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ARTICLE

From Civil Society to City Hall: CSO Membership, Entry into Politics, and Local Elected Officials' Social Group Priorities

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Abstract

How does prior membership in civil society organizations (CSOs) shape the social groups' priorities of local politicians? This study examines the relationship between membership in civil society organizations (CSOs) – including labour unions, youth organizations, women's organizations, seniors' associations, business associations, and others – and the social groups that local representatives claim to prioritize in their policymaking. Using 2022 survey data from 591 locally elected officials in Flanders, covering cities to rural municipalities, we demonstrate that a large majority (82%) were members of at least one organization prior to running for office, with many holding leadership positions. Our analysis then examines whether different types of civil society membership, such as union membership or participation in youth organizations, are associated with a stronger focus on the representation of specific social groups, including people in poverty, the elderly, local businesses, women, and young people. The findings offer new insights into how civil society organizations serve as recruitment channels for politics and may shape the policy priorities of local politicians.

Keywords: Civil society organizations, Local politicians, Flanders, Entry into politics, Social group representation

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Introduction

Previous studies have highlighted the crucial role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in democracies. They primarily examined how CSOs mobilise citizens around shared interests and seek to influence public policy, thereby functioning as transmission belts between society and political decision-making (Anheier & Salamon, 2006; Bolleyer, 2021). However, through their interest representation activities, CSOs also create opportunities for citizens to develop civic and leadership skills and expand their social networks. They can socialise members to become politically active, for instance, through campaigning, leading community initiatives, or engaging in advocacy work such as contacting elected officials. For this reason, CSOs are often referred to as *schools of democracy* or informal training grounds for citizenship (Maloney, 2009; Quintelier, 2008; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2016).

This civic function makes CSOs central to candidate self-selection and political recruitment. On the one hand, civically engaged citizens may be more inclined to seek elected office themselves, having developed the necessary skills and social networks, and, conversely, those predisposed to political engagement may be more likely to join CSOs in the first place (van Ingen & van der Meer, 2016). On the other hand, parties may strategically recruit from CSOs to mobilize voters and signal responsiveness to key constituencies (Verge, 2012; Martin, 2023).

While the civic roles of CSOs and their electoral benefits to parties are well established in the literature, little is known about how CSO membership translates into political candidacies. Most research analyses the role of party elites and selectorates in candidate selection, the methods and criteria they apply, and the ambitions and characteristics of those considering political entry (e.g. Devroe et al., 2023; Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Wauters et al., 2024). This leads to our first research question (RQ1): *To what extent do politicians exhibit prior membership in CSOs before holding elected office, and which types of CSOs were they members of?*

Next to the role of CSOs for entry into politics, we also examine whether elected officials claim to prioritise the social groups they once served. Many CSOs represent specific constituencies, such as entrepreneurs, women, poor people, or youth, raising the question of whether these group-based affiliations shape political behaviour once in office. While existing research has examined CSOs' influence on policy positions (e.g., De Bruycker et al., 2025; Rasmussen & Reher, 2019), less is known about how CSO membership affects *which* social groups elected officials claim to represent (but see e.g. Kim et al., 2013). Yet this matters: Substantive representation is not only about *what* elected representatives advocate for, but also *for whom* they act (Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). Scholars have referred to these social group prioritisations as politicians' *focus of representation* (Eulau et al., 1959; Wahlke et al., 1962). As such, we interpret these claims of prioritization as signalling officials' intent to substantively represent particular social groups.

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We specifically focus on disadvantaged social groups because of their persistent underrepresentation, as policy outcomes often favour the wealthy and resourceful (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023). While existing research has shown that politicians' social backgrounds influence their policy priorities and positions, potentially serving as a corrective mechanism for the unequal representation of disadvantaged groups (Carnes & Lupu, 2023; Bailer et al., 2022), we consider prior CSO membership as an additional mechanism. Such membership can create a lasting connection between elected officials and social groups, driven by shared experiences (Phillips, 1995) or electoral incentives to remain responsive to key constituencies whose support they rely on (Broockman, 2013). Therefore, our second research question (RQ2) is: *To what extent does prior membership in CSOs influence the social groups that elected officials claim to prioritise in office?*

We draw on a 2022 survey of 591 locally elected officials in Flanders (Belgium). The Flemish local level presents a *most likely case* for finding strong associations between prior CSO membership and entry into politics. First, the low threshold to run for local elected office may encourage CSO members to self-select into politics, while parties recruit from this pool of civically active citizens to mobilise voters (Martin, 2023; Verge, 2012). Second, research suggests that due to Flanders' consociational legacy – characterised by strong pillarised ties between CSOs and parties – strong linkages between CSO membership and political recruitment persist, despite recent developments in the civil society sector (Hellemans, 2020; Van Haute et al., 2013; Van Haute & Wauters, 2019). These developments include declining membership, increasing dependence on public funding, austerity pressures, and decreasing autonomy (Bolleyer & Correa, 2022; Verschuere & De Corte, 2012).

Our descriptive results show that an overwhelming majority of local politicians (82%) were members of at least one CSO before holding office, with sport/leisure and youth associations being the most common. For centrist and left-leaning politicians, this membership served as an intrinsic motivation to stand for election or a direct recruitment channel, but less so for right-leaning ones. These patterns thus suggest that civic engagement remains a key stepping stone toward formal political participation at the local level. Our study hereby adds to the minimal literature on party candidacies at the local level (but see Grimberg & Vollaard, 2016; Otjes et al., 2020). Unlike at the national level, where formal party structures exist to identify, evaluate, and train potential candidates and where prior party-political experience is often required, local party branches typically must perform these tasks themselves in contexts where only a small pool of individuals is willing to run for local office. Evidence from the Netherlands shows that local party branches often struggle and some even fail to recruit full candidate lists (Otjes et al., 2020), and numbers from Belgium indicate that the vast majority of candidates on local lists run symbolically and have no genuine aspiration to hold office (Put et al., 2014). This highlights the

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importance of CSO members as a key source of potential candidates at the local level.

Exploratory regression analyses indicate that local politicians with experience in socioeconomic CSOs (e.g., unions, poverty associations) are more likely to claim that they prioritise the disadvantaged groups their organisations represent. This pattern is particularly pronounced among those affiliated with left-leaning parties. In contrast, identity-based CSO membership (i.e. in women's or youth associations) is associated with lower levels of such congruence across all party ideological orientations. All in all, the type of CSO membership and politicians' ideological orientations jointly shape whether politicians' priorities align with organised societal interests.

CSO Membership and Entry into Politics

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and political parties play a crucial role in democratic societies. Both fulfil similar representative functions by aggregating citizens' interests and articulating them before government (Allern, 2024; Kitschelt, 1993; Verba et al., 1995; Warren, 2001). Yet, they differ in their goals and strategies. While political parties seek to gain elected office to shape public policy, CSOs aim to influence public policy through (in)formal advocacy activities (Bolleyer, 2021; Hutter et al., 2019). Extensive research has examined the organisational ties between CSOs and political parties that shape parties' policy priorities and positions (Allern et al., 2021; Hutter et al., 2019, p. 325), as well as the strategies parties use to engage with CSOs (Martin, 2023, 2024; Verge, 2012, p. 45), such as fostering overlapping memberships and appointing CSO representatives to advisory boards and statutory councils.

However, from an individual perspective, less is known about how CSOs shape political careers. On the one hand, CSOs can function as *schools of democracy*: fostering political participation and civic skills (Quintelier, 2008; Van Deth, 1997; Verba et al., 1995; Warren, 2001). Through political socialisation (i.e. participating in a youth association may expose individuals to municipal policymaking on youth), CSO membership shapes political attitudes such as political efficacy and trust, increases political knowledge, and helps individuals develop politically relevant skills such as deliberation, negotiation, and public speaking (see also Wollebaek & Selle, 2002). A precondition for these socialisation effects to arise is, of course, *active* engagement rather than passive involvement, such as donating money (Skocpol, 2003). Yet, these socialisation effects may be expected from CSOs regardless of the level at which they operate – local, regional, or national – and whether they are overtly politically active, such as environmental associations, or apolitical groups, such as leisure associations (Baggetta, 2009; Quintelier, 2013).

On the other hand, politically engaged citizens are also more likely to join CSOs in the first place (van Ingen & van der Meer, 2016). Underlying individual (psychological)

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traits, such as extraversion, and resources, such as time and (political) knowledge, are likely to motivate citizens to participate both in civic *and* political activities. But even if citizens who are already more politically engaged join CSOs, such engagement can still further foster civic skills over time (Quintelier, 2013). Therefore, through political socialisation and self-selection, CSO membership is linked to an individual's likelihood of participating in elected politics (see also Maloney, 2009; Van der Meer & Van Ingen, 2016).

This supply-side dynamic intersects with parties' strategic demand-side incentives. From a party perspective, recruiting candidates from CSOs can potentially enhance electoral appeal. Political candidates with CSO roots might be seen as more value-driven representatives rather than opportunistic in their pursuit of office, signalling trustworthiness (Funk, 1999). Having candidates with a CSO background also helps expand a party's electoral reach, stabilise support, and demonstrate responsiveness to key constituencies, as these candidates possess and can leverage community connections (Martin et al., 2022; Verge, 2012).

Yet, little is known about how CSO membership translates into political candidacies. This is surprising because political recruitment and candidate selection determine who gains power and empowers those who select candidates. Existing studies focus on the role of party elites and selectorates in encouraging or dissuading potential candidates, the applied selection methods and criteria by these party elites and selectorates, and the political ambitions, characteristics, and attitudes of citizens (considering) entering politics (e.g., Devroe et al., 2023; Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Wauters et al., 2024). And while there is compelling evidence that civic engagement increases political participation (e.g. voting) and civic skills (Van Deth, 1997; Verba et al., 1995; Warren, 2001), few studies explicitly test how CSO membership relates to entry into politics. Therefore, this study takes a first step in addressing that gap by exploring the link between prior CSO membership and political candidacies. Our core expectation is that prior CSO membership is strongly associated with entering political office. On the supply side, existing scholarship shows that CSOs cultivate civic skills and political efficacy while also fostering self-selection into formal political engagement. On the demand side, parties often value candidates with established community networks and potential voter bases – assets that CSO members are well positioned to provide – making them more attractive to recruit. This expectation guides our exploratory study, and we hope it will serve as a foundation for future research on how CSO membership shapes entry into political office.

CSO Membership and Prioritisation of Social Groups

Civic engagement not only facilitates entry into public office but also shapes the constituencies that elected officials prioritise. We argue that elected officials' *focus*

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of representation, meaning the social groups they (claim to) prioritise in office (Eulau et al., 1959; Wahlke et al., 1962), is informed by prior CSO membership. For instance, politicians who were members of trade unions or business associations may continue to prioritise these social groups because of their ongoing personal commitment to represent their interests. This focus on individual politicians' group representation aligns with seminal work highlighting how historical party-level linkages between specific social groups and parties – such as workers and socialist parties or employers and conservative parties – were central to structuring political representation (Allern & Verge, 2017; Katz & Mair, 1995; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). These institutionalised ties stabilised political cleavages by embedding social group interests within the party system, through both ideological, value-driven (e.g. workers' rights) components and strategic, electoral components (e.g. voter mobilisation).

Yet, as far as we know, recent scholarship has given little attention to how prior membership in CSOs shapes elected officials' representational focus (but see e.g. Kim et al., 2013). The lack of attention might be partly driven by scholarly work positing that parties have become detached from civil society due to increased professionalised campaigning and the declining relevance of traditional cleavages, hindering their ability to channel voter concerns into political decision-making (e.g. Katz & Mair, 1995; Martin, 2023, 2024). McAdam and Tarrow (2013) also argue that CSO members are less likely to represent their constituents once elected, as parties collaborate with social movements prior to elections for support. Once in office, parties aim to appeal to median voters and other stakeholders, thereby refraining from making strong commitments to CSOs (Bolleyer, 2021; Maier et al., 2016; Martin, 2023). Consequently, party pressures may dilute the ties with particular social groups established through CSO membership, especially when party ideology does not align with the group's interests.

However, three arguments from existing literature suggest that, once elected, politicians with a CSO background will continue to support specific social groups associated with these CSOs. First, at the individual level, studies highlight the strong normative commitment of elected officials to causes related to their former associations (Celis et al., 2009; O'Neill and White, 2018; Quintelier, 2008). CSOs socialize and train members within a specific ideological framework, which shapes their political engagement and convictions (Hutter et al., 2019; Maloney, 2009; Quintelier, 2008).

Second, at the party level, previous studies have shown that CSOs maintain relations with political parties to pressure former members in office to continue advocating for their causes and to hold them accountable for remaining responsive to the CSOs they once served. Political parties, in turn, sustain these connections through party members involved in CSOs, or by inviting CSO members to advisory boards (Martin, 2023; Verge, 2012). Strategic incentives reinforce this pattern: Recent empirical evidence shows a clear electoral payoff for appeals to social groups. For instance,

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Robinson and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that parties' appeals to the working class result in greater overall support from working-class voters and help voters understand a candidate's representational priorities.

Finally, entry into politics itself operates at the intersection of individual and party factors. CSO members are recruited not only for their civic and leadership skills and social embeddedness, but also for their ideological alignment with the party (Bolleyer, 2021; Martin et al., 2022; Quintelier, 2008). Moreover, candidates often self-select into politics because of their intrinsic motivation to represent the social groups affiliated with their CSOs. For instance, O'Neill and White (2018, p. 13) show that union members recruited by the UK Labour party made "the political system more representative in terms of social interests". This implies that elected officials with a (previous) union membership have both intrinsic and strategic electoral incentives to prioritize these groups.

Building on this, we examine whether prior CSO membership can serve as an additional corrective mechanism to the well-documented biases in policy representation (see Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023). Rather than analysing policy outcomes, we examine which social groups elected officials claim to prioritise and whether CSO membership is associated with a greater focus on *disadvantaged* groups. After all, the fact that policy outcomes tend to favour the wealthy and resourceful does not necessarily imply that elected politicians primarily intend to cater to these groups' interests in the first place.

We define disadvantaged groups as those with a disadvantaged structural position in society due to age (e.g. children, the elderly), disability or illness, socioeconomic status (e.g. people in poverty), or minority status (e.g. refugees) who are typically underrepresented in political institutions (Mansbridge, 1999). However, one widely discussed mechanism to reduce this inequality is descriptive representation: elected officials who share the background characteristics of these disadvantaged groups and can therefore be intrinsically as well as electorally motivated to represent the interests of these groups (Broockman, 2013; Carnes & Lupu, 2023; Stockemer & Sundström, 2025; Wüst, 2014).

In this regard, prior research has demonstrated that MPs from disadvantaged backgrounds often focus on relevant policy issues. For instance, studies show that migrantised MPs focus on migration topics (Bailer et al., 2022), younger Japanese mayors are more inclined to allocate spending to child welfare (McClean, 2025), and when working-class MPs were more numerous in the UK Labour party, this resulted in better advocacy for working-class voters (O'Grady,2019). Yet studies also conclude that this effect can be limited by factors such as the lower voter turnout among specific social groups or the increasing parliamentary seniority of MPs with a disadvantaged background (Bailer et al., 2022; Hahn, 2024; McClean, 2025). Descriptive representation alone might thus not alleviate inequalities in representation.

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We therefore examine CSO membership as another potential channel for mitigating representational biases. CSO ties may strengthen an elected official's focus on disadvantaged or underrepresented citizens, as suggested by findings that CSO mobilisation increases the alignment of elected officials' positions with low-SES citizens' views (De Bruycker et al., 2025) and that the political mobilisation of labour unions advances the interests of low-income groups in policymaking (Weisstanner & Jensen, 2024). CSOs often represent various disadvantaged social groups, such as youth, the elderly, people with disabilities or illnesses, and refugees, whose voices remain frequently unheard. For reasons outlined above, we expect that CSO membership can help mitigate inequality in representation by making elected officials more prone to prioritise disadvantaged social groups. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: *Politicians who were CSO members are more likely to claim to prioritise the (disadvantaged) social groups linked to those CSOs than those who were not members.*

The strength of these commitments likely hinges on party ideology, which provides the normative framework through which elected officials interpret their representational role and assess the legitimacy and pragmatism of prioritising certain social groups. Left-wing parties – both established (i.e. social democrats) and newer parties (e.g. greens) – tend to (historically) maintain closer and more institutionalized ties with CSO than right-wing parties (Martin et al., 2022, p. 1385). This enduring relationship suggests that the "logic of constituency representation" (Kitschelt, 1989) is central to the core identity and strategy of left-wing parties. This makes left-wing elected officials more receptive to prioritising social groups associated with their CSOs (Martin, 2023). In this regard, recent empirical evidence on party platforms and politicians' Facebook posts highlights the diverging social groups parties claim to represent based on their ideological orientation. For instance, left-wing parties are more likely to appeal to employees or workers and poor people (e.g. Damhuis & Karremans, 2017; De Mulder et al., 2024; Thau, 2018), whereas right-wing parties tend to appeal more positively to business owners (e.g. De Mulder et al., 2024; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: *Left-leaning politicians who were CSO members are more likely than their right-leaning counterparts to claim to prioritise disadvantaged groups.*

Furthermore, the type of CSO may matter. Socio-economic CSOs, such as labor unions and welfare associations, often have stronger institutional ties with political parties than identity-based organizations, like youth and women's associations (Martin, 2024; O'Neill & White, 2018). Second, socio-economic CSOs, also referred

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to as the principal interlocutors of governments, are often larger organisations (e.g. peak associations), more resourceful, and more embedded in formal institutions and policymaking compared to identity-based organisations (Martin, 2024; Willems et al., 2021). As a result, elected officials with backgrounds in socio-economic CSOs may be more likely to sustain group-based commitments in office. This expectation is also grounded in recent empirical evidence indicating that socioeconomic cleavages continue to dominate electoral competition. Thau (2019) finds that appeals to socioeconomic groups remain a dominant and stable feature in UK party platforms over time. In contrast, identity-based appeals – such as those related to gender or ethnicity – did not show a notable rise in emphasis. Complementing this, De Mulder and colleagues (2024) demonstrate that Belgian politicians frequently refer to socioeconomically defined groups in their Facebook posts over 10 years, whereas this is not the case for identity-based appeals. Applied to our study, these latter results suggest that elected officials with ties to socioeconomic CSOs might be particularly prone to claim to prioritise the associated social groups because these societal segments are electorally salient. Taken together, these findings on elected officials' strong ties to socioeconomic CSOs in general, along with the results of claims-making studies, lead us to expect that those with prior membership in socioeconomic CSOs will be more likely to claim to prioritise associated social groups than those officials with prior membership in identity-based CSOs or those without CSO experience. This leads to our third hypothesis:

H3: *Politicians with prior membership in socioeconomic CSOs are more likely to claim to prioritise the associated disadvantaged social groups than those affiliated with identity-based CSOs or those who were not CSO members.*

Case Selection, Data, and Method

To answer our research questions and explore our expectations, we focus on CSOs and locally elected officials in Flanders. Our focus on the *local* level is motivated by three substantive reasons. First, local politics often provides early opportunities for political socialisation where civic engagement can serve as a stepping stone to elected office (Martin, 2023; Verge, 2012). In contrast to the national level, where established party organisations are responsible for identifying, vetting, and preparing prospective candidates, local party branches generally must undertake these tasks on their own (Grimberg & Vollaard, 2016; Otjes et al., 2020). Given the often limited number of individuals willing to contest local elections, members of CSOs may become an especially valuable source of potential candidates. Moreover, local parties can instrumentalise existing local networks of (societally engaged) citizens to attract voters through recruiting skilled candidates from CSOs (Martin, 2023). The electoral payoff

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is particularly relevant at the local level because candidates embedded in CSOs bring a high voter turnout potential and direct alignment with local concerns – factors that matter more when (national) party labels matter less and personal reputation, performance, and community embeddedness are key factors explaining vote choice (Dodeigne et al., 2022). This trend is particularly relevant since voters can express preferences for individual candidates on a semi-open list.

Second, due to multiple state reforms and decentralization processes in Belgium over the past decades, local governments have been granted more policy autonomy. As a result, local politicians can significantly shape local political agendas and support specific social groups (Martin, 2023; Van Haute & Wauters, 2019). In Belgium's strong party system, this also means that local elected officials actively contribute to shaping the national party agenda (e.g. through priority setting, leadership selection, and intra-party engagement). This suggests that concerns from specific social groups within CSOs can be channelled upwards into national political discourse and party platforms.

Third, Flanders itself represents a most likely case due to its historically pillarised civil society, in which a plethora of labour unions, youth associations, women's organisations, and other grassroots CSOs have longstanding ties to political parties (Hellemans, 2020; Martin, 2023; Van Haute & Wauters, 2019). At the same time, research shows that Flemish CSOs have undergone substantial transformation in recent decades: declining volunteer engagement in some sectors, growing dependence on public funding, and reduced autonomy under market-oriented governance and austerity pressures (Pauly et al., 2021; Suykens et al., 2019; Verschuere & De Corte, 2014). These developments have altered, though not erased, the robust linkages between CSOs and political parties. Indeed, research on the Christian democrats, socialists, and liberal party – the so-called pillar parties – confirms that their members maintain extensive ties to CSOs and remain embedded in their own sociological worlds despite the decline of rigid pillarisation and the transformations described (Van Haute et al., 2013). These institutionalised ties may thus help explain why CSO backgrounds – especially those rooted in socioeconomic organisations – continue to shape the path-dependent entry of local politicians into politics and the social group priorities they pursue. For these substantive reasons, we contend that Flanders is a most likely case for finding strong associations between prior CSO membership, entry into politics, and social group prioritisation. Combined with the large sample size of local elected officials, the Flemish local level serves as an ideal testing ground for our expectations.

The exploratory descriptive (RQ1) and regression (RQ2) analyses use data from 591 local Flemish politicians surveyed between May 4 and June 15, 2022, including information on their membership in various CSOs, ideological orientation, prioritisation of social groups, and demographic characteristics. A total of 904 of the 6,911

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contacted politicians completed the survey, yielding a response rate of approximately 13%. It is important to note that the contact information was collected in 2018, and many of the listed politicians had since left office. This attrition likely contributed to the relatively low response rate. The final total of 591 respondents is achieved after omitting missing values across the board. The sample includes politicians from all provinces and across the ideological spectrum. Most respondents (70%) were municipal council members; 30% served as mayors or alderpersons. Regarding gender, 33% of the respondents were women and 67% were men. Regarding geographic distribution, 54% of respondents reside in rural areas, 25% in suburban areas, and 21% in urban areas. The average respondent is approximately 54 years old and has nearly 12 years of political experience, with ages ranging from 23 to 80 and seniority from 2 to 47 years. Finally, out of all respondents, 17% have a low level of education, 40% a middle level (completed secondary school), and 42% a high level of education (post-secondary, tertiary). In what follows, we describe the variables included in the exploratory regression analyses (RQ2).

Dependent variables

First, a binary variable indicating whether the politician claimed to prioritise any disadvantaged social groups was created, derived from survey items covering relevant social groups. Specifically, we asked respondents: "Do you have a particular commitment to the interests of specific social groups?" From a closed-ended list, politicians could select up to three of the following social groups: people in poverty, ethnocultural minorities, women, young families, LGBTQ individuals, youngsters, the elderly, individuals with disabilities, local businesses, refugees, other groups, or none of the above. Then the following were classified as disadvantaged: people in poverty, ethnocultural minorities, LGBTQ, youngsters, the elderly, ill persons, persons with disabilities, and refugees. As a result, 18% of respondents did not claim to prioritise any of these disadvantaged groups, while 82% did. However, social desirability bias may be at play due to the closed-ended list format and the focus on disadvantaged groups. Respondents may have been more likely to report prioritising disadvantaged groups in alignment with social norms and priming effects.

To verify the robustness of our findings, we constructed a second, more conservative measure: a binary indicator of congruence between politicians' CSO membership and whether they explicitly claimed to prioritise the disadvantaged social groups typically associated with those specific CSOs. We define CSOs as formally organised, voluntary associations that pursue collective goals, including societal change, political influence, or community service delivery, and that operate independently from the government and commercial market actors (Salamon & Anheier, 1997). Our operationalisation reflects this breadth of activities; we include leisure associations (e.g. sports clubs, socio-cultural associations), cause-oriented groups (e.g. environmental

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and human rights groups), identity-based organisations (e.g. women's groups, youth associations, LGBTQ associations), business and professional associations (e.g. small business networks), and labour unions. While some of these organisations are overtly politically active, others are only latently so. Nevertheless, all could foster civic and leadership skills in society (political socialisation; schools of democracy) and/or in all types of CSOs, citizens who are more predisposed to engage politically are likely to be members (self-selection).

Specifically, we asked respondents: "Were you, before standing for local elected office, active within one or more of these listed CSOs?" They could indicate whether they were a member of any of the following CSOs: labour union, ethnocultural or religious association, environmental association, rural association, youth organisation, poverty organisation, women's organisation, social welfare and health association, local business association, Global South, elderly organisation, neighbourhood initiative, leisure or sports association, peace or human rights association, service club, other, and no membership. Respondents could be members of multiple CSOs. The number of CSO memberships ranges from none to nine, with most politicians reporting membership in one (29%), two (27%), or three (18%) organisations. About 18% reported no prior membership, while higher levels of civic engagement (four or more memberships) were rare, accounting for 11% of our sample. Congruence was coded as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of congruence coding

CSO Type	Congruent social group(s)
Labour union	People in poverty, elderly, ill
Ethnocultural or religious association	Ethnocultural minorities
Youth organisation	Youngsters
Elderly association	Elderly
Women's organisation	Women
Social welfare & health association	Ill, Persons with disabilities
Local business association	Local business
Poverty organisation	People in poverty
Global South and Peace or human rights association	Refugees
Environmental association, Rural association, Neighbourhood initiatives, Leisure or sports associations, Service club and No membership.	*No match*

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The coding of congruence between CSO membership and group prioritisation is based on the beneficiary groups commonly associated with each CSO type. For instance, labour unions are typically linked to the representation of low-income individuals, the elderly, and those with health vulnerabilities, while ethnocultural associations advocate for ethnocultural minorities, and youth or women's organisations centre their activities on their respective demographic groups. In contrast, CSOs without a clear link to specific, delineated societal segments – such as environmental associations, leisure clubs, or neighbourhood initiatives – were not matched to any target group. This matching approach reflects established patterns in the literature on CSO advocacy domains (e.g. Martin, 2024; O'Neill & White, 2018; Willems et al., 2019), allowing us to assess whether politicians' social group priorities align with the core constituencies of the CSOs to which they belonged. Ultimately, 70% of respondents reported prioritising congruent social groups, while 30% did not.

CSO Membership (Type)

Based on the detailed question about CSO membership, we created a dummy variable distinguishing those who were CSO members before holding elected office from those who were not. Eighteen percent were not members, while 82% were members. Second, the binary indicators for membership in the above types of CSOs were also recoded into two broad categories: *Socioeconomic* (including labour unions, poverty, social welfare, and local business associations) vs. *Identity-based* (including women, youth, ethnocultural, Global South associations*),* leaving out those CSOs that could not be easily classified (i.e. Environmental association, Rural association, Neighbourhood initiatives, Leisure or sports associations, Service club). This makes for 45% identity-based associations and 55% socioeconomic associations.

Ideological Orientation

Left-right ideological orientation was measured based on the following question: "In politics, people sometimes speak of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place your local party on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means your party is left-wing and 10 means your party is right-wing?" and categorized into *Left (values 0 to 3)*, *Centre (values 4 to 6; reference)*, and *Right (values 7 to 10)*. This results in 24% of respondents belonging to left-wing parties, while 46% are centrists and 30% belong to right-wing parties.

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Controls

In addition, in all models we control for politicians' social background characteristics, which prior research has shown can shape representational priorities (Bailer et al. 2022; Carnes & Lupu, 2023). These include gender (women vs. men), age (derived from birth year), region (urban, suburban, rural), education level (low, middle, high), religiosity (yes/no derived from a self-reported affiliation or worldview), and migration background (politician, parent, or any grandparent born outside Belgium vs. all born in Belgium). Additionally, we control for political seniority (years in office) and political mandate (executive [mayor and alderpersons] vs. council members).

Importantly, we control for the number of social groups each politician claimed to prioritise in our robustness checks; politicians who claimed to prioritise more social groups may appear more congruent simply because of their broader reach. In our sample, 13% of politicians claimed to prioritise one social group, 23% claimed to prioritise two, and 63% claimed to prioritise three. Only 1% of politicians claimed to prioritise four or more groups. To address the right-skewed distribution of the number of social groups claimed to be prioritised by politicians, we apply a square root transformation. This approach reduces the influence of extreme values while preserving the variable's continuous nature. We apply the same logic to control for the number of CSOs in which respondents reported membership. Politicians with multiple CSO affiliations may also appear more congruent, given their broader civic engagement.

Descriptive Analyses: Local Elected Officials' Prior CSO Membership and Entry into Politics

To address our first research question – *To what extent do politicians exhibit prior membership in CSOs before holding elected office, and what types of CSOs were they involved in?* – we analysed patterns of pre-electoral civic engagement among local representatives. Figure 1 presents data on how local politicians were initially encouraged to run for office. A majority (61%) reported being recruited by someone within a political party. Another 12% were encouraged by family, friends, or acquaintances, while 27% took the initiative themselves. These findings broadly align with prior research on political recruitment mechanisms (Hazan & Rahat, 2010).

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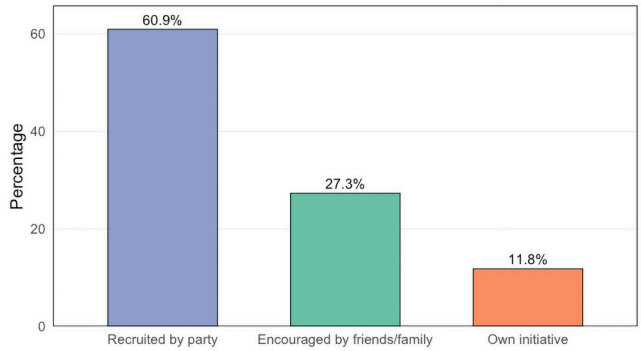


Figure 1. Initial Motivation to Run for Office

Moreover, political parties were already familiar to many respondents: 60% were party members at the time they decided to run in local elections. Among these party members, 46% had been members for less than five years, 26% for five to ten years, and 28% for over a decade. However, 40% of candidates had not yet joined the party for which they eventually ran, indicating that formal membership is not a prerequisite for local candidate recruitment in all cases.

Despite the central role of political parties, our primary focus lies on the role of CSO membership for political recruitment and/or self-selection into politics. Previous studies suggest that politically engaged citizens often gain visibility through civic organisations and are subsequently approached by parties. At the same time, CSOs have been described as 'schools of democracy', fostering the skills and networks conducive to political engagement. Our data support this view. An overwhelming 82% of surveyed local representatives indicated that they were members of at least one CSO prior to their political candidacy. Figure 2 displays the types of organisations involved. The most frequently cited were leisure and sports clubs (46%), youth organisations (34%), neighbourhood or community initiatives (13%), and labour unions (10%). Overall, the wide range of membership suggests that local politicians emerge from a diverse set of CSOs.

Notably, civil society membership was often intensive. Seventy-seven percent of respondents held a board or leadership position in at least one organisation at the time of their first candidacy. This finding underlines the formative role of civic leadership in political socialisation.

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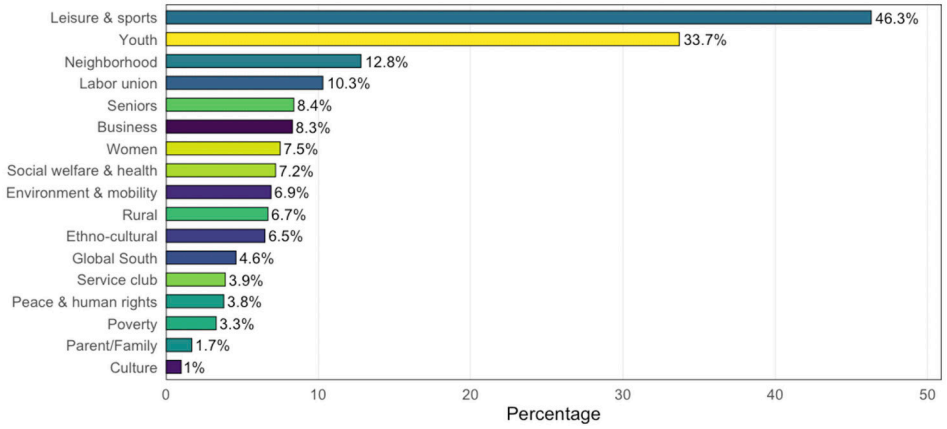


Figure 2. Prior Membership by Type of CSO

However, civic engagement tends to decline once candidates enter elected office: While 40% of respondents still hold a leadership position, a third (33%) are no longer active in CSOs in any capacity. Of those who continue their involvement, 10% are active annually, 11% quarterly, 20% monthly, and 27% weekly or more frequently, indicating a substantial overlap between political and civic life at the local level.

To further assess whether civil society served as a channel of recruitment or a source of intrinsic motivation, we asked respondents who had CSO experience: *What role did your civic engagement play in your decision to run for office?* Forty percent reported being recruited by a political party as a direct result of their civic engagement. Another 23% cited civic participation as an intrinsic motivation to seek office, and 37% said their CSO membership played no role.

The data also reveal differences in how civil society membership affects political recruitment and motivation to stand for office across the ideological spectrum, as demonstrated in Figure 3. For politicians affiliated with centrist parties, membership in civil society organisations plays a particularly significant role: Over half (50.4%) reported being recruited by their party due to their involvement in CSOs, and an additional 21.5% indicated that such membership was an intrinsic motivation for their candidacy. This suggests that civil society acts both as a recruitment channel and a motivational force for centrists. Among left-leaning politicians, the influence of CSO membership is also notable, though somewhat less pronounced, with 36.3% recruited through their civil society ties and 26.7% motivated intrinsically by their involvement. Conversely, for right-leaning politicians, civil society membership appears less central: A majority (51.2%) stated that it did not matter in their decision to run, and only about a quarter were recruited by their party based on their CSO activities (26.2%) or were intrinsically motivated (22.7%).

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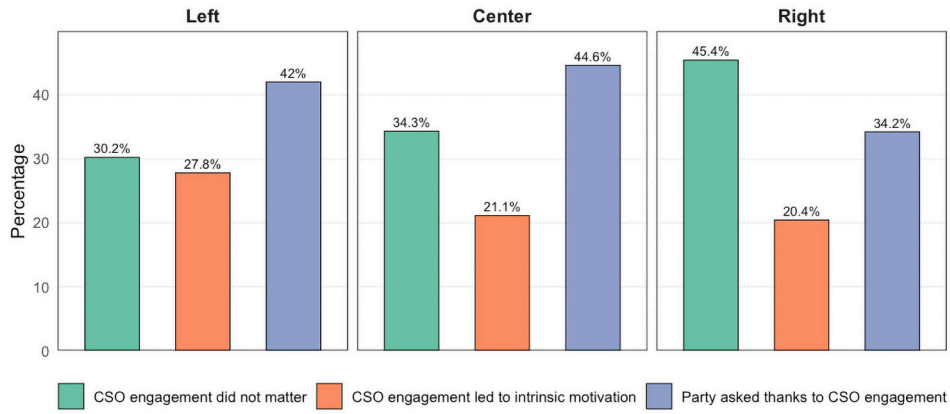


Figure 3. Role of CSO Membership to Stand for Elected Office, by Left-Right Party Ideology

These patterns suggest that while civil society remains a significant gateway into politics for left- and centre-leaning politicians, the right relies more on alternative pathways to elected office, highlighting the varying roles of civic engagement across party-political ideologies.[3] A Chi-squared test confirms these significant differences in how civil society organisations (CSOs) shape political engagement across party families ($\chi^2 = 32.84$, df = 4, $p < .001$).

To answer our second explanatory research question – *To what extent does prior membership in civil society organisations affect the social groups that politicians claim to prioritise in office?* – we first examined which social groups local representatives report actively supporting. As illustrated in Figure 4, the most frequently prioritised groups were the people in poverty (30%), youth (25%), and the elderly (25%). Other commonly cited constituencies include local businesses (21%), young families (18%), and people with disabilities (16%). Notably, underprivileged groups – such as refugees (8%), ethnic minorities (8%), LGBTQ+ individuals (6%), and the ill (6%) – were mentioned less frequently. These results suggest that prior membership in civil society may incline local representatives to advocate for broadly defined, often socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, but less so for groups typically associated with identity-based

3 Politicians' left-right self-placement and their parties' left-right placement largely coincide (78%-82% overlap), but some divergences exist. Notably, about one in ten politicians from centre parties place themselves on the left, and another one in ten place themselves on the right. Those whose personal ideological orientation diverges from their party's left-right orientation report CSO membership as an entry route somewhat more frequently than their aligned peers: 49% for aligned centrists, compared to 57% for centre-left and 54% for centre-right combinations.

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politics. While women were not frequently named as a priority group by local officials (8%), their position contrasts sharply with that of other under-prioritised identity-based groups. Unlike refugees or LGBTQ+ individuals, whose lower prioritisation often reflects marginal political influence, women benefit from strong institutional mechanisms such as gender quotas and mainstreaming policies (Devroe et al., 2020; Meier, 2012). This might suggest that women's interests are often advanced through structural channels rather than through explicit prioritisation.

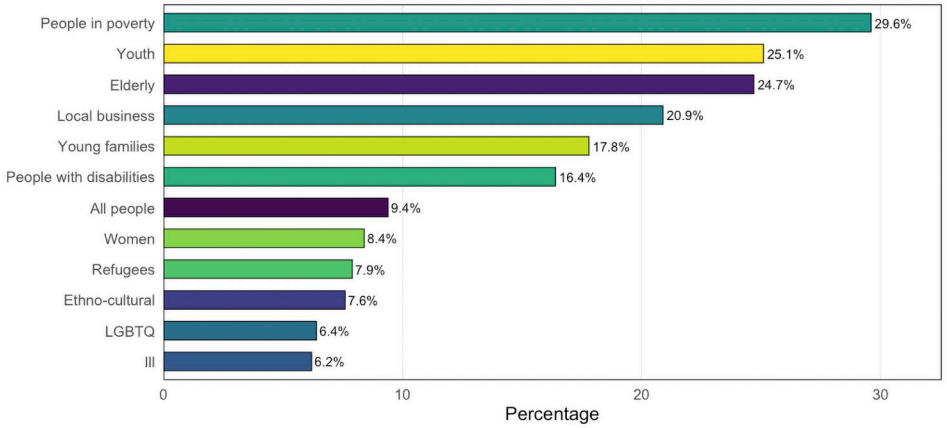


Figure 4. Social Group Priorities

This ranking of prioritised groups shows similarities between local officials and national politicians, with youth, families, and the elderly appearing prominently in both (see De Mulder et al., 2024). However, migrants, for instance, rank much higher in national politicians' social media claims than refugees do among local officials' stated priorities, highlighting differences in the salience of some groups across government levels (which might be attributed to the policy competencies of each level).

As shown in Figure 5, the data also reveal ideological patterns in the social groups claimed to be prioritised by local elected officials. Representatives from left-leaning parties were considerably more likely to claim to prioritise people in poverty (25%), ethno-cultural minorities (11%), and refugees (8%) than their centre and right-wing colleagues. In contrast, politicians from right-leaning parties exhibit a stronger orientation toward local businesses (18%) and the elderly (16%), while showing minimal engagement with ethno-cultural (1%) and refugee groups (3%). Centre parties display a more balanced distribution, with notable prioritisation of youth (15%), the elderly (14%), people in poverty (15%), and local businesses (12%).

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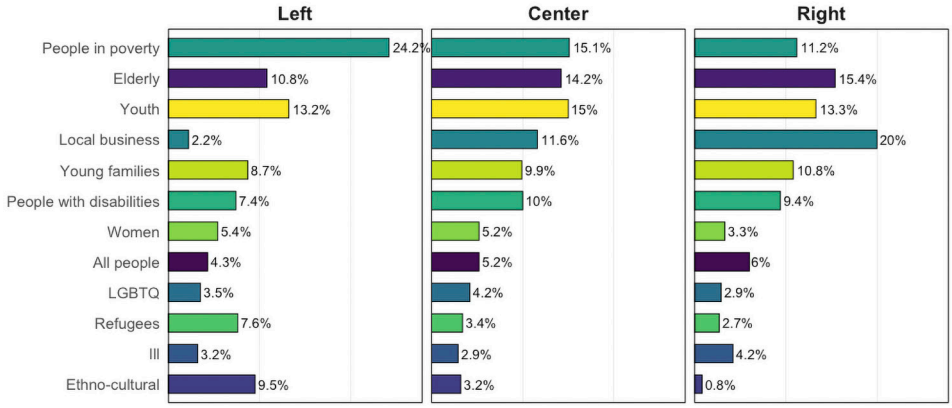


Figure 5. Social Group Priorities by Left-Right Party Ideology

Regression Analyses: Prior CSO Membership and Social Group Priorities

We estimated logistic regression models to assess the relationship between CSO membership (type) and party ideology and the likelihood of prioritising disadvantaged social groups. The models control for gender, age, seniority, region, education, and political mandate. Table 2 presents an initial analysis of whether prior CSO membership increases the propensity of locally elected politicians to focus on disadvantaged groups. To examine potential conditional effects, we included interaction terms between CSO membership and the parties' ideological orientations.

The logistic regression analysis in Model 1 indicates that prior CSO membership is significantly associated with a higher likelihood of prioritising disadvantaged groups, as indicated by a positive, statistically significant coefficient (0.571, $p < 0.05$). This confirms Hypothesis 1: politicians with prior CSO experience were more likely to claim to prioritise the (disadvantaged) social groups linked to those CSOs than those who were not CSO members. Next, party ideology also plays a significant role: local politicians from left-wing parties were significantly more likely to claim to prioritise disadvantaged groups than those from right-wing parties (1.300, $p < 0.001$), while those from centrist parties did not differ significantly. The control variables – gender, age, seniority, region, education, religiosity, migration background, and political mandate – do not show statistically significant effects.

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Table 2. Prioritization of Disadvantaged Social Groups

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	*S.E.*	*Estimate*	*S.E.*	*Estimate*	*S.E.*
CSO member (yes)	0.571*	(0.309)	0.423	(0.503)	-	-
CSO type (ref.=No member)	-	-	-	-	-	-
– Identity	-	-	-	-	0.399	(0.341)
– Socioeconomic	-	-	-	-	0.773*	(0.365)
– Other	-	-	-	-	0.605	(0.385)
Party ideology (ref.=Right)	-	-	-	-	-	-
– Centre	0.293	(0.250)	-0.026	(0.615)	0.293	(0.251)
– Left	1.300***	(0.370)	1.437	(0.886)	1.304***	(0.374)
Controls						
Gender (men)	0.001	(0.247)	-0.010	(0.248)	0.017	(0.248)
Age	0.006	(0.010)	0.006	(0.010)	0.003	(0.011)
Seniority	-0.017	(0.013)	-0.017	(0.013)	-0.015	(0.013)
Region (ref.=rural)	-	-	-	-	-	-
– Suburban	-0.061	(0.275)	-0.051	(0.276)	-0.088	(0.277)
– Urban	-0.059	(0.311)	-0.053	(0.311)	-0.083	(0.313)
Education (ref.=low)	-	-	-	-	-	-
– Middle	-0.294	(0.351)	-0.303	(0.351)	-0.290	(0.352)
– High	-0.427	(0.358)	-0.438	(0.358)	-0.388	(0.360)
Religiosity (yes)	0.415	(0.243)	0.396	(0.245)	0.396	(0.245)
Migration background (yes)	0.256	(0.350)	0.246	(0.350)	0.278	(0.352)
Political mandate (Executive)	-0.276	(0.246)	-0.290	(0.247)	-0.291	(0.248)
Interaction						
CSO member*Party ideology Center	-	-	0.378	(0.671)	-	-
CSO member*Party ideology Left	-	-	-0.183	(0.964)	-	-
Constant	0.717	(0.724)	0.870	(0.806)	0.878	(0.736)
Model fit						
Observations	591		591		591	
Log Likelihood	-257.869		-257.610		-257.095	
AIC	543.738		547.220		546.191	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

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Model 2 introduces interaction terms between CSO membership and party ideology to examine whether the effect of CSO membership varies across political ideologies. These interaction terms are not statistically significant. This rejects Hypothesis 2: Left-leaning politicians with prior CSO experience were not more likely than their right-leaning counterparts to claim to prioritise (disadvantaged) groups. The findings thus underscore the independent effects of civil society membership and left-leaning ideological orientation on local politicians' attention to disadvantaged social groups.

Finally, Model 3 further refines the analysis by distinguishing between different types of CSOs. The results indicate that membership in socioeconomic CSOs is significantly associated with a higher likelihood of prioritising disadvantaged groups (0.773, $p < 0.01$). While the coefficients for identity-based and other CSOs are positive, they are not statistically significant. This confirms Hypothesis 3: Politicians with prior membership in socioeconomic CSOs were more likely to claim to prioritise the associated (disadvantaged) social groups than those affiliated with identity-based CSOs or those who were not CSO members. Not all forms of civic engagement are thus equally important for prioritising (disadvantaged) social groups. Notably, the effect of left-wing ideological orientation remains robust and statistically significant across models.

To assess the robustness of our findings and probe the substantive link between civic engagement and social group prioritisation, we constructed a more conservative measure of membership-priority congruence. This binary indicator captures whether politicians who reported CSO membership also claimed to prioritise social groups typically associated with those organisations, such as poverty organisations and people in poverty, or women's associations and women. In Table 3, we examine whether, among politicians with CSO experience (n = 393), those affiliated with specific types of CSOs (e.g. youth, poverty, local business) are more likely to exhibit congruence with the beneficiaries commonly associated with each type of CSO. To ensure theoretical validity, the analysis includes only respondents for whom a plausible link between CSO type and social group prioritisation was identifiable; others were excluded. We also include interaction terms between CSO type and left-right ideology to explore whether this alignment is conditioned by political ideology. A more fine-grained analysis of individual CSO types, beyond the broader categorisation into socio-economic and identity-based groups, is provided in Appendix A.

The results in Model 1 reveal that membership in socioeconomic CSOs remains a strong and significant predictor of congruence, indicating that politicians affiliated with these organisations were more likely to claim to prioritise social groups aligned with their CSOs' interests (1.544, $p < 0.001$). Left-right ideological orientation does not appear to influence prioritising congruent social groups based on CSO membership. Among the control variables, age and political seniority are negatively associated with prioritising congruent social groups.

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Table 3. Congruence Between the Type of CSO and Social Group Priorities

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Estimate	*S.E.*	*Estimate*	*S.E.*
CSO type: Socioeconomic	1.544***	(0.299)	1.274**	(0.472)
Party ideology (ref.=Right)	-	-	-	-
– Centre	0.553	(0.306)	0.451	(0.408)
– Left	0.523	(0.354)	0.193	(0.460)
Controls				
Number of social groups prioritised (ref.=One)	-	-	-	-
– Two	1.373***	(0.384)	1.377***	(0.340)
– Three or more	2.140***	(0.336)	2.147***	(0.340)
Number of CSO memberships (ref.=One)	-	-	-	-
– Two	0.332	(0.338)	0.307	(0.339)
– Three	0.325	(0.382)	0.310	(0.384)
– Four or more	0.417	(0.429)	0.402	(0.432)
Gender (men)	-0.041	(0.270)	-0.040	(0.271)
Age	-0.033**	(0.013)	-0.033**	(0.013)
Seniority	-0.031*	(0.015)	-0.032*	(0.015)
Region (ref.=rural)	-	-	-	-
– Suburban	0.177	(0.307)	0.225	(0.310)
– Urban	-0.275	(0.337)	-0.242	(0.340)
Education (ref.=low)	-	-	-	-
– Middle	0.389	(0.378)	0.458	(0.386)
– High	-0.002	(0.382)	0.031	(0.385)
Religiosity (yes)	0.145	(0.287)	0.150	(0.288)
Migration background (yes)	-0.144	(0.358)	-0.201	(0.364)
Political mandate (Executive)	-0.045	(0.287)	-0.020	(0.289)
Interaction				
CSO Socioeconomic * Party ideology Centre			0.189	(0.603)
CSO Socioeconomic * Party ideology Left			0.800	(0.704)
Constant	-0.408	(0.869)	-0.260	(0.898)
Model fit				
Observations	393		393	
Log Likelihood	-201.694		-200.987	
AIC	441.388		443.973	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

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Hence, unlike the prioritisation of any disadvantaged social group (i.e., Table 2), longer tenure in local office is associated with a lower likelihood of congruence with the specific social group associated with their CSO membership, possibly because of socialisation and career advancement that shifts these local officeholders' focus away from this initial group-specific representation. This is in line with prior research by Bailer and colleagues (2022), who found that legislators at the beginning of their career are more likely to represent the disadvantaged social groups with whom they share descriptive features than at the end of their career. Other factors, such as gender, region, education, and mandate type, do not show significant effects.

The interactions between CSO type and left-right ideology in Model 2 are not statistically significant, indicating that this effect is not strongly conditioned by left-right ideological alignment. Importantly, we controlled for the number of social groups respondents claimed to prioritise, as respondents were presented with a closed list of groups. This variable is strongly associated with congruence: Respondents who claimed to prioritise two groups (1.373, $p < 0.001$) or three or more groups (2.140, $p < 0.001$) were significantly more likely to show alignment with at least one of the groups typically represented by the CSOs to which they belonged.

The predicted probabilities shown in Figure 6 indicate that politicians with socioeconomic CSO backgrounds were consistently more likely to claim to prioritise congruent social groups than those from identity-based CSOs, across all party families. Among left-wing politicians, the likelihood of congruence is 0.53 compared to 0.11 for identity CSO members; for centrists, 0.45 vs. 0.15; and for right-wing politicians, 0.30 vs. 0.10. These results suggest that socioeconomic civic ties are more strongly linked to group-based prioritisation than identity-based affiliations, regardless of political orientation.

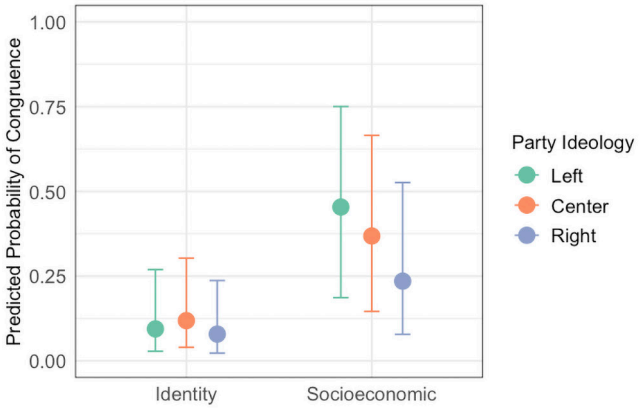


Figure 6. Predicted Probabilities of Congruence by CSO Type and Left-Right Party Ideology

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Nevertheless, the effect appears most pronounced among left-wing politicians compared to those in centre- and right-wing parties. Nonetheless, the lack of a statistically significant interaction effect suggests that these differences should be interpreted with caution. These findings underscore that not only does civic engagement shape political priorities, but the specific type of CSO membership matters – and this effect may be conditioned by left-right ideology. This highlights the nuanced pathways through which civic engagement informs the political focus on (disadvantaged) populations within local politics.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article addressed two key research questions: (1) how prior membership in civil CSOs influences political recruitment and candidate self-selection at the local level, and (2) whether such involvement shapes the social groups politicians claim to prioritise once elected. Using original survey data from 591 local politicians in Flanders, Belgium, this study takes an exploratory approach to examine the relatively under-researched links between CSO membership, political entry, and the prioritisation of social groups. Although the data are not fully representative, the identified associations offer valuable insights into how civic engagement influences political trajectories and priorities.

Our findings confirm that prior CSO membership serves as an important pathway into local politics, especially for centrist and left-leaning politicians, supporting the notion of CSOs as 'schools of democracy' that foster political socialisation and civic skills (Maloney, 2009; Quintelier, 2008), including those who are more inclined to engage politically in the first place (van Ingen & van der Meer, 2016; Quintelier, 2013). These findings also align with the notion that parties can strategically strengthen their appeal among specific constituencies and expand their voter base by recruiting candidates with CSO experiences (cf. Martin, 2023, 2024). Our study hereby adds to the minimal literature on party candidacies at the local level (but see Grimberg & Vollaard, 2016; Otjes et al., 2020). The limited pool of individuals willing to stand for local office underscores the importance of CSO members as a key pool of potential candidates. Moreover, while CSO membership may be especially important for running for local elected office and less so for national elected office (where prior party-political experience matters more), it does indirectly relate to national-level candidacies, as holding a local mandate can serve as a stepping stone for gaining regional or national elected office. Indeed, many Belgian local officeholders hold seats in regional or national parliaments (Van de Voorde, 2017). Our results thus suggest that CSO membership can serve as an entry point at the local level into a political career, further fostering civic skills and potentially leading to higher-level political mandates.

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Furthermore, politicians with socioeconomic CSO backgrounds were significantly more likely to claim to prioritise the social groups these organisations represent; this effect, albeit tentatively, is more pronounced among left-wing politicians than among their centrist and right-wing peers. This suggests that party ideology might moderate the translation of civic engagement into political priorities. These findings resonate with prior research showing that descriptive representation can influence politicians' focus on disadvantaged groups (Bailer et al., 2022; Carnes & Lupu, 2023; Stockemer & Sundström, 2025; Wüst, 2014). While politicians' social backgrounds alone only partly reduce representational inequalities (e.g. Bailer et al., 2022; Hahn, 2024; McClean, 2025), our results indicate that CSO membership may provide an alternative pathway, particularly for those more supportive of social redistribution, to carry the priorities of disadvantaged groups into office.

We can make further interesting observations by connecting findings on prior CSO membership among elected officials as a pathway to enter politics with our results on the prioritisation of specific social groups. The candidate recruitment and (self-)selection process can partly explain unequal representation in politics. When citizens from specific societal segments are less active in civil society, this may lead to less political socialisation and ultimately result in weaker political representation of these groups' interests. This dynamic is reinforced by the fact that politicians often claim to prioritise social groups that maximise their electoral appeal, thereby excluding underrepresented communities with limited civic presence. For example, we observe that ethnic minorities are only to a limited extent mentioned as a prioritised group, and this goes hand in hand with limited connections between local politicians and CSOs that represent these groups. In contrast, socioeconomic CSOs, such as labour unions and welfare associations, are (historically) more professionalised and better embedded in formal policymaking, often maintaining stronger ties with political parties (Martin, 2024; O'Neill & White, 2018; Willems et al., 2021) compared to identity-based CSOs, such as ethno-cultural associations. These advantages make them effective recruitment channels, increasing the likelihood that, when their members enter office, they advocate for their constituencies (as our results show) and potentially sustain existing inequalities in representation.

Despite these contributions, several limitations and avenues for further research remain. First, the study's focus on local politicians in Flanders may limit the generalisability of the findings to other political systems and levels of government where party structures and civil society dynamics differ. We considered Flanders to be a *most likely case*; therefore, it is plausible that in less pillarised societies, the pathways from CSO membership to elected office and substantive prioritisation of social groups may be weaker. Similarly, the strength and type of party-CSO linkages, as well as the role of electoral incentives, could vary across contexts, potentially affecting how civic engagement translates into political priorities. Future research could

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therefore explore these dynamics in varied institutional and cultural settings to better understand how context shapes the CSO-politics relationship.

Second, in this study, we measured politicians' *claims* of prioritisation rather than policy responsiveness, in line with the *focus of representation* concept (Eulau et al., 1959; Wahlke et al., 1962). We interpreted these claims as signalling officials' intentions to represent particular social groups substantively. However, future research should examine how such stated intentions translate into concrete actions and policy responsiveness.

Third, although the survey data provide solid correlational insights, we should be careful not to overstate causal claims about the effects of CSO membership on political entry or on shaping political priorities. Because our study focuses exclusively on elected officials, it cannot speak to differences between successful and unsuccessful candidates, nor to whether CSO membership increases one's chances of being elected. Future research could address this by comparing entry pathways among both winners and losers. In addition, longitudinal designs would allow scholars to assess more convincingly whether CSO membership precedes and drives the adoption of particular social group priorities over time (for a similar approach, see Bailer et al., 2022).

Fourth, our focus on disadvantaged groups rather than social groups more broadly may have limited the scope and explanatory power of the congruence analysis. It may partly explain the moderating effect observed among left-leaning politicians. The survey design also focused on specific identities without addressing intersectionality, an area that future research should consider, as it captures overlapping social group memberships and priorities better.

Additionally, social desirability bias may have influenced respondents' self-reports of prioritization. Future research could therefore use direct observational data to examine the social groups to which local officeholders appeal during council meetings or in social media posts, to explore whether this is associated with their CSO membership (cf. De Mulder et al., 2025). And while our analysis broadly distinguishes between left, centre, and right ideologies, more nuanced distinctions – such as between traditional and newer parties or local party variations – could further refine understanding. Also, adding the perspectives of party leaders and selectorates to assess the importance of CSO membership for political candidacies could be valuable. Finally, the considerable time lag between the collection of contact emails (2018) and the administration of the survey (2022) could have affected response rates and the representativeness of the sample.

Taken together, our findings highlight the importance of civil society as both a fertile ground for identifying political candidates and a source of substantive representational orientations for local officeholders. While rooted in the Flemish

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context, our findings invite further inquiry into how civic trajectories shape political behaviour at both the regional and national levels of government in Belgium and other European democracies.

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Appendix

Table A Congruence between the type of CSO and social groups prioritised

	Model 1	
	Estimate	*S.E.*
CSO Type		
– Labour union	2.548***	(0.537)
– Ethnocultural or religious	-0.818	(0.502)
– Youth	0.835*	(0.431)
– Poverty	2.706*	(1.169)
– Women	1.299*	(0.598)
– Social welfare & health	1.327*	(0.516)
– Local businesses	2.478***	(0.571)
– Global South	0.258	(0.617)
– Elderly	1.619**	(0.495)
– Peace or human rights	1.120	(0.789)
– Parent/family	2.049*	(0.998)
Ideological orientation (ref.=Right)	-	-
– Centre	0.704*	(0.328)
– Left	0.512	(0.387)
Controls		
Number of social groups prioritised (ref.=One)	-	-
– Two	1.360***	(0.394)
– Three or more	2.145***	(0.350

	Model 1	
Number of CSO memberships (ref.=One)	-	-
– Two	0.302	(0.352)
– Three	0.153	(0.443)
– Four or more	-0.377	(0.597)
Gender (men)	0.233	(0.331)
Age	-0.029*	(0.015)
Seniority	-0.037*	(0.017)
Region (ref.=rural)	-	-
– Suburban	0.335	(0.327)
– Urban	-0.115	(0.361)
Education (ref.=low)	-	-
– Middle	0.301	(0.395)
– High	0.081	(0.403)
Religiosity (yes)	0.273	(0.303)
Migration background (yes)	-0.044	(0.374)
Political mandate (Executive)	-0.074	(0.304)
Constant	-1.681	(1.094)
Model fit		
Observations	393	
Log Likelihood	-185.935	
AIC	429.870	

The logistic regression analysis in Table A reveals that the type of civil society organisation a politician is affiliated with significantly influences the likelihood of congruence. Politicians who were members of labour unions are markedly more likely to claim to prioritise corresponding social groups, with a strong and highly significant coefficient ($\beta = 2.548$, $p < 0.001$). Similar patterns emerge for politicians who joined local business associations ($\beta = 2.478$, $p < 0.001$), poverty-related organizations ($\beta = 2.706$, $p < 0.05$), elderly organisations ($\beta = 1.619$, $p < 0.001$), and parent/family groups ($\beta = 2.049$, $p < 0.05$). Significant, though somewhat smaller, positive associations are also found for politicians involved in women's organisations ($\beta = 1.299$, $p < 0.05$) and social welfare and health CSOs ($\beta = 1.327$, $p < 0.05$). Other CSO types,

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Global South and peace/human rights groups, do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance, although several show positive point estimates.

Ideological orientation also matters: Centrist politicians were significantly more likely than right-wing politicians to claim to prioritise congruent social groups ($\beta = 0.704$, $p < 0.05$), while the coefficient for left-wing politicians is positive but not statistically significant.

Furthermore, politicians who name multiple social groups as priorities are significantly more likely to show congruence. Finally, several social background characteristics also influence congruence. Older and more senior politicians are less likely to show such alignment, possibly reflecting professional distancing over time (see Bailer et al., 2022). Other factors – including gender, education, religiosity, migration background, and region – do not show statistically significant effects.

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