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The scope of active labour market policies in local labour market programmes in Swedish municipalities – driven by needs or values?

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ABSTRACT

This study takes its vantage point from the increasing decentralisation of welfare by examining the growing trend of welfare states implementing active labour market policies (ALMPs), with a focus on Sweden's municipal autonomy. Local governments often maintain their own local labour market programmes (LLMPs) despite having no central requirement, yet efforts vary significantly. Research explaining these variations is limited, but this study uses a new dataset to explore the factors driving the scope of LLMPs. It tests whether needs-driven structural characteristics or partisan value motives influence municipal ambitions. However, the findings indicate that neither unemployment levels, education, social welfare needs nor political rule explain LLMP variations. Instead, municipal size, tax rates and organisational factors play a more critical role. These results challenge conventional assumptions, revealing that ALMPs are shaped more by structural and administrative conditions than by local needs or political ideology.

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KEYWORDS Local labour market; labour market policies; local partisan conditions; local structural conditions; municipal policies

Introduction

Active labour market policies (ALMPs) constitute an increasingly important topic for welfare states. This policy area addresses the dynamics of the labour market and focuses on the essential problems of unemployment and mismatched skills. The concept refers to how various policies aim to increase labour market participation by 'activating' unemployed people through, for example, skills training, job search counselling, workplace training and

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subsidised employment (Weishaupt 2011). Systematic meta-analyses have proven such measures to be efficient for individuals' chances of gaining employment in certain contexts, a few years after completion of the programme and through programmes that emphasise human capital accumulation (Card, Kluve, and Weber 2018), with results on the whole being heterogeneous.

While research on the effects of ALMPs is extensive, it is more restrictive in explaining societies' application of ALMPs. Differences can be found regarding the extent to which such policies originate from the national government or subnational branches, but as an emerging literature stress, local welfare systems have gained an increasing role in the provision of welfare services throughout Europe (e.g., Andreotti and Mingione 2016; Scarpa 2016). This particular tendency of decentralisation, fuelled by the need to meet increasingly individualised and fragmented demands of welfare combined with ambitions of reduced national public spending, finds especially fertile ground in the Nordic context. Since this arena is the focus of this study, the central role that municipalities play in the provision of welfare services cannot be ignored (Loughlin, Hendriks, and Lidström 2012). Comparatively speaking, Nordic municipalities have extensive autonomy in a wide range of areas, not least in terms of institutional depth and discretion regarding how to organise public administration (Ladner et al. 2019). Although this is a voluntary element in the Swedish context, most municipalities pursue their own ALMPs in the form of local labour market programmes (LLMPs) (Vikman and Westerberg 2017). This localisation thereby constitutes an explicit example of the decentralisation of welfare systems (Andreotti and Mingione 2016; Scarpa 2016).

While such programmes are common in most of Sweden, their actual character varies substantially, not least regarding the municipal scope of LLMPs. Regardless of the municipal costs of such programmes, their staffing and the versatility in services provided, differences among municipalities can be noted. For example, while the cost of LLMPs in some municipalities is almost four times above the national average, there are also a few local governments that completely refrain from maintaining such welfare provisions. In this study, we investigate this variation in Swedish municipalities by raising the following research question:

- Can variations in the scope of LLMPs be explained by structural or partisan motives?

As indicated, we find two potential theoretical explanations that contrast each other. First, *structural* characteristics may influence the scope of LLMPs. These include demographics, population characteristics and the situation in the local labour market, as they can create a demand for certain policy

measures (e.g., Wilensky 1975). More explicitly, a local population characterised by higher unemployment rates and needs for social welfare can signal the need for larger LLMP demands that the local government might respond to. Delivering that could indicate a responsive democracy. Second, and potentially counter to such assumptions, the scope of LLMPs can also be motivated by differences in values due to *partisan* motives. Political parties to the left may drive the expansion of LLMPs to cater to the needs of the unemployed or the working class, while right-wing parties, in contrast, would be expected to diminish the additional public burdens of the local welfare sector (e.g., Korpi 1983).

Unfortunately, assessing such variations in the local context faces challenges regarding poor data and rough measurements, meaning that any systematic knowledge of variations in LLMPs is deficient (e.g., Forslund et al. 2019). The current study has two advantages over previous research (e.g., González-Alegre 2018; Lundin 2007; Vikman and Westerberg 2017). First, it draws on a unique dataset that has not previously been applied. This dataset contains information on municipalities' own perceptions of their LLMPs' characteristics, collected through a survey distributed to all Swedish municipalities. Second, by complementing this data with already established statistics, including official statistics of municipal accounts, a set of operationalisations regarding the scope of LLMPs can be assessed simultaneously. This increases the possibility of a valid examination of the phenomenon under study.

The Swedish context

Sweden has a long history of pursuing ALMPs. In particular, the financial crisis of 1991 enhanced the development of ALMPs, as social assistance rates increased rapidly through a combination of increased unemployment and reduced unemployment benefits (Brauer 2022; Ulmestig 2024). Although the Swedish model formally builds upon a centralised labour market policy originating from the Ministry of Employment and channelled further through the Public Employment Service (PES), municipalities have the right to pursue policies in other areas, known as 'general power' (Montin 2016). This has enabled most Swedish municipalities to maintain their own LLMPs (Vikman and Westerberg 2017).

A growing number of municipalities have developed LLMPs to supplement PES services, which many municipalities have criticised as being ineffective. Municipalities have also argued that social assistance recipients are not prioritised by the PES and the agency has had cut-backs that has limited their presence and opportunities, particularly in smaller municipalities (Lidén and Nyhlén 2023). As social assistance is a municipal responsibility in Sweden, municipalities can have incentives

to activate social assistance recipients and require their participation in LLMPs, since otherwise they would constitute a more permanent strain on the municipal budget through continued welfare payments. However, the efficiency of such policies in Sweden has been highly questioned (Calmfors, Forslund, and Hemström 2002).

Research has not focused on the fact that municipalities do not engage in this area for their own sake, but that several overarching trends in the welfare state have added pressure on the local level. This is characterised as a 'dual labour market policy', with two systems occurring concurrently – one managed by the PES for established workers who are currently unemployed and one by the municipalities for those far away from the labour market (Ulmestig 2024). This situation, combined with the diminished responsibilities of national institutions through reduced benefit levels and the limited local presence of the PES, has amplified the rescaling of ALMPs to the local level (Larsson 2015; Peck 2002). This involves individuals who are far away from the labour market and enrolled in LLMPs and is addressed by municipally based activation policies. These individuals often do not have alternative means of subsistence and are dependent on the local welfare system for financial support, and the municipalities may make such aid conditional on their enrolment in LLMPs.

Today, some ALMPs are delivered through LLMPs, with the aim of targeting social assistance recipients in cases where they are denied services by the PES or when the municipality assesses that the services provided by the PES are insufficient (Forslund et al. 2019). Few scholars have studied the substantial differences between municipal labour market policies. As these programmes are voluntary for Swedish municipalities, their adoption and expansion have varied over time (Brauer 2022). Even today, there is extensive local variation in terms of scope (Brauer 2021; Lundin 2007; Vikman and Westerberg 2017).

Theoretical points of departure

Our explanation of the scope of municipal LLMPs differs from how previous studies have modelled the influences of societal circumstances in such variations (Burić and Mrnjavac 2017) by partly transferring them to a local level and partly by closing in on two theoretical building blocks. The first building block stems from a structural point of view based on assumptions of how local population characteristics and the labour market drive demands, while the other is based on partisan theory and builds on ideas regarding how the local political rule can differ in terms of values. Taken together they present opportunities to assess the decentralisation of welfare policy.

Structural explanations

By examining the scope of municipal LLMPs, we can build on a structural entry point with a theoretical origin in structural functionalism by applying a macro perspective on how political systems evolve (e.g., Almond and Verba 1965; Easton 1965). Similar to more narrowly defined institutional theory (Hall and Taylor 1996), we emphasise a few decisive points. As policy choices ultimately depart from the behaviour of stakeholders (Nyhlén and Lidén 2014), in our case local actors, the circumstances in which they find themselves are crucial aspects that must be accounted for. First, the structural aspects of a society are placed at the forefront. There are elements of society, with various levels of formality, that structure the social world through what can be referred to as institutions. Based on the concepts of new institutionalism, this encompasses the norms and values within organisations used to explain behaviour (March and Olsen 1983). Second, such structures demonstrate endurance over time. They are not completely transient but can obviously vary in the extent of their stability. Third, such circumstances pose restrictions on actors' behaviours. That is, their options for action are constrained by societal structures (Peters 2019).

Applying a structural perspective of municipal LLMPs does not imply that the actions of individual actors are without significance, but it suggests that their behaviour, individually or collectively, should be analysed through the restrictive features of the surrounding structure (Nyhlén and Lidén 2014). For LLMPs such aspects concern the population and its characteristics. Additionally, structural factors and seemingly individual behaviour and decision-making related to labour market measures are likely to coincide on the aggregate level (Hillmert, Hartung, and Weßling 2017).

One of the most fundamental structural conditions shaping decision-making in policy concerns demographics. *Population characteristics* represent a specified perspective on vital elements. Put simply, a population within the community with characteristics that impede their labour market participation can motivate or force policymakers to take certain measures. Age, ethnic background and educational level requirements for social aid are all such factors that are well known to correlate with employment levels for both individuals and aggregated groups of the population, and they thereby provide us with a baseline scenario. If the composition of the workforce is unfavourable according to such aspects, it may encourage policymakers to expand or modify LLMPs (Burić and Mrnjavac 2017).

A more specified characterisation reflects the expected requirements of the population. Maintaining more extensive LLMPs could be assumed to constitute a response to the needs of the local population (e.g., Wilensky 1975). The most obvious indicator is the municipal *unemployment rate*. A large number of unemployed individuals in a municipality would act as

a demand for LLMPs and motivate efforts to establish them. Previous empirical studies on the occurrence of ALMPs at the national level support this concept (e.g., Rueda 2005; Tepe and Vanhuyse 2013). Tepe and Vanhuyse (2013, 491) formulate it as '*as higher levels of unemployment should lead governments to react by spending more on all forms of ALMP*'. However, the results of subnational studies on LLMPs are more ambiguous on actions taken by policymakers in such situations. While studies from Scandinavia have identified such an expected pattern (Vikman and Westerberg 2017), Spanish research has disclosed an opposite effect (González-Alegre 2018), arguing that higher levels of unemployment can have a crowding out effect on pursued LLMPs, meaning that funding instead needs to be reallocated to the core tasks of the local welfare state.

Partisan explanations

Even if structural conditions often provide an apt understanding of how policies are settled, it cannot be ignored that they are ultimately the result of political struggles and negotiations (Häusermann, Picot, and Geering 2013). Policy areas are politicised to varying degrees. For ALMPs, this issue has traditionally been categorised according to the left – right scale. In line with classic ideas about how parties located on the left of the political spectrum strive for a more extensive welfare sector (Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi 1983; Lipset 1960), a partisan component should not be ignored when examining the ambitions of LLMPs. The assumption would be that policies that lower unemployment strengthen labour as a social force and are beneficial for the working class, which would motivate parties to adopt such policies and thereby maintain support among their voters. By contrast, parties to the right would prefer less active political interference in labour market policy, while relying more on the market itself (Bergman, Müller, and Bäck 2025; Cronert 2022).

However, later research has challenged this traditional pattern and policies driven by left parties. Inserting the idea of insiders and outsiders in the labour market, Rueda (2005) argued that left-wing parties will particularly respond to the demands of insiders within labour markets. This group, which already holds highly protected jobs, will be less interested in additional spending on labour market policies. However, empirical studies at the national level have not been unanimous in their results. While some have found no effects of left-wing rule on levels of ALMPs (Rueda 2005; Tepe and Vanhuyse 2013), others have verified the traditionally assumed pattern, but at the same time disclosed that patterns are affected by the current economic situation (Bergman, Müller, and Bäck 2025)

Recent attempts to reconcile such partly opposing perspectives have emphasised the need to refine the view of ALMPs, looking at their different

targets, intended outcomes and modes of production (Cronert 2022). To this specification, we would also add that the circumstances at the local level can be different. In general, the partisan effect on local policymaking has been ambiguous (e.g., Ferreira and Gyourko 2009; Högström and Lidén 2023; Toubeau and Vampa 2021), making some authors claim that the relevance of the ideology vanishes in some subnational contexts. Oliver, Callen, and Ha (2012) applied the term managerial democracies to characterise US municipalities that often lack ideological divisions and instead revolve around certain local issues and the performance of local governments.

However, the rare Swedish examples of research examining the partisan effects on the extent of LLMPs, give some hints about an effect. Brauer (2021) some effects of the influence of ideological orientation of the *local rule* on locally applying national programmes for ALMP. Lundin (2007), though, found more stable patterns. In Lundin's analysis of LLMP spending across municipalities, more solid support for left-wing parties was associated with more substantial spending, which is particularly valid in larger municipalities and can be interpreted as an interaction effect between partisan motives and municipal size.

Hypotheses

Although the research is not united regarding the potential effects of structural and partisan conditions, we still find evidence to assume the existence of such factors regarding LLMP. Hence, to approach the research question based on theoretical motives, we identify two rival hypotheses that will guide our empirical research, distinguished by the fact that one of them originates from a needs-driven background (e.g., how structural conditions shape increasing needs) (Burić and Mrnjavac 2017; Rueda 2005; Tepe and Vanhuysse 2013), while the other originates from a value-based mode of reason (e.g., how political parties perceive this issue differently) (Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi 1983; Lipset 1960; Lundin 2007). We thus formulate the following assumptions:

H1: *Structural conditions (i.e., a population whose characteristics do not align with labour market demands, leading to higher unemployment) will make local governments more likely to pursue more extensive LLMPs.*

H2: *Partisan conditions (local rule by left-wing parties) will make local governments more likely to pursue more extensive LLMPs.*

These two theoretical building blocks differ on key points. The first refers to how policymaking initiatives originate in the way problems are identified within the community, whether by voters or local stakeholders.

The second, by contrast, emphasises how the agenda is driven by the ideology and values advanced by the ruling parties, which define what is considered important, legitimate, or desirable to address. In this perspective, policymaking is less a response to immediate societal concerns and more an expression of the governing party's political vision and normative priorities. Still, the two logics can at times coincide, for instance when community concerns align with a party's ideological agenda.

Additional explanations

There are obviously other explanations for municipal ambitions regarding LLMPs than just the abovementioned hypotheses (e.g., Burić and Mrnjavac 2017; Vikman and Westerberg 2017). We therefore find theoretical motives to control for two additional sets of predictors. The first concerns how municipalities organise their work. It can be assumed that the organisational placement of an LLMP and whether it is divided into various units can affect its scope. The second set of influencing circumstances concerns the municipality's economic conditions (e.g., Bailey, Bramley, and Hastings 2015; Webb and Bywaters 2018). Pursuing policies in this area will of course add at least short-term costs to the municipal budget, making the motivation for these programmes challenging, bearing in mind that this is not a required policy area. Hence, it must be assumed that aiming for more expansive LLMPs can be facilitated by better economic conditions.

Methods

This study draws on cross-sectional quantitative data. Three types of data are represented in the material. First, the unique survey data (gathered in 2024) create the foundation for the study and are necessary for the construction of the dependent variables. Second, the data are complemented with additional survey data on the same theme, collected annually by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR). Third, official statistics depicting the municipal sector as a whole are added to provide predictors that can explain variations across municipalities.

Description of survey data collected specifically for current study

The initial ambition of the survey, carried out in 2024, was to use census sampling covering all 290 Swedish municipalities, thereby collecting previously non-existent data about each LLMP (used Survey items can be found in the appendix). Before collection, SALAR representatives were consulted in accordance with SFS 1998:204. Online surveys were distributed by email using contact information acquired

mainly from the web pages of each municipality. Follow-up calls were made to initial non-responders. A total of 196 municipalities participated in the online survey, thus generating a basic response rate of 68% (two municipalities stated that they did not have LLMPs and were thus excluded from the total population). Overall, 2024 should be a - typical year regarding unemployment rates and other relevant indicators (see Statistics Sweden 2025).

The questionnaire consisted of eight question themes and a total of 110 items, including subcategories. Some units were drawn from established batteries, such as the political goals, management and decision-making for each LLMP; the organisation of everyday activities; and the position in the municipal organisation structure. Other questions, such as operative questions regarding client-related work, were produced solely for this purpose.

To assess the representativity of the material based on the units of analysis being, in this case, municipalities, data from SALAR were used. This offered an established classification of Swedish municipalities, consisting of three main groups (see Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth 2025).

The distribution of the material between the municipality types is illustrated in Table 1. As shown, the maximum difference between the share of material and the share of Sweden is limited to 3.7% points, indicating that the material can be considered solid in terms of representation, in that each municipality type is represented. The independent variables are displayed in Table 2.

In addition to the three-group classification, SALAR offers a more in-dept classification of nine municipality types. The data have been compared to this as well, with similar results.¹

Description of additional data sources

In addition to data collected through the survey, a set of variables was collected by other means. These mainly concerned economic and

Table 1. Distribution of participating municipalities in relation to the three main municipality types established by SALAR.

Municipality type	Frequency in collected data	Share of collected data	Frequency in Sweden	Share in Sweden	Difference, percentage points (±)
Large cities and nearby municipalities	24	1.2%	46	15.9%	3.7
Medium-sized towns and nearby municipalities	75	38.3%	110	37.9%	0.4
Small towns and rural municipalities	97	49.5%	134	46.2%	3.3
<i>Sum</i>	196	≈100%	290	≈100%	7.4

Table 2. Independent variables (variables from KOLADA and SALAR are dated 2023).

Structural explanations				
Name	Short name (in table)	Description	Measurement	Data source
Low education level	Education	Share of the municipality's population with, at most, pre-secondary education.	Share (%)	KOLADA
Unemployment	Unemployment	Unemployment rate for the share of the population aged 25–65 (this age span excludes <i>youth unemployment</i> , which is commonly considered a separate measure).	Mean share, yearly (%)	KOLADA
Residents born abroad	Foreign-born	Share of the population born outside of Sweden.	Share (%)	KOLADA
Residents living on welfare	Welfare	Share of the population (over 18) requiring municipal financial aid over a steady period of time.	Share (%)	KOLADA
Partisan explanations				
Political left rule	Left rule	Mainly left-leaning political rule in municipality, where the rule includes either the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party or the Green Party. Reference categories: cross-block rule, other.	Dummy variable	SKR
Political right rule	Right rule	Mainly right-leaning political rule in municipality, where the rule includes one or more of the following: the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, the Liberals, the Centre party and the Sweden Democrats. Reference categories: cross-block rule, other.	Dummy variable	SKR
Control variables				
Gender distribution	Gender distr.	More or less than 60% females among employees.	Dichotomous	Own survey
Standardised job descriptions	Std. job descr.	<i>Are there written and detailed job descriptions for the tasks?</i> 1 = True in more than half of the cases.	Dichotomous	Own survey
Position of LLMP in the municipality structure	LLMP position	Is the LLMP placed: 1 = In the management structure. 2 = Under the municipal executive board.	Dichotomous	Own survey
Organisation structural division	Org. division	Is the LLMP formally divided into separate units or departments? 1 = Yes 2 = No	Dichotomous	Own survey
Solvency		Assets financed through own means.	Share (%)	KOLADA
Municipal tax rate	Tax rate	Share of income collected as tax by the municipality.	Share (%)	KOLADA
Population(log)	Population	Number of people living in a given municipality.* Logarithmic due to skewed distribution.	Logarithmic number.	KOLADA
Number of participants	Participants	Number of participants associated with the LLMP.	Count	KOLADA

*This study uses general population, as opposed to the population of working age. The correlation between the two is substantial ($r_{xy} = 0.999$).

demographic conditions for the responding municipalities, such as population size, unemployment rates and tax levels. The main sources for these were Statistics Sweden (2025), Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2025) and the national database KOLADA (2025).

Analytical techniques and operationalisations

A set of variables deemed relevant to the previously mentioned theory and research was chosen and subsequently analysed in relation to relevant background variables related to demographics. Three dependent variables were selected for further analysis:

- *Activities carried out by the LLMPs own means.* This variable, collected through the survey, consists of count data, where each count represents a given activity that the LLMP carried out by its own means (hence, not through outsourcing or otherwise). Such activities include the distribution of internships, courses, support in job search and work training (cf. Forslund et al. 2019).² We argue that offering more activities to the unemployed is one valid way to measure the scope of an LLMP.
- *Full-time employees.* This variable refers to the number of people working full time throughout the year in a given LLMP, normalised by dividing it by the municipal population size (full-time employees per 1,000 inhabitants). The data were obtained through KOLADA (2025). As the staffing of the LLMP provides an indication of the objective of the unit, we perceive it as a valid measurement.
- *Cost of labour market measures.* This variable, obtained from Statistics Sweden, measures the total amount spent on local labour market measures, normalised by population size (SEK per inhabitant). One of the most appropriate ways to measure the scope of an LLMP is by looking at its cost.

Each dependent variable was subjected to simple initial correlation analysis (Pearson's r_{xy}), focusing on the relationships between the three, followed by linear regression (ordinary least square [OLS]) models for each.³ In addition to the possibility of disclosing the effects of each specified predictor on the dependent variables, this method also allowed for controlling for possible confounding relationships between independent variables (e.g., right-ruled municipalities can be expected to have higher taxes).

The independent variables originated from two different theoretical blocks in accordance with the contrasting hypotheses. The structural explanations were specified by inquiring about the importance of *unemployment* rates, and the distribution of the local population was based on several classification criteria, such as *education* level, *foreign-born* and *welfare recipients*. It was

assumed that higher levels of unemployment, welfare dependency and foreign-born populations, along with lower levels of education, would influence the dependent variables (González-Alegre 2018; Vikman and Westerberg 2017). The other block drew on *partisan* motives and was operationalised through a categorisation of the local rule, either indicating a left- or right-wing rule, with cross-bloc governing used as a reference category. According to theoretical expectations, we expected that the scope of LLMPs would be positively influenced by left-wing rule and negatively predicted by centre-right governing (Brauer 2021; Lundin 2007).

In addition, a set of control variables was included to better specify the models. These controls were divided into two groups of variables. The first reflected measurements quantifying the internal organisation of LLMPs in each municipality. From the conducted survey, we applied information concerning the *position of the LLMP within the municipality*, indicating whether it was placed directly under the executive board or within a certain municipal administration. Similarly, we also measured whether or not *the LLMP was formally divided into separate units or departments*. Two additional control variables considered the staffing of the organisation. We measured both whether *there were written and detailed job descriptions for the tasks* of the LLMP and the *proportion of females* among the employed. Finally, we measured the *number of participants* as a proxy for the size of the LLMP. The second group of controls referred to the municipal characteristics. Municipal *solvency* provided a general depiction of the economic situation in the municipality, while the local *tax rate* gave an indication of the municipal strategies for collecting revenue. Finally, *population size* functioned as a general depiction of the municipal characteristics.

Regression models applying OLS estimations were used to explain the variation of the dependent variables. Potential multicollinearity was checked by measuring variance inflation factors (VIFs), while independence of errors and distribution of residual values were controlled for through plots as well as exported values with normality tests. To ensure the robustness of the results, alternative specifications will also be discussed.

Results

We present our analytical findings in two sections, starting with descriptions of the distribution of the three dependent variables and the relationships between them. This is followed by the regression models.

Descriptions of LLMPs

Descriptive information for the three dependent variables is summarised through three boxplots (additionally, histograms are included in [Figure 2](#),



Figure 1. Boxplots for activities carried out by own means (left), full-time employees per 1,000 inhabitants (centre), and cost of labour market measures, SEK per capita (right). statistics for left figure, mean: 4.1, median: 4.0, SD: 3.0. Statistics for centre figure, mean: 0.6, median: 0.6, SD: 0.33. Statistics for right figure, mean: 1073.4, median: 1009.5, SD: 642.9.

found in the appendix). As shown in Figure 1, there is substantial variation among all three variables, in accordance with prior knowledge in this field (Forslund et al. 2019; Vikman and Westerberg 2017). Starting with the number of activities provided, most municipalities maintain between two and six different ones in their LLMPs, but municipalities with more far-reaching ambitions exist as well, with up to about 10. Similarly, LLMP staffing differs, even when population size is taken into account. While most municipalities uphold organisations with between 0.4 and 0.8 employees per 1,000 inhabitants (for a medium-sized municipality of about 30,000, this is 12–24 employed), about 1%ile of municipalities have LLMPs that are more extensive, with values above 1.1. Finally, the distribution of costs of labour market measures significantly varied across municipalities. While some municipalities have reported negligible costs, the average municipality has costs of 1,073 SEK per citizen. For a municipality with 30,000 citizens, this amounts to 32 million SEK annually. However, it should be noted that some municipalities reach substantially higher levels. Looking at the coefficient of variation as a way to compare the dispersion of the three variables, the highest is for activities carried out by own means, followed by costs of labour market measures and finally by full-time employers.

Correlations between the three dependent variables have been conducted. These range from small to large, where the strongest relationship was found between cost and employees ($r^2 = 0.550$), and the weakest occurred between activities and employees ($r^2 = 0.282$). The positive relationship between the three dependent variables indicates that they grasp a similar phenomenon but capture it slightly differently.

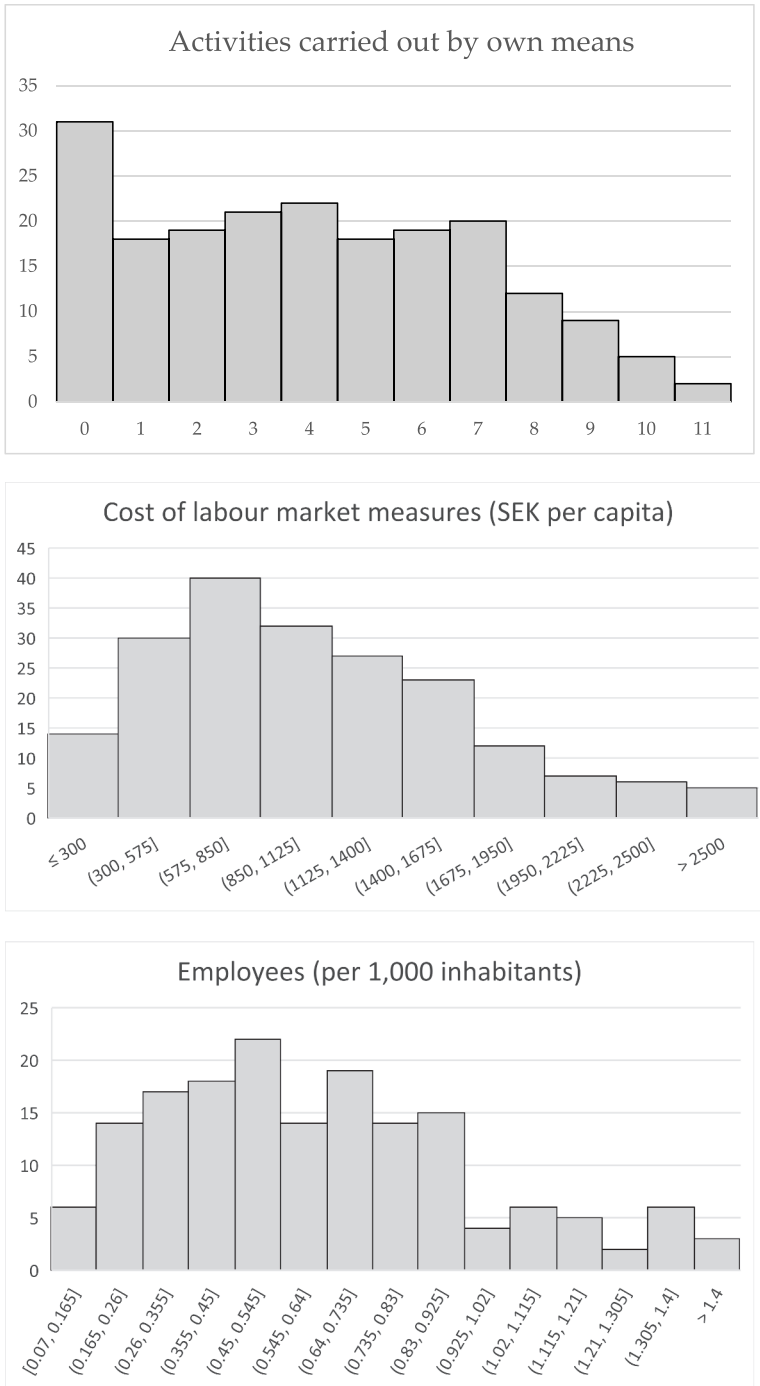


Figure 2. Histograms (dependent variables).

Table 3. Regression models (OLS).

Variable	MODEL 1				MODEL 2				MODEL 3			
	Effect	SE	β	p	Effect	SE	β	p	Effect	SE	β	p
Population	.100	.487	.034	.837	-.231	.053	-.614	< .001***	-.397.734	108.215	-.513	< .001***
Education	-.051	.131	-.055	.697	-.002	.014	-.021	.860	-10.456	29.073	-.043	.720
Unemployment	-.049	.221	-.038	.823	.014	.024	.083	.563	41.904	49.044	.124	.395
Foreign-born	.093	.063	.215	.143	-.002	.007	-.030	.804	19.625	14.078	.173	.166
Welfare	.198	.773	.032	.798	.059	.083	.075	.483	63.601	171.857	.040	.712
Left rule	-.634	.811	-.073	.437	-.056	.087	-.051	.521	-128.214	180.457	-.056	.479
Right rule	-.093	.508	-.017	.855	.004	.055	.006	.939	46.061	112.975	.033	.684
Gender distr.	-1.259	.462	-.238	.007**	-.097	.050	-.144	.056	-65.477	102.677	-.047	.525
Std. job descr.	-1.162	.478	-.219	.017*	-.063	.052	-.093	.227	75.559	106.328	.055	.479
LLMP position	.333	.600	.051	.581	-.029	.066	.034	.662	275.952	133.529	.162	.041*
Org. division	-.857	.495	-.161	.086	-.078	.053	-.115	.145	-136.538	110.078	-.098	.217
Solvency	-.029	.018	-.142	.108	-.001	.002	-.033	.664	6.926	4.048	.128	.090
Tax rate	.649	.312	.255	.040*	.082	.034	.251	.017*	228.622	69.326	.344	.001***
Participants	-.002	.002	-.180	.216	.001	.000	.329	.009**	1.077	.408	.325	.010*
Dependent	Cost of labour market measures (SEK per capita)											
Valid cases	126											
r^2	0.213	Employees (per 1,000 inhabitants)										
Adj. r^2	0.115	125										
Std. Pred. values	Min = -3.775 Max = 1.826											
Std. Residual:	Min = -2.259 Max = 2.523											
	Min = -3.288 Max = 2.003											
	Min = -2.645 Max = 3.171											

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p \leq 0.001$. *** $p \leq 0.001$. Max. VIF: 4.127. Effect = Unstandardised coefficient (β).

Explaining variations in scope of LLMPs

Proceeding with the explanatory models of the three dependent variables, the regression models are estimated in Table 3. The displayed models are full models, but stepwise estimations that test the hypotheses in turn are later commented on further. These models are found in the Appendix (Tables 4, 5 and 6).

In the first model, regressing the variable for activities carried out by own means on the set of independent and control variables yielded a few significant predictors, which all belong to the set of controls. Hence, neither partisan nor structural explanations were found to have an effect. The variable with the largest effect was tax rate, for which a 1% increase in municipal taxation was associated with around a 0.6 increase in the number of activities. Second, municipalities with more than 60% female employees in their LLMPs had an average of about 1.3 fewer activities carried out by own means. Third, municipalities with higher rates of standardised job descriptions for LLMPs had fewer activities. Having more than half of the tasks standardised was associated with around 1.2 fewer activities.

The second model examined variations in LLMP employees in relation to inhabitants of the municipality. Of the structural variables, the logarithmic transformation of municipal population size was found to have a negative effect. Hence, less populated municipalities maintain more staffed LLMPs when accounting for population size. More specifically, a 1% increase in the municipality population was associated with a decrease in employees of roughly 0.1 per 1,000 inhabitants. Additional control variables also showed a significant effect on the dependent variable. The largest effect was found for the number of participants, while tax rate represented the second largest, with higher municipal tax meaning more employees in the LLMPs.

The third model regressed the cost of labour market activities per capita on the explanatory variables. Once again, municipal population size showed a negative effect. The cost per capita was, on average, higher in less populated municipalities. Additional control variables also displayed a significant effect on the dependent variable. Tax rate once again was found to have a significant effect, with a 1% increase equalling about 229 SEK more per capita spent on labour market measures. Number of participants had the second largest effect among the control variables (more participants equalling higher spending), while LLMP position also had a notable effect. For the latter, municipalities where LLMPs were positioned under the municipal board (as opposed to within the management structure) were associated with increased spending (276 SEK per capita).

A general view of the three models shows substantial explanatory power for the latter two but lower explanatory power for the one examining activities carried out. No disturbing level of multicollinearity was detected

for any model. Residuals in models 1 and 2 were normally distributed, while model 3 showed some skew in this regard.⁴ In relation to the hypotheses, structural and partisan motives can be dismissed as explanatory powers associated with the control variables.

Alternative specifications

The stepwise models for activities carried out by own means are displayed in the Appendix (Table 4). They offer little to no additional information compared to the complete model. No structural or partisan explanation seemed to have any substantial effect on this indicator. Acceptable explanatory power was not reached until the full model was conducted. However, stepwise models reflecting the other two dependent variables added some nuances. For the number of employees (see Appendix, Table 6), unemployment had a medium-sized and statistically significant effect when only structural explanations were applied. This goes in the expected direction of higher unemployment rates equalling more employees per capita. However, this effect disappeared when additional variables were accounted for. Similar tendencies were also seen for costs of labour market measures, with a smaller effect (see Appendix, Table 5). No problematic multicollinearity was detected in these stepwise models.

For partisan explanations, the dummy variables applied in the model were built on the established distinction between left- and right-leaning parties. Other constellations, such as cooperative alliances between parties on both sides of the ideological spectrum, were hence used as reference categories in the regression models. While it could be theoretically interesting to further examine the effect of alternative groupings, such trials in bivariate analysis and multivariate models showed little to no differences between groups for the indicators and no improvement in the determination coefficients for the models.

To assess the effect of influential observations, Cook's distance was estimated, and the models were rerun with the most influential cases excluded. For all models, a cut-off point of 0.04 was applied, meaning that observations with values higher than that were removed. In Model 1, this excluded three observations. However, the results were kept intact, with the exception that an organisation's structural division became significant with a positive coefficient, meaning that no formal division was more strongly connected to higher levels of offered activities. In Model 2, four observations were excluded. However, significant effects remained, with no additional effect being found when the model was re-estimated. In Model 3, two noticeable changes occurred. The proportion of foreign-born became significant with a positive effect on the dependent variable. At the same time, the organisational placement of an LLMP fell below the threshold for significance.⁵

As each model had a given number of missing cases for at least one of the variables, the observations actually included in the models were further examined for skewness in relation to overall Swedish municipality types. This found that the maximum deviance between any given municipality type was 3.3% points and that the sum of such differences was 6.6. Thus, a slight improvement was found compared to the entire material.

The individual variable with the largest number of missing cases was *number of participants* (49). While removing this would have increased the number of valid cases for the models, it remains included for two main reasons. First, it was deemed theoretically necessary to control for such a crucial factor. Second, additional analysis without it showed a decline in the determination coefficients for all three models.

For unemployment, one alternative measure could be the rate in the *FA-region*⁶ of each particular municipality. This was not used in the final models of the analysis for three main reasons. First, this would decrease the variability of the measurement, thus making it less precise. Second, it could not be used with municipal unemployment due to obvious inflation of multicollinearity. Third, no overall model improvement could be achieved through a shift between these.

Conclusions

This study took its dual entry point from the increasingly important notion of welfare states activating their unemployed share of the population and the ongoing tendency of a continued decentralisation of vital welfare services. From a Swedish perspective, municipal autonomy entails that most local governments maintain their own LLMPs. While research is scant in terms of explaining the variation in the scope of LLMPs (Brauer 2021; Forslund et al. 2019; González-Alegre 2018; Lundin 2007; Vikman and Westerberg 2017), this study exploited a new comprehensive dataset that could shed new light on this puzzle. Drawing on the theoretical literature in the field, the two dominating themes were based on the assumption that either structural characteristics or partisan motives would have an influence. However, as demonstrated, neither of these two aspects could explain the municipal use of ALMPs. To put it explicitly, neither societal needs nor partisan values appear to drive the scope of LLMPs. This leads us to a number of conclusions.

First, we could not detect any solid pattern of structural needs-driven policy. In short, the proportions of unemployed, those on social welfare or those with foreign backgrounds do not influence the scope of LLMPs. Although this is surprising, similar tendencies have been previously reported in the Swedish context (Vikman and Westerberg 2017). This outcome is in itself potentially problematic, as it implies that municipalities do not appear to account for the composition of their populations and

respond to their expressed needs. However, this lack of responsiveness, which is an important element of democracy (Powell 2004), can have several motives. First, the outcome could be due to the *inability* of this group to articulate their preferences, as they represent a resource-weak and marginalised proportion of the local community. Second, it could be due to the leading municipal stakeholders' *distrust* regarding the efficiency of LLMPs (Calmfors, Forslund, and Hemström 2002). Finally, it could be due to stakeholders' *ignorance* of those needing assistance, and thus, not reacting to their preferences but rather in favour of other groups in society deemed more important (Bailey, Bramley, and Hastings 2015; Webb and Bywaters 2018).

Second, value-based partisan motives appear to be completely distant from the scope of the studied example of decentralised welfare provision. Although the applied measurement is rough, it still encompasses the most fundamental aspect of partisan character, namely, *who governs*. Still, we cannot verify any tendencies for parties to the left or the right to pursue their theoretically expected policies (Esping-Andersen 1990; Korpi 1983; Lipset 1960) while lacking the possibility to fully account for the protection of insider-groups that Rueda (2005) identifies. Our results thereby indicate that local labour market policies, at least from this broad understanding, are not a politicised question. Rather, the kind of pragmatism often associated with the local level appears to reign (Oliver, Callen, and Ha 2012). Hence, voters have no benefit from letting local parties' standpoints regarding labour market policies guide them in their voting choices. This conflates with the motives for the lack of a needs-driven policy.

Third, the factors, although showing importance, cannot be considered either structural or partisan related. Rather, the data indicate certain effects of variables related to either economic conditions or organisational settings in the LLMP. For instance, the municipal tax rate was found to have a small- to medium-sized effect in each of the complete models, with higher tax seeming to be associated with a larger willingness to invest in local labour market measures, which is also true for the allocation of resources and diversity in activities. Although tax rates are controllable per se on behalf of the municipality political rule and could hence indirectly be associated with political ambition (e.g., Högstöm and Lidén 2023), a raise in tax is generally not taken lightly by any stakeholder. More plausibly, the association between tax rates and the three measurements could be considered a manifestation of economic realities or circumstances and their impact on the activities of a municipality. As labour market measures are not mandatory municipal activities, it could be plausible that municipalities with lower tax rates are less likely to invest extensively in such activities since the extension of municipally run activities overall would have to focus on mandatory undertakings.

For number of activities, two variables related to the organisation structure of the LLMP (gender distribution and standardised job descriptions) had a small effect. Additionally, the location of the LLMP within the municipality organisation structure had a small effect on the cost of labour market measures. Although the direction of such effects might be questionable, this could arguably indicate that organisational conditions could be of some interest when trying to explain the overall variation in local labour market aspirations.

We thereby reach the conclusion that future research should look for predictors of LLMPs from a broader set of theoretical assumptions. Our findings imply that access to resources will influence LLMPs. This is indicated by capacity measures such as population size and tax rate, although the mechanisms through which these determinants operate remain unclear. Furthermore, the internal organisation of the work with labour market programmes is related to their scope. In future studies, it would be valuable with additional research on the decentralisation of welfare services that could lead to more comprehensive theoretical foundations. Additionally, potential interaction effects (for example the previously mentioned such between partisan motives and municipal size) could be explored further.

Notes

1. Maximum difference for any type: 3.6% points. Sum of differences: 9.4% points.
2. These activities include labour market training, job search activities, educational activities and courses, internships, support for regular job market employment in the regular market with and without salary subsidies, municipal labour market employment, youth internships during and outside of holidays, language training, validation, measures focused on health and lifestyle, measures related to the concept *supported employment*, activities in line with the principles of the programmes *IPS* and/or *BIP*, local job paths in cooperation with employers and education actors (public and/or private sector).
3. The variable *activities carried out by the LLMPs own means* is essentially count data and would hence be most suitable for a Poisson model. However, this was not appropriate due to a violation of assumptions. For the complete dataset, there was a deviation from the Poisson distribution, while the observations used in the actual regression model were subject to overdispersion.
4. K-S tests showed a minimum p-value of 0,200 for models 1 and 2, while model 3 had a p-value of 0,031.
5. In Model 1, Sotenäs, Västervik and Södertälje were excluded; in Model 2, Ljusdal, Överkalix, Sorsele, Harnosand and Övertornea were excluded; and in Model 3, Ljusnarsberg, Harnosand, Älvkarleby, Arboga, Sorsele and Ånge were excluded.
6. FA-regions (i.e., *Functional Analytical Regions*) are regions in which people may live and work in different parts without excessive everyday travel. There are 60 in total (Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth 2025).

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