed as a threat. While all EMM candidates were not categorically declined, two of the eight parties' recruitment agents described the criteria for suitable candidates in explicitly exclusive terms. They hesitated, for instance, whether Muslims would be suitable candidates and stressed Finnish or Christian values as a priority for the party. For example, one interviewee elaborated in length on whether a Muslim could be accepted as a member of the party, and another interviewee brought up a case, where the party had turned down a potential candidate because the person was a Muslim. In our sample, only interviewees from parties centre to right adopted this discursive strategy.

The explicitly exclusionary statements are distinctive to the white supremacy discursive strategy. However, while the interviewees either hesitated Muslims' involvement in the party or recited examples rejecting Muslims, the recruiting agents making use of the discursive strategy of white supremacy also stressed that if the potential candidate's values are in accordance with the party's values, 'ethnic minority background is not a hindrance'. This could be interpreted as an indication of both the very narrow interpretation of racism, often cited in contemporary European politics (e.g., Lentin & Titley, 2011), and the well-documented discursive tendency to avoid presenting oneself as racist or prejudiced (e.g., van Dijk, 1992). Explicitly confirming discrimination based on the ethnic background is likely to be a tabooed topic, whereas addressing culture and religion are at the centre of anti-immigration rhetoric (e.g., Keskinen, 2013).

The discussions on whether Muslims qualify as candidates recite views familiar from discourse on 'failed multiculturalism' and counter-posing 'Western' and 'Islamic' values commonly circulated in anti-immigration racist rhetoric (Keskinen, 2013; Lentin & Titley, 2011). The discursive strategy not only relies on a stereotypical counter-posing 'immigrants' and 'Finnish people' but it also constructs ethnic minorities primarily as the objects of politics. By making the supposedly homogenous and white nation as a standard for the political community, this strategy explicitly invokes what Hage (2000, p. 18) calls 'a fantasy of a nation governed by White people, a fantasy of White supremacy'. The interviewees relying on white supremacy as a discursive strategy are not concerned about the party's appeal in the eyes of the EMM

voters (cf. da Fonseca, 2011). In contrast, stressing the party's values that prioritize an image of a white nation appear more central.

The candidate interviews provide an additional perspective on the centrality of the 'Finnish and Christian values' recited in this discursive strategy. One of the interviewed candidates described how uniting Christian values and the need to react to 'many Muslims who are on their way here' was a feature that connected the interviewee to the party leadership. In other words, the requirement to affirm the extremely exclusionary white normativity expressed in terms of superiority of 'Finnish and Christian values' was recognized also in the candidate interviews, which also demonstrates that some EMM candidates might confirm to these values.

### **Nonperformative diversity**

A majority of the recruiting agents explicitly mentioned that they had recognized the importance of recruiting EMMs and that they had taken deliberative actions to implement that objective. Yet, most of the interviewees agreed that there is a lack of EMM candidates. The second discursive strategy we identified recognizes diversity on a surface level as an important value in politics but at the same time presents different types of justifications on why the desired diversity is not achieved. Following Ahmed's (2012) discussion on empty and dysfunctional declarations of anti-racism, we term this discursive strategy *nonperformative diversity*. The strategy can be summarized as 'diversity is important, but'. It plays on a similar rhetorical structure as the famous denial of racism that in the end affirms racist discourses as analysed by van Dijk (1992). In explaining EMMs' underrepresentation, the interviewees relied on distinct rhetoric patterns, which legitimize maintaining whiteness as a norm. All parties from left to right used this second discursive strategy in explaining their lack of EMM candidates.

This discursive strategy consists of three parallel ways of speaking. First, interviewees drew from colour-evasive descriptions of the party's priorities and of the political environment by stressing universalist claims of everyone's equality. Further, the recruiters referred to both the EMMs' supposed lack of skills/knowledge to present oneself for candidacy and the party's lack of social ties to EMM groups. By colour-evasive descriptions, we mean statements like: 'all the residents of the municipality are equally important' and 'EMM candidates are involved as much as anyone else'. In other words, the recruiters stressed that the lists are equally open to anyone, but they did not see it necessary to reach out to EMM candidates, nor did they reflect candidacy from the perspective of EMM candidates—for instance, what would make it interesting, attractive, or accessible for them. In other words, they affirmed diversity as a goal on a discursive level in a manner that allows to assume that there is no issue with the EMM underrepresentation. Further,

colour-evasiveness is likely to reflect broader discursive tendencies of the context. For instance, the interviewees emphasized balanced lists in terms of age, gender, occupational background and regional representation and set specific numeric goals in terms of these characteristics. In contrast, while most of the interviewees highlighted that the ballot lists must include EMM candidates at least in municipalities where EMM residents form a notable share of the population, many were reluctant to talk about numeric goals in terms of how many EMM candidates should be included on the lists. This can be understood as an indication of the discursive environment, where racialized differences or representation of EMMs is customarily not addressed (Seikkula, 2019, p. 1008). At the same time, the colour-evasive rhetoric undermines possibilities to address specific obstacles for persons from an ethnic minority to present themselves as candidates.

Second, several interviewees suggested that one of the major obstacles in the recruitment of EMM candidates was their lack of knowledge of the Finnish political system or other lack of capacity, which makes them less likely to aspire to political careers. Dahlstedt and Hertzberg (2007, p. 179) identify a similar logic of 'blaming the victims' as a model for an explanation as it comes to minorities' absence in public life. Further, Mankki and Sippola (2021), who have interviewed foreign-background labour-union activists in Finland, explain that their interviewees reported being repeatedly met as 'uninformed immigrants', and therefore not being taken seriously in labour-union activities. As it comes to our data and political participation, the supposed lack of knowledge about the political system allows to present recruiting supposedly uninformed EMM candidates as a risk for the party. However, some of the interviewees stressed that it is the ethnic minorities themselves who do not see themselves qualified: 'from the party's perspective, [lack of] language skills does not prevent the candidacy, it's more like that the person might withdraw, because they don't regard their language skills sufficient'. However, also such statements repeat a logic of victim-blaming (Dahlstedt & Hertzberg, 2007, p. 179), because the lack of diversity on ballot lists has to do with the ethnic minorities themselves. Some interviewees also relied on stereotypical explanations of conservative and closed minorities (cf. Mulinari et al., 2009) similar to the ones used in the first discursive strategy to justify the exclusion of ethnic minorities. For instance, one interviewee highlighted that, parallel to a lack of language skills or knowledge of the political system, ethnic minority women are not participating, because some cultures do not allow women's participation. However, the same interviewee gave no consideration to the practices in Finnish municipalities or party politics that might hinder ethnic minority women's participation. In other words, such culturalizing explanations, that is, reasoning that relies on dichotomous and homogenizing understanding of non-Western cultures (Keskinen, 2011), were also part of the discursive strategy that leaves the responsibility of diverse political representation to the minorities alone.

Third, many party representatives stressed that their party lacks contact with EMM communities. The interviewees repeatedly gave explanations such as:

We regard multiculturalism, equality and migration in positive light, but it is difficult to transmit this message to people who have migrated to Finland, because we lack connections to them.

In sum, we hoped for more candidates of foreign background, because there's a lot foreign background residents in Vantaa. However, the interface is not ok, which makes it more difficult to recruit candidates of foreign background.

Both statements recognize diversity as a value. At the same time, they also repeat an explanation of everyday segregation and their lack of connections to diverse population groups as a cause of underrepresentation. Such everyday segregation appeared as relatively taken-for-granted, and in this discussion 'migrants' and 'Finns' are presented as two clearly cut, separate entities. The interviewees also construct ethnic minorities as homogenous (and sometimes stereotypically traditional groups), by using expressions implying segregation and traditional and patriarchal communities by relying on expressions like 'the population in question', 'community leaders'. While 'segregated migrant communities' have been a commonplace doomsday scenario in the 'failed multiculturalism' discourse (Lentin & Titley, 2011), a more accurate explanation for everyday segregation is often the reluctance of white people for social mixing (e.g., Schuermans et al., 2015). Similar to the rhetoric that blames EMMs for the lack of diversity, also the discussion on segregation assumes that minorities and people of foreign background are relatively newly arrived and, hence, they lack a history in Finland.

The candidate interviews provide another perspective on the issue of lack of contact between the parties and potential EMM candidates. One interviewee, for instance, questioned why the parties' local organizations do not approach ethnic minorities. The interviewee further connected this to a lack of everyday connections: 'Finns and immigrants are not knocking on each other's doors when they are neighbours [...] in the elevator everyone just turns their backs against each other [...] openness in the everyday, approaching and creating social connections would be important in my view'. Another interviewee suggested segregation as a reason for lack of knowledge of the political system: 'In Somali culture, an outsider is invited in and they are guided [...]. I would have expected more of this'. In other words, the interviewee saw this as a shortcoming of 'Finnish culture'. We suggest that statements like this highlight the limits of the *nonperformative diversity* strategy. Further, several candidates brought up that the relevant sources of information for them were outside the party, indicating that they viewed their party organization's support as very

limited. Some also explained that they felt that the party did not trust their expertise. Some critiqued their parties for not taking EMMs seriously as potential voters. While the interviewed candidates stressed the lack of support and engagement from the side of white Finnish people, it is noteworthy that they also relied heavily on the ‘Finns and immigrants’ distinction.

### Diversity tokens

EMM candidates' participation was also described as ‘a must’ by some of the representatives from parties (mainly from the left) that positioned themselves against anti-immigration rhetoric and/or for multiculturalism. Having a candidate with an EMM background on the ballot list was described as important as having another candidate who had retired or belonged to a sexual minority and so on. According to this discursive strategy, EMM representatives were seen as necessary either for the party's image or in order to appeal to EMM voters. *Diversity tokens* are the name we give to the discursive strategy, which cheers tokenist representation, ‘getting more racialised bodies into institutions’ (Puwar, 2004, p. 9) but leaves organizational cultures and structures unchanged (cf. Ahmed, 2012).

As migration and diversity have become politicized topics, some parties need EMM candidates similarly as others want to avoid them. For instance:

There have to be foreign-background candidates on the [party's] list. That is a clear criterion for the ballot list. The party has profiled as an advocate for multiculturalism. This has been highlighted, in particular, during the last five years, because [the party] wants to counter-pose anti-immigration advocacy.

The quoted interviewee explains that the party needs EMM candidates on the ballot list because challenging the anti-immigration agenda is a part of the party's agenda. Another recruiting agent explicitly discussed the need to include visible minorities so that the ballot list would not be ‘all white’. On the one hand, the deliberate goal of including visible minorities in public life in Finland—where for instance prevalence of racism against people of African origin is among the highest in the European Union & FRA—Agency for Fundamental Rights (2018)—can be regarded as dismantling whiteness as a norm. On the other hand, we suggest that this type of statement requires taking into account Ahmed's (2012, p. 59) theorization of advancing diversity: ‘if diversity becomes something that is added to organizations, like color, then it confirms the whiteness that is already in place’. Ahmed warns against giving false impressions just for the sake of impression. We suggest that in the context of candidate recruitment this urges to pay attention to the questions of whether including (visible) minorities on the ballot lists is done just for the sake of

diversifying, or whether minority candidates are provided sufficient support, and whether the parties are willing to share the positions of power with them.

Concomitantly, ‘ethnic minorities as a must’ can refer to recognizing the role of EMM candidates when it comes to reaching potential voters. This is crystallized in statements like ‘we would not have received the votes of people with a Kurdish background without a candidate with a Kurdish background’. In other words, party representatives who saw minority candidates as brokers who can reach certain minority groups to gain votes for the party indeed consider EMMs as potential voters. Yet, this discursive strategy says very little about the role of the EMM candidates in politics, a topic frequently addressed, in the candidate interview data.

Candidate interview data, again, provide a contextualizing perspective to the discursive strategy used by the recruiters. As one of the interviewed candidates had it: ‘That’s what the parties nowadays want, candidates of migrant background, because of the voters. For instance, Russian speakers, if we want to reach them, we, the party needs to have a Russian speaking candidate’. While these interviewees positioned themselves within the party and agreed with the idea of minority candidates as brokers, several candidates also expressed that they felt exploited: ‘I have started to feel that we’re being exploited. We are only needed when there’s a voting, you know?’ The interviewee refers to their position as an EMM candidate. Another candidate discussed their political experiences and disappointment explaining how they were only nominated as a deputy member of a municipal committee, while the actual membership was given to a fellow candidate who had gained only a fraction of the number of the votes the interviewee had gained. The interviewee summarized their view of this outcome: ‘Us foreigners are not really invited to politics, only to collect votes’. At the same time, another interviewee critiqued the tokenist approach explaining that in their view EMM candidates’ expertise is not recognized beyond their background: ‘They think I only know about things related to migration, nothing else. I think that is sad’.

### **Striving for conviviality**

We name the fourth discursive strategy as ‘striving for conviviality’. By this we refer to interview statements, in which the interviewees not only stressed commitment to diversity or anti-racism as a pronounced goal in candidate recruitment but presented diversity and inclusion as political goals towards which they had taken active measures. As we discuss next, advancing diversity and nonhierarchical and nondichotomous relations among people from distinct backgrounds (on conviviality see Gilroy, 2004) is an incomplete process. Hence, we speak of *striving* for conviviality. This strategy was used mainly by interviewees from leftist parties, and distinctive to it was stressing the party’s



role as a responsible agent in advancing anti-racism and diversity, also by supporting EMM candidates.

Striving for conviviality meant that the interviewees started with a definition of the society as diverse and positioned themselves as well as ethnic minorities within the same political community. For instance, one of the recruiters specifically mentioned that in a multicultural city such as Vantaa, the list of candidates should include new ethnic minorities:

Having migrant background candidates on the ballot lists facilitates integration and good relations between different population groups. It diminishes prejudice. The majority of migrants' children are born here, which you can also see when you walk on the street. This should be visible everywhere in the society, including party politics.

Another recruiter used consistently the word new-Finns (*uussuomalainen*), which can be also interpreted as an attempt to create discursive space for diversity and contest the exclusions feeding division to 'Finns and immigrants'.

An important part of this discursive strategy was that the interviewees also reflected to some extent on institutional hindrances to EMM's participation. Some recruiting agents reflected that there is an insufficient amount of support available to EMM candidates. In other words, they identified a lack of language skills or knowledge about the political system, but instead of seeing it as the sole responsibility of the EMM candidates, they perceived the party as the responsible agent in providing support to the new candidates. Primarily interviewees from leftist parties highlighted this. Recruiters from the rightist parties mainly brought up, in accordance with the previously discussed strategies, that every candidate is themselves responsible for running their personal campaign. However, also some interviewees from the rightist parties acknowledged that some of their party members had done a valuable job by providing personal support to EMM candidates.

In relation to candidate recruitment, a couple of recruiting agents took up anti-racism as an important value in candidate selection: 'We expect people to commit to the party's values, and then we have wanted to emphasize, in particular, this thing with racism. If a person wishes to be on our ballot list, they need to understand not to be a racist'.

Further, a couple of recruiters reflected on the prevalence of racism and the party's responsibility to support EMM candidates against possible harassment during campaigning. Acknowledging in distinct ways the possibility that EMM candidates might face racism and preparing to provide support if needed can be interpreted as an opening to facilitate certain minority candidates' participation.

The candidate interviews confirm that, in some leftist parties, racism is discussed to a significant extent. For instance, one interviewed candidate

elaborated on a case where a fellow party member had been expelled because of their racist statements.

## CONCLUSIONS

The underrepresentation of EMM candidates speaks of a potentially severe democracy deficit. Previous scholarly literature has brought up the impact of negative stereotypes on parties' candidate recruitment (e.g., Durose et al., 2011, 2013; van Trappen, 2021a, 2021b). Our qualitative analysis adds to this discussion and provides more nuanced perspectives on the question of diversity on ballot lists. By discussing white normativity, we unravel the recruiters' stereotyped attitudes towards EMMs as potential candidates. On the one hand, we find a tendency for the recruiting agents from parties center-to-right to find it easier to discard questions of diversity. On the other hand, we find that whiteness as a norm shapes parties' perceptions across the political field.

We identified four discursive strategies that the recruiting agents in the 2017 Finnish municipal election context used to explain underrepresentation of EMM candidates. The first strategy (white supremacy) presents EMM background strictly as a hindrance and was used only by the agents of parties from center to right. The second strategy (nonperformative diversity) naturalizes the underrepresentation by drawing on explanations that either see it ultimately as a shortcoming of the EMMs or portray everyday segregation as an insuperable obstacle. The second strategy was used across the political field and likely reflects the recruiting agents' own experience of a segregated social reality. The third discursive strategy (diversity tokens) depicted EMM candidates as essential to parties that position themselves as defenders of multiculturalism. The fourth strategy (striving for conviviality) portrayed diversity in the society as inherent to the parties' values and recognized EMMs as full members of the political community. The third and fourth strategies were used mainly by the recruiting agents from the political left.

Stands that see whiteness as 'Finnish' or 'Christian' values as superior are explicitly exclusionary. However, we argue that also such reasoning that formally recognizes diversity as important but sees EMMs lacking capacity for politics or EMMs as out-of-reach communities also exclude EMMs from the political community. Candidate interviews also suggest that the role of 'a diversity token' does not make candidacy attractive to EMMs. First, three strategies are examples of the distinct ways in which white normativity is adopted to justify the underrepresentation of EMM candidates. Yet, we also identified one discursive strategy that suggests trajectories to dismantle white normativity by recognizing EMMs as full members of the political community and actively committing to antiracism (also, in the party's internal code of conduct). In the Nordic context, where people seen as non-white are repeatedly perceived 'perpetual outsiders' or 'eternal immigrants'. (Lundström &

Teitelbaum, 2017, p. 151), this potentially challenges the image of the white nation as a standard for the political community.

Our analysis of white normativity provides new perspectives to discussions on gatekeeping in candidate recruitment and selection. Our findings should encourage future analyses of EMM underrepresentation in Nordic politics to consider how white normativity potentially shapes institutional cultures. White normativity is reproduced not only by explicitly excluding EMMs but also naturalizing the reasons why they are not included, and to some extent, reducing EMM candidates as tokens of diversity who have no other role than to contribute to the image of ‘a diverse party’. In other words, our analysis prompts an interest to explore further how whiteness as a norm shapes access to power within party organizations.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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