Refugee crisis and right-wing populism: Evidence from the Italian Dispersal Policy☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of the 2014–2017 'Refugee Crisis' in Italy on voting behavior and the rise of right-wing populism in national Parliamentary elections. Our analysis exploits unique administrative data on refugee reception centers across Italian municipalities and exogenous variation in refugee resettlement induced by the Dispersal Policy. We find a positive and significant effect, although small in magnitude, of the share of asylum seekers on support for radical-right anti-immigration parties, which runs in parallel with a decline in public support for center-left parties. We further examine the mechanisms underlying this shift in political preferences and provide causal evidence that anti-immigration backlash rather than being rooted in adverse economic effects is triggered by radical-right propaganda and hate-speech.

1. Introduction

The '2015 refugee crisis' brought unprecedented inflows of refugees and migrants to Europe; most of these refugees were fleeing war and terror in Syria and social unrest in Northern Africa and the Near East. Between 2014 and 2017, around 3.5 million people applied for asylum in the EU–28 countries (Eurostat, 2020).[1] These inflows stretched reception systems designed to manage asylum seekers and divided public opinion in many destination countries (Hatton, 2020; Dustmann et al., 2016).[2]

While asylum applications peaked in 2016 and have fallen since,[3] asylum seeker arrivals have decreased unevenly among EU member states, with pressure persisting on some main entry points, such as Italy and Greece. The number of arrivals to Italy showed little change for the entire period between 2014 and 2017, while it dropped considerably in 2018. Between 2014 and 2017, every year an average of 150,000 people reached the Italian coasts smuggled by traffickers from North Africa and rescued at sea (UNHCR, 2018). In 2017, Italy received 67 percent of EU migrant arrivals from Mediterranean routes, and accounted for 18 percent of all first-time asylum applicants to the EU–28 (Eurostat, 2020).[4]

In this paper, we assess the political impact of refugee migration on public support for radical-right anti-immigration parties and populist movements in Italy. We used Freedom of Information Act requests to collect unique municipality-level administrative data from the universe of Italian Prefectures on numbers of refugees and reception centers during the 'refugee crisis'.[5] The granularity of our data combined with the quasi-experimental nature of the Refugee Dispersal Policy allow us to evaluate the political effects of refugee migration on national Parliamentary elections at a very local level, and to assess whether voting behavior is explained by economic/welfare motives or triggered by pure anti-immigration propaganda. In this context, the Italian case is particularly interesting since the refugee crisis overlapped with the rise of right-wing populist parties, *i.e., League and Brothers of Italy (BoI),* whose nationalist and anti-immigration stances challenged the traditional political system. In particular, the political manifesto of the *League* encouraged nationalist, anti-global and Euro-skeptical sentiments that in some contexts paved the way to a violent rhetoric against foreigners and minorities (Romarri, 2020) (Section 2.2 provides evidence from the Manifesto Project). After years on the fringe of Italian politics, the *League* gained power in the 2018 national elections, joining the other main populist party *5 Stars Movement* (5SM) in the government coalition.

Our identification strategy leverages the natural quasi-experimental setting provided by the Dispersal Policy (*Piano Nazionale di Riparto*) implemented by the Italian Home Office in 2014. It involved the extraordinary creation of temporary reception centers (hereafter, *Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria* – CAS) to cope with the massive and continuous arrivals of asylum seekers and the lack of capacity of the ordinary reception system run by local authorities. CAS centers have accomodated the vast majority of asylum seekers over the last few years such that they turned into *de facto* permanent reception centers rather than exceptional facilities.

In line with the spike in asylum applications between 2014 and 2017, the number of Italian municipalities hosting a refugee reception center tripled over the same period, and the number of centers rose from around 1,000 in 2014 to almost 8,000 in 2017 (with average host capacity of 20 to 35 refugees). The granular level of the policy has resulted in a scramble for rapid geographical relocation of unanticipated numbers of asylum seekers across almost 8,000 small administrative units (municipalities).[6] According to the Dispersal Policy, migrants are first allocated to provinces (NUTS–3 administrative units) in numbers proportional to the resident population. Thus, the distribution of centers across municipalities (LAU–2 administrative units) within the provincial territory is done through public procurement procedures managed by Prefectures (provincial-level government offices) and intended for the private sector. The resulting relocation of refugees is unanticipated, occurs over a very short period of time, and peaks at the end of the observation period (2017–2018). We exploit the natural exogenous variation in refugee settlement induced by the policy to overcome sorting concerns and estimate the short–run impact on electoral outcomes (vote shares) in national elections between 2013 and 2018.

For our analysis we compile a novel and unique municipality-level administrative dataset on refugee resettlement and reception centers opened during the period 2014 to 2018, which we combine with data on electoral outcomes of national Parliamentary elections from the Home Office. We further match this dataset with municipality-level demographic, economic and institutional characteristics from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). Our empirical analysis employs a difference-in-difference estimation strategy and exploits the time and spatial variation in the share of asylum seekers assigned across municipalities according to the quasi-random design of the Dispersal Policy.[7]

We find a positive impact of the share of asylum seekers on support for anti-immigration parties, the *League* and *Brothers of Italy*, although the effect is small in magnitude: a 1 percentage point (p.p.) increase in the share of asylum seekers – which is roughly equal to the average change among municipalities hosting a CAS – leads to an increase in the share of votes for anti-immigration parties by 0.17 p.p. Furthermore, we find no political impact of refugee migration on center-right voting or voter turnout, while the rise anti-immigration backlash runs in parallel with a loss of support for center-left and 5SM parties.

To investigate the mechanisms underlying the increased support for anti-immigration parties, we conduct a systematical assessment of the major economic consequences of refugee settlement at the municipality level. We find little economic impact, as we document that refugee settlement does not generate economic losses in terms of local average income, native outflows, or municipality public expenditure. In particular, the fact that the influx of asylum seekers does not affect public expenditure at the municipal level is additional (indirect) evidence that the material impact of refugee reception is null. Indeed, in case of a material

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[3] Aggregate refugee inflows dropped following the 2015 agreement between the EU and Turkey according to which migrants who did not apply for asylum or whose claims were rejected could be returned to Turkey.

[4] In 2019 Italy received 9.3 percent of EU migrant arrivals via Mediterranean routes, and with 43,770 asylum applications accounted for 6.3 percent of all first-time applicants.

[5] These data on refugee reception and relocation system are supposed to be collected regularly by the Italian Home Office from local government offices (Prefectures) but are not yet publicly available for the years 2014–2018.

[6] Italy's administrative division includes 20 regions each split into a number of provinces (corresponding to NUTS–3 administrative units), which in turn are split into municipalities (LAU–2). Italy includes a total of 107 provinces with an average population size of around 540,000, ranging between 127,844 to 3,075,083. The number of municipalities is slightly less than 8,000 and their average population is around 7,000 (ranging from 120 to over 1 million).

[7] Our sample includes 6,891 municipalities with a mean (median) population of 7,212 (2529) and a mean (median) area of 38 (22) square kilometers, belonging to one of the 92 provinces included in our sample.

impact through various channels (e.g., higher crime rates), local authorities would have to bear substantial additional costs on top of the national subsidy that fully funds refugee reception centers. This does not appear to be the case. In contrast, we observe that the dispersed allocation of asylum seekers, combined with the age structure of the local population, contributes significantly to the inter-generational replacement of elderly natives within municipality.

Overall, we find little evidence that electoral preferences are rooted in actual economic mechanisms, leaving space for ideological or political drivers of voting behavior. In most European countries, identity politics have played an increasing role over the period analyzed and have become particularly divisive in Italy, where fear of immigrants (and anti-immigrant backlash) has overshadowed economic discussion ahead of the March 4, 2018 election. Hence, we examine the role of political propaganda immediately before the election and at the peak of the refugee crisis for mobilizing voter support. We focus on the electoral campaigns of those right–wing parties that embraced an anti-multiculturalism stance and anti-immigration rhetoric.

Using the Twitter accounts of right-wing candidates during the electoral campaign, we geocode municipality-level information on their political rallies and campaigning events, which took place between January and March 2018, just before elections. We show that while right-wing rallies are fairly balanced across municipalities with respect to the share of refugees, the impact of this share on radical right-wing support is higher in areas where campaign rallies (especially the *League*'s ones) were held. In addition, we combine the data on campaign rallies with the "Hate Barometer" data collected by Amnesty International Italy in the three weeks before the election. The Hate Barometer measures the use of hate speech, i.e. speech against immigrants and ethnic minorities, by all election candidates. We find that the anti-immigrant backlash is significantly higher (by more than 2 p.p.) in municipalities where far-right candidates campaigned and used hate speech. Overall, this evidence is consistent with a "dog whistle" effect, i.e. xenophobic propaganda can trigger electoral gains by legitimizing some implicit stereotypes (e.g. fear of foreign groups) through divisive language and stances (Goodin, 2008; López, 2015).

Our paper contributes to the fast growing body of work on the impact of refugee inflows on voting behavior and economic outcomes in host countries (Dustmann et al. (2019) for Denmark, Steinmayr (2021) for Austria, Hangartner et al. (2019) and Vasilakis (2018) for Greece, Gessler et al. (2021) for Hungary, Batut and Schneider-Strawczynski (2022) and Schneider-Strawczynski (2021) for France).[8] Specifically for Italy, works by Barone et al. (2016), Bratti et al. (2020) and Gamalerio et al. (2023) delve into the political effects of exposure to immigrants and refugees. Barone et al. (2016) use an instrumental variable (IV) strategy to study the impact of immigration flows on electoral outcomes in the early 2000s. They focus on economic immigrants in a very different context from that of a "refugee crisis" managed through a dispersal policy, and find that immigration leads to a significant increase in votes for the center-right coalition. More recently, Gamalerio et al. (2023) study the Italian 'public reception system', i.e. refugee centers opened directly by municipal authorities in some locations, which represent a minority of the reception facilities during the refugee crisis.[9] By using an IV estimation strategy, they find that the opening of such specific premises managed by municipalities *decreased* electoral support for far-right parties. Finally, Bratti et al. (2020) focus on the geographic spillover effects of refugee centers on voting outcomes in neighboring municipalities in the 2018 election. Their analysis uses data on public and private (CAS) centers altogether, which were registered at some point in 2016, before the peak of the refugee crisis in 2017. We advance this stream of work by using a nationwide panel dataset on the entire refugee crisis and a natural quasi-experimental setting in which a sudden, significant influx of asylum seekers is rapidly distributed across locations between two national elections. The enforced dispersal policy, combined with the high granularity of refugee assignment data across municipalities, allows us to isolate the causal impact of mere exposure to refugees (i.e., abstracting from labor market issues, intergroup contact, and/or a particular bundle of integration services) on the *rise* of right-wing populism and on the *change* across the political spectrum.

A key contribution of our study is that we examine the contentious mechanisms driving the anti-immigration backlash, empirically investigating both actual economic channels and non-economic drivers, such as the role of political propaganda. Our results are consistent with other findings in different settings that point to no material effects (e.g. no economic effects) of immigration at the local level, but a clear negative shift in people's attitudes towards and concerns about migrants. A recent paper by Ajzenman et al. (2023), for example, finds that the overall effect of immigration to Chile on crime fears is through an increase in the perception of crime, rather than an increase in crime itself (see Vadlamannati, 2020 for a meta-analysis on this). By directly measuring far-right political propaganda and hate speech during the electoral campaign, we provide novel empirical evidence that anti-immigration propaganda significantly exacerbated the public opinion backlash in Italy. This is consistent with the observation that identity politics and divisive political stances are affecting the radicalization and polarization of voting behavior (e.g. Gennaioli et al., 2019; Coates, 2017).[10]

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[8] See also Gehrsitz and Ungerer (2022), Achard et al. (2022), Freddi (2021) and Rozo and Vargas (2021) for further evidence on recent refugee exposure and political/behavioral outcomes in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Colombia respectively. There is also a well-established literature on the political effects of (regular) immigration, which focuses mainly on the underlying labor market channels (see among others Mayda et al. (2022) for the US, Edo et al. (2019) for France; Otto and Steinhardt (2014) for Germany, Mendez and Cutillas (2014) for Spain, Halla et al. (2017) for Austria, Lonsky (2021) for Finland and Levi et al. (2020) for the U.K.). See also Cools et al. (2021) for a meta-analysis of this literature.

[9] See Section 2 for further details on this.

[10] Right-wing political campaigns, in particular, have shifted away from economic policy towards the ethno-nationalist and cultural cleavage from which they derive their appeal. While the latter have gained electoral success in Europe in recent years, there is evidence far-right propaganda does not merely reflect but also aggravates radicalization, xenophobia and social conflict (see Bursztyn et al., 2019; Fletcher et al., 2020; Grosjean et al., 2021; Müller and Schwarz, 2021; Romarri, 2020).
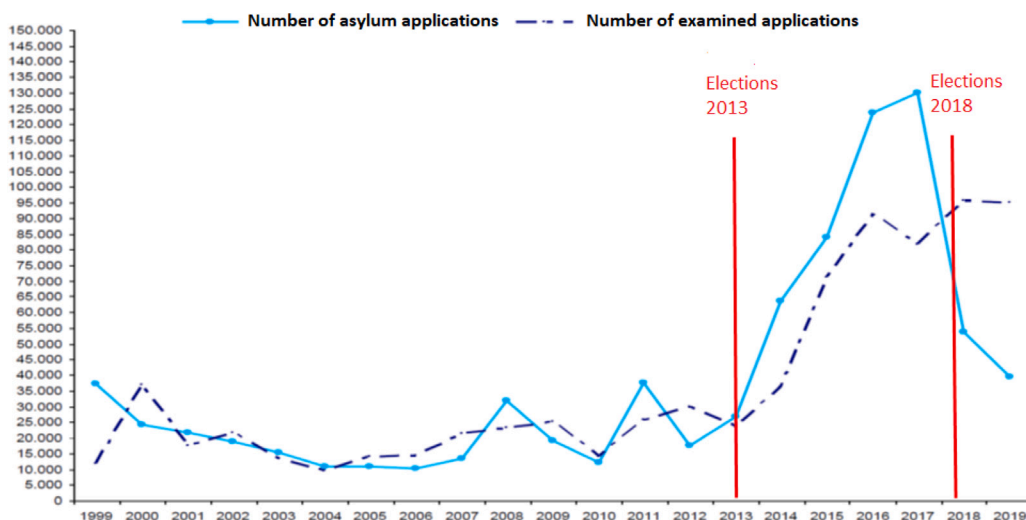
Fig. 1. Asylum seekers' applications in Italy over time (1999–2019).
Notes: This Figure plots the evolution in the number of asylum applications and the number of examined applications to Italy from 1999 to 2019.
Source: Authors' elaboration from Home Office database - Asylum applications (2020).

2. Background

2.1. The refugee crisis in Italy and the reception system

Over at least the past 20 years for both domestic and external reasons including the geographical accident of being a peninsula in the middle of the Mediterranean, Italy has become a major destination country for international migrants, for either permanent or transitional settlement. After the first large migration inflows which occurred during the 1990s, particularly from Albania and the Balkans following the Yugoslav Wars, 2000 to 2007 saw a steady South-North inflow to Italy. Surges occurred in line with the Enlargement of the European Union (2007), the First North African Emergency (2008), the Arab Springs, the end of the Libya regime and the subsequent exodus via the Mediterranean (2011), and the escalation of old and new conflicts in many areas of the Near East, especially Syria (2013–2014).

The so-called refugee crisis in Europe peaked in 2015, with over 1 million asylum seeker arrivals in one year, mainly fleeing the Syrian war (UNHCR, 2018). The numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Italy, especially through the Central Mediterranean Route, showed little change between 2014 and early 2018 with 155,000, 180,000, and 119,000 asylum seeker arrivals in 2015, 2016 and 2017, respectively (UNHCR, 2018). After the Italy–Libya Memorandum of Understanding, signed in 2017, and during the right-wing populist government which came to power in 2018, Italy experienced a decline in asylum seeker arrivals from 20,120 in mid-September 2018 to less than half this number in 2019 (see Fig. 1 that depicts asylum applications over time as well as gamaelection cycles).[11]

The need to host and settle asylum seekers resulted in the scaling up of the existing reception system in Italy, which prior to the crisis involved two major stages/tracks. First, identification and basic assistance is provided at major disembarkation sites ('hotspots') and CARA (*Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo*) government centers. Second, the offer of housing support and assistance as part of the process of integration in the national territory is managed by the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR), Italy's national "public reception system", established in 2002. SPRAR is set up as an initiative of the municipality administrations and is run by the local authorities on a voluntary basis (i.e. they are not for profit). It is sponsored by the national government through money channeled to local municipalities and provides integration services such as language courses, psychological care, training and labor market integration programs. SPRAR is distinguished by its small scale organization that aims to integrate refugees in the local context.[12] However, since the municipalities' political orientation and administration capacity determine the presence and distribution of SPRAR reception centers across the country, at the height of the refugee crisis in

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[11] The major entry points to the EU are Italy, Greece, Malta, Hungary, Croatia/Slovenia and Bulgaria. The response to the crisis was to introduce border closures, first between Turkey and the EU (Greece) in 2015 and shortly after between Serbia and Hungary and Turkey and Bulgaria.

[12] The SPRAR model allows for joint action by the Ministry of the Interior, the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and it is a shared responsibility of the local and central public authorities. For detailed information see https://www.siproimi.it/english.

December 2014, only 433 out of around 8,000 municipalities were involved in a SPRAR project (and in 2017 only 700 municipalities had a SPRAR center).[13] This number proved insufficient to manage the unprecedented inflow of asylum seekers during the crisis.

Hence, in 2014, a third (parallel) refugee reception system was set up as an extraordinary initiative. The temporary CAS centers were created to augment the capacity of the existing reception scheme and quickly became the main system for new refugee inflows. In every year in the period of 2014 to 2018, CAS centers hosted around 75 percent of asylum seekers in Italy (Def. 2018 — see Fig. A.1 in Appendix) and about 4,000 municipalities had at least one CAS center during the period analyzed. CAS centers are a private enterprise supported financially by national government but run by private stakeholders according to a public bidding procedure.

Initially, asylum seekers are allocated to province-based Prefectures according to the 'allotment plan', which sets the number of asylum seekers as a proportion of the provincial resident population (i.e. about 2.5 refugees out of 1,000 inhabitants). The aim of this settlement scheme was to reduce the concentration of asylum seekers and refugees in urban and disembarkation areas and to share the "costs" of reception and hospitality through a gradual and sustainable distribution of asylum seekers across the national territory. Next, the allocation of centers within the provincial territory is coordinated by local Prefectures, which issue public bids that are eventually awarded to cooperatives, NGOs or private operators based on project quality and the cost of the tender. The location of the refugee centers is proposed and decided by economic operators without consultation with local goverment administrations.[14] The terms of the law decree that procurement calls remain open for a maximum of 35 days or less if the case is considered urgent. At the height of the crisis, the majority of procurement calls were issued according to a competitive open procedure which meant that any party could submit a proposal; experiences of lack of bids accounted for less than 2 percent (see ActionAid and Openpolis, 2018).[15] Some CAS are housed in former group accommodation buildings but most were set up in networks of private apartments.[16]

The effectiveness of the Dispersal Policy for achieving a balance between dispersion and concentration, sharing the costs and preventing 'not-in-my-back-yard' reactions is unclear a priori. Section 3 provides more evidence and descriptive statistics on policy design and CAS distribution across Italy.

CAS centers are distinguished by their temporary and for profit nature. Like the SPRAR system, CAS centers are geographically dispersed. Unlike the SPRAR, though, they do not aspire to ensuring provision of integrated refugee reception services such as psychological support, training and job market integration (even though some of them did).[17] As a result, they tend to provide basic reception services (food and accommodation) and very few asylum seekers hosted in CAS are able to participate in the labor market.[18]

It should be noted that, by law, asylum seekers are obliged to remain in the center of first placement in order to benefit from reception facilities, legal assistance and economic support. Therefore, if an asylum seeker decides to move to another location, he or she loses access to reception services. Moreover, as Italy has the longest asylum procedure in Europe, ranging between 18 and 24 months from application to formal registration of status, asylum seekers have few incentives to relocate in the short term. We therefore expect a high rate of compliance with the assigned location. Data on differences between assigned and actual numbers of asylum seekers that we collected for a sub-sample of municipalities confirm that the relocation of asylum seekers after assignment is very low.[19]

2.2. The political spectrum in Italy

The outcome of the 2018 round of national elections resulted in a radical transformation to the balance of power across the political spectrum. First, anti-immigration parties gained a large share of the votes and took the lead among the center-right parties. Second, the populist 5SM, which was founded in 2009, achieved the most seats in both chambers of the national parliament. Third, center-left parties experienced a large voter losses.

Within the anti-immigration front, the *League* and *Brothers of Italy* (BoI) gained significant momentum. The former started in northern Italy in the late 1980s as a federalist party promoting regional fiscal independence, more recently becoming a national party

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[13] Using data on SPRAR centers between 2005 and 2017, Gamalerio and Negri (2023) show that municipalities setting up a center received substantial central government fiscal grants and returns to the local economy. Despite these economic benefits, electoral incentives can deter local politicians from opening a SPRAR center.

[14] A few examples of clashes between Prefectures and local mayors regarding the allocation of asylum seekers and the opening of receptions centers made headlines and led to anti-immigration protests.

[15] Between 2016 and 2017 the amounts tendered through the open procedure increased by around 1 billion euros. This procedure guaranteed the highest levels of transparency and competitiveness among the various economic operators involved (ActionAid and Openpolis, 2018).

[16] A Parliamentary Commission to the Chamber of Deputies reported in 2017 that 85% of CAS were in apartments or private houses, mostly (82%) privately rented (Chamber of Deputies, 2017).

[17] During the period analyzed, the Italian government assigned 35 euros per person per day (mostly in the form of goods and services) to both SPRAR and CAS. However, in the latter case, this is a nominal amount since the actual costs are established through calls for tenders and could be lower than 35 euros. Also, individual Prefectures are able to change the starting auction base for CAS. Those critical of the predominance of CAS systems suggest that since these centers are run as enterprises rather than to benefit the local community, CAS managers might be tempted to cut costs in order to make a profit.

[18] Theoretically, asylum seekers can take up a job 2 months after applying for asylum. However, if their income exceeds a certain threshold they lose their eligibility for being accommodated in a reception center. Official statistics show less than 10% of all asylum seekers in the Italian reception system held a regular job between 2011 and 2017. See https://documenti.camera.it/leg17/resoconti/commissioni/bollettini/pdf/2017/09/06/leg.17.bol0871.data20170906.pdf.

[19] For 51 out of 92 provinces we have data both on allocated and actual number of refugees living in a municipality at time t_1. In 67 per cent of municipalities hosting refugees (N=1396), the number of allocated and actual refugees strictly overlaps. Further, in 75 per cent of those municipalities where the two numbers do not correspond, the differences between actual and assigned refugees is below 20 per cent.

under the leadership of Matteo Salvini. The latter is a nationalistic party that was created in 2012 as the result of a break with the center-right party — *Popolo delle Libertà* (PDL) — and can be identified roughly as a post-fascist political party. The remaining anti-immigration front includes several extreme-right groups such as *Casa Pound* (CP), a neo-fascist movement embracing nationalistic ideas including nationality-based welfare systems, and repudiating acceptance of asylum seekers in Italy.

Anti-immigration and nativist sentiments are important elements of both the *League* and BoI's political agendas. Their propaganda emphasizes the risk that migration could trigger a process of demographic and cultural change, and depicts irregular migrants as a potential threat to the national economy and security. While proposing fairly similar economic programs, these parties also share a common stance on several migration-related issues, while being anti-establishment and Euro-skeptical. Both parties have (i) not endorsed any actual law reforms regarding regular immigration to Italy, (ii) strongly opposed to the reception of irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean by sea, and (iii) voted against the reform of the Dublin system in the European Parliament.[20] Importantly, the rise of the *League* fueled anti-immigration sentiments resulting in an upsurge of episodes of discrimination and violence against foreigners (Romarri, 2020).

In contrast, the center-left parties supported the change to the Dublin Regulation.[21] *Democratic Party* (PD) was the major component of the government that administrated Italy during the refugee crisis when the CAS asylum-seeker reception scheme was introduced and implemented. Although in 2017 the PD-led government forged an agreement with the Libyan authorities that was effective for preventing a substantial proportion of the irregular flows from overseas, the PD was perceived by the electorate as a pro-immigration party. The *League* and BoI representatives held the PD-led government responsible for allowing massive inflows of irregular migrants.

Finally, 5SM rejected precise positioning in the left–right axis and its position on immigration has been ambiguous. While not engaging explicitly in anti-immigration propaganda, 5SM's European Parliament members voted against reform of the Dublin Regulation on the distribution of asylum seekers across European countries.

According to the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2020), which illustrates ideological differences on immigration among Italian parties, major parties largely omit cultural diversity as desirable. Yet, the *League* and BoI express negativity towards it, particularly after the refugee crisis (see Table A.1 in Appendix). The *League* emphasizes cultural homogeneity and opposes a diverse society. Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data (Jolly et al., 2022) confirms the *League* and BoI as having the most restrictive immigration policies, advocating for immigrant assimilation into the national culture. Only PD's 2018 manifesto expresses a positive stance on immigration.[22]

3. Data and descriptives

3.1. The dispersal policy

Open access to centralized data on refugee settlement and CAS centers across Italy from 2014 onwards is not made available by the Home Office. Hence, we carried out first-hand data collection of administrative information through Freedom of Information Act requests (FOIA - *Accesso civico generalizzato*) to governmental offices (Prefectures) at the local (provincial) level.[23] We filed formal requests for data access to the universe of 106 Prefectures between July 2019 and February 2020.[24] We collected information on CAS capacity, timeline and actual number of hosted refugees for the years 2014–2019.[25]

The format of the data received and the response times were very heterogeneous across offices. In most cases, the data contained the list of reception centers set up in a province area within the reference period along with details on location and capacity. We obtained complete data for the entire period (2014–2018) for 92 Prefectures. In 10 extra cases, data were made available only for the most recent years, so we could not include those provinces in our analysis. Four offices did not release any data at all.[26] We exclude sample selection in our data by running balance tests on pre-treatment municipality characteristics. Table A.2 in Appendix confirms that non-responding provinces are not systematically different in terms of economic, demographic, political and institutional characteristics.

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[20] The *League* leader Matteo Salvini, was appointed Interior Minister in the 2018 populist coalition government and just 10 days after his appointment implemented a no docking rights policy in Italian ports for NGOs-operating rescue boats. In September 2018, he implemented the controversial Security Decree which denied asylum seekers the right to enroll in municipal registry offices (*de facto* excluding them from basic health care and social coverage), reduced their rights as migrants and asylum seekers, excluded them from benefiting from humanitarian protection under SPRAR system and downsized the CAS system by reducing financial support for general services such as mediation and legal advice for refugees.

[21] By center-left parties we mean the *Democratic Party* (PD) and radical-left parties, i.e. *Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà* (SEL) in 2013 and *Liberi e Uguali* (LEU) in 2018. While SEL and PD were part of the same coalition in the 2013 election, LEU represented an independent coalition which proposed its own candidate for prime minister in 2018. However, here we include both in the center-left coalition since they adopt very similar positions with regard to immigration policies.

[22] Unfortunately, Manifesto Project data for 2013 is unavailable, hindering documentation of within-party ideological shifts. [Data source: https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/].

[23] The Italian Home Office has a local representative unit (i.e. Prefectures) in 106 of them. Sardinia has 4 local offices covering a territory of 5 Provinces.

[24] In order to test the response rate and time we firstly ran a pilot survey with 23 local offices from three regions (July–September 2019). As a second stage, data collection was extended to the remaining 83 offices. A description (in Italian) of our data collection is available at https://www.openpolis.it/limportanza-dellaccesso-ai-dati-il-caso-del-sistema-di-accoglienza-in-italia/.

[25] For a subsample of provinces we have additional information on the characteristics of hosted refugees (gender, number of unaccompanied children, nationality) and the type of accommodation and management facility.

[26] Palermo, Campobasso, Isernia and Cremona never replied FOIA requests and are excluded from our sample. As for response time, this varied between two weeks and five months. In more than half of cases, several interactions between the offices and the research team were needed to obtain the requested data.
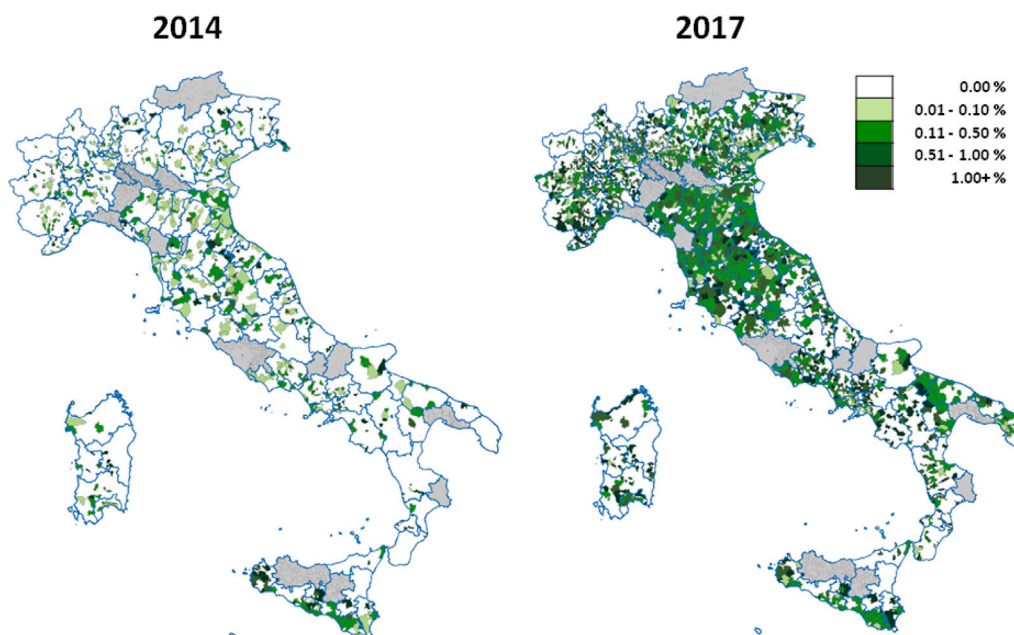
Fig. 2. Share of asylum seekers in the municipality population 2014–2017.
Notes: This Figure shows the distribution of the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population assigned to Italian municipalities in 2014 at the beginning of the refugee crisis and in 2017 at its peak.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Information was extracted through text mining and machine learning techniques from very different source files and combined into a unique and harmonized dataset. The compiled dataset allows mapping the number of asylum seekers hosted across 6,965 out of 7,950 Italian municipalities (7,918 in 2019) and tracking their evolution over time from the escalation of the refugee crisis to 2019. Overall, our sample provinces hosted around 37,000 asylum seekers in the CAS reception system in 2014, which increased to almost 144,000 in 2017 (equal to about 0.3 percent of the total national population). In Fig. 2 we show a map of our data for 2014 and 2017, namely the share of asylum seekers on the 2013 resident population across municipalities.

The refugee Dispersal Policy implemented by the Italian government reproduces a quasi-experimental setting, by assigning refugees to municipalities on a quasi-random basis. As mentioned in Section 2, in the first stage refugees are allocated across provinces based on resident population-size. The strong relationship between allocated asylum seekers and pre-policy population size is supported by the data as shown in Fig. A.2 in Appendix.[27]

In the second stage, refugees end up in different municipalities within province according to the fast and scrambled public procurement bids managed by Prefectures we described in Section 2 (in Section 4 below, we provide systematic evidence that the redistribution of asylum seekers worked as good as random). We report descriptive statistics in Table 1. The number of municipalities hosting a CAS tripled over time along with the increase in asylum applications. The maximum number of CAS centers was reached between 2017 and 2018 (at the end of our observation period). Reception centers accomodate between 20 and 30 refugees, on average, with a decreasing average size over time as long as the dispersal policy has been put into practice. Yet, high heterogeneity is observed in the organization of hospitality at the local level. For instance, given the same percentage of asylum seekers in the total population, the average number of refugees per CAS centers in 2017 was 16 and 101 in Lombardy and Sicily, respectively. Overall, the percentage of reception centers hosting more than 100 refugees never exceeded 3.5 percent. This evidence reflects the granular level of the dispersal policy implemented in Italy, which was the result of a scramble for a rapid geographical allocation of asylum seekers.

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[27] In Fig. A.2 we plot province population size before the policy launch (2013) against the number of asylum seekers: provinces with higher population size receive larger numbers of refugees on a mandatory basis. The regression line has a slope equal to 0.0023 (s.e. 0.0001), which is very close to the Allotment Plan of 2.5 asylum seekers out of every 1,000 inhabitants. The strong relationship between allocated asylum seekers and pre-policy population size is also reflected in the regression goodness-of-fit measure (R-squared equal to 85 percent).

Table 1
Allocation of asylum seekers.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Municipalities hosting a CAS	775	1,383	2,135	2,655	2,340	1893
Municipalities hosting a CAS (%)	11.13	20.43	31.50	38.12	35.01	27.18
Nr. of asylum seekers	37,374	67,566	121,258	143,750	116,014	83,690
Nr. of CAS	1,321	2,962	5,896	7,899	7,208	5,533
Average size of CAS	34	28	26	23	22	20
CAS with more than 100 guests	62	119	213	254	191	152
CAS with more than 100 guests (%)	3.5	2.6	2.1	1.7	1.2	1.3

Notes: This table reports summary statistics about the allocation of asylum seekers across reception centers.

Table 2
Election outcomes — Descriptives.
Source: Home Office data warehouse — Electoral results (*Eligendo*).

	2013		2018	
	Chamber of deputies	Senate	Chamber of deputies	Senate
Anti-immigration parties	6.05	6.25	21.70	21.87
League	4.09	4.33	17.35	17.61
BoI	1.96	1.92	4.35	4.26
PDL	21.56	22.30	14.00	14.43
5SM	25.56	23.79	32.68	32.22
Center-left	29.55	31.63	26.25	26.28
Turnout	75.19	72.93	75.11	72.99

Notes: The table shows summary statistics for electoral results in national Parliamentary elections in 2013 and 2018 for the main political parties and coalitions.

3.2. Electoral data

In order to measure local political preferences, we use data from the Home Office for the 2013 and 2018 national elections of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, the two chambers of the Italian Parliament.[28] This dataset provides information about the number of votes received by any party competing in each round at the municipality level.

At a national level PDL, the major holder of center-right governments in the last 25 years, accounted for about 22 percent of total votes in the 2013 national elections, while the *League* and BoI, combined, accounted for around 6 percent. After the March 2018 elections, the anti-immigration front steadily gained support. BoI more than doubled its share of votes, and the *League* received around 17 percent of votes (see Table 2). In the Appendix, we report a map of vote shares for anti-immigration parties at the municipality level (see Fig. A.3). The results from the 2018 elections also confirmed the rising trend in the support for the populist party 5SM, which escalated to about 32 percent of preferences from, 25 percent in 2013.

Between 2013 and 2018, leftist parties experienced a drop in their consensus. Center-left coalitions received, on aggregate, about 26 percent of votes in 2018, down from around 30 percent in 2013. The *Democratic Party* (PD) maintained the lion's share, with slightly more than 18 percent and 19 percent of votes for, respectively, the *Chamber of Deputies* and *Senate* elections, although it reported the relatively largest loss if compared to 2013, when PD accounted for more than 25 percent. The second largest parties within the left wing of parliament were *Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà* (SEL), in 2013, and *Liberi e Uguali* (LEU), in 2018. Both are located to the left of PD on the political spectrum, and their share of votes amounted to around 3 percent in both elections.

We examine the impact of asylum seekers on the share of votes for the whole group of anti-immigration parties, including the *League*, BoI and *Casa Pound*, as well as the two main anti-immigration parties, i.e. *League* and BoI, separately. We further estimate vote shares for the center-right party (PDL) and the populist party (5SM). We then focus on the group of center-left parties, including PD and 'radical-left' parties (i.e. SEL in 2013 and LEU in 2018). We consider political participation by using the municipality's electoral turnout (i.e. the share of actual voters over the number of citizens entitled to vote) as an outcome.[29] Municipalities located in *Valle d'Aosta* region ($N = 74$) are not included in our sample, since the list of parties running into elections in this constituency strongly diverges from the rest of the country and makes it troublesome comparing local electoral outcomes with national-level results.[30]

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[28] Data are publicly available at: https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it. The 2018 Italian general election was held on March 4th 2018. We further consider national elections in 2001–2008 to test for diverging pre-trends in political preferences during pre-refugee-crisis years.

[29] All Italian citizens over 18 years old are entitled to vote for the election of the members of the Chamber of Deputies, while only those over 25 years of age are entitled to vote for the election of Senate members.

[30] The constituency of *Trentino-Alto Adige* also presents some slight differences in terms of local candidates. *BoI* did not run for 2013 Chamber of Deputies election, while the *League* did not for Senate in the same year. To address this issue, we set to zero the vote shares for *BoI* (Chamber of Deputies) and the *League* (Senate) in 2013 elections for municipalities located in this region ($N = 174$). The exclusion of this region from our estimation sample does not affect results' magnitude and direction and estimates are available upon request.

3.3. Political propaganda

To measure the political propaganda of anti-immigration parties before the 2018 national elections at the local level, we use an indicator of public events and rallies of right-wing parties at the municipality level. We gather this information from Twitter accounts belonging to the *League*, BoI and PDL candidates, as well as official party accounts, and we geo-reference local events or electoral rallies happening across Italian Municipalities between January and March 2018 (electoral campaign). We do this to take advantage of the high granularity of exposure to political propaganda and to measure right-wing stances delivered in person, rather than on-demand as in media access or engagement. In fact, electoral campaigns in Italy are rally-intensive, and particularly so in the 2018 election, when identity politics played an important role and 'charismatic politicians', such as the *League*'s leader Salvini, exploited the traditional ground campaigning and voter contacts to influence others.

We downloaded more than 42,600 tweets published by election candidates and official right-wing party accounts from January 1st to March 4th, the day of national elections. By using an automated algorithm, we gather all tweets that reference any election event (rallies, electoral meetings, political public event, etc.) held in a specific location (municipality).[31] We found 4300 tweets linked to an electoral campaign event at the local level, and among them we identify 851 municipalities that have been visited at least once by right-wing candidates during the final rush of the electoral campaign (see Fig. A.4 in Appendix). In Section 7 we document that campaign events were fairly balanced across municipalities according to the share of hosted refugees. [32]

To further elicit the 'dog-whistle effect' of anti-immigration propaganda on orienting electoral preferences, we use information collected by Amnesty International Italy in their 'Hate Barometer' (*Il barometro dell'odio*).[33] Amnesty monitored social network (Facebook and Twitter) profiles of all candidates to both Chamber of Deputies and Senate during the 23 days before the 2018 election, reporting the online hate speech episodes of incitement to hatred against immigrants and ethnic minorities. Overall, they collected 787 episodes (either Facebook posts or tweets) from 192 candidates, 82 percent of them from the main anti-immigration parties. The vast majority of hate speeches (91 percent) were directed against immigrants and foreigners. From these records, we identify 125 right-wing candidates who published at least one hate message during the observed period. We match this information with the dataset on electoral campaign events described above and we single out 36 hate-speech-candidates who also held a rally in 231 municipalities across the country during the electoral campaign.

3.4. Municipality characteristics

We match the source of data described so far with a set of demographic and economic characteristics of the municipalities. We use these variables to check whether the allocated share of asylum seekers is independent of a set of observable local-level variables in the baseline period, and to investigate the mechanisms driving our empirical findings. We consider data from ISTAT's public warehouse[34] on the resident population by age and gender, the share of foreign born population, the share of the population over 65 years old and per–user expenditure for local public services. We also use data from the latest available 2011 Census on municipality unemployment rates, share of the population with tertiary-education, and presence of non-profit institutions.[35] Data on rent prices are released by The Italian Revenue Agency and correspond to the market value per square meter in the municipality. We resort to aggregate data from the Minister of Finance on taxable gross income earned by residents to compute municipality per–capita income.[36] We refer to the dataset on broadband internet access from the Guarantor Authority for Italian Communications (*Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni, AGCOM*). These data report information on the share of households with no access to broadband internet in each municipality in 2018. We identify Mafia presence following Dipoppa (2021)[37] and municipality administrations being under receivership in 2007–13 from the Local Administrators Registry released by the Ministry of Interior.

The 6891 municipalities in our sample have a mean (median) population of 7212 (2529) residents, ranging from 120 to more than one million, and a mean (median) area of 38 (22) square kilometers. The mean (median) per capita income is 11,652 (12,123) Euros and the mean (median) share of residents over 65 years is 23.01 (22.41) percent. The mean (median) share of foreign residents before the refugee crisis is 6.21 (5.38) percent.

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[31] The algorithm includes the use of keywords such as 'rally', 'meeting', 'gathering', etc. Such keywords must appear in combination with the name of an Italian Municipality, which we then match to our main dataset. A final, semi-automated procedure is used to double-check if all tweet-municipality pairs actually identify a political meeting.

[32] To perform some robustness checks, we also collect data on campaign rallies for the 2013 national election, using the same steps as the methodology for 2018.

[33] For detailed information on Amnesty International report see https://www.amnesty.it/barometro-odio/ (in Italian).

[34] Available at: http://dati.istat.it/.

[35] Source: http://dati-censimentopopolazione.istat.it/Index.aspx?lang=it.

[36] Source: https://www1.finanze.gov.it/finanze3/stat_dbNewSerie/index.php.

[37] The indicator combines three sources of data: the list of goods, properties, and firms seized from Mafias from 1982 to 2013; an indicator for city councils dissolved due to Mafia infiltration from 1991 to 2013; and Mafia-related victims (from VittimeMafia.it).

4. Empirical strategy

We study the impact of the presence of asylum seekers on electoral outcomes at the municipality level by means of a fixed effects model specified as follows:

$$V_{mt}^{j} = \alpha^{j} + \beta^{j} AS_{mt} + \mu_{m}^{j} + \delta_{t}^{j} + \epsilon_{mt}^{j} \tag{1}$$

The dependent variable, V_{mt}^{j}, is the vote share (over the total number of voters) for political party j in municipality m at time t (where $t_0 = 2013$ and $t_1 = 2018$). Our analysis considers the outcomes from the 2013 and 2018 national elections for the two chambers of the Italian Parliament, i.e. the Chamber of Deputies and Senate. The explanatory variable of interest, AS_{mt}, is the share of asylum seekers at the municipality-level (i.e. the number of allocated refugees as a fraction of the municipality's total population at the baseline).[38] This is computed as the sum of the capacity of all CAS centers in a municipality. As we consider the allocated number rather than the actual number of refugees living in a municipality, the coefficient β can be interpreted as an intention-to-treat parameter (see also Dustmann et al., 2019). The long waiting times for asylum procedures and the low incentives for asylum seekers to relocate, as documented in Section 2.1, support the hypothesis that in most cases the actual number of refugees living in a municipality corresponds to the allocated lot. Since the CAS system started in 2014 (the crisis kicks off), and before then refugee reception in extraordinary centers was either low or nil at the local level, the share of asylum seekers is set to 0 in the pre-treatment period (2013) in all municipalities, while in $t_1 = 2018$ it is equal to the refugee share in 2017, the year just before the elections.[39]

The parameter μ_{m} captures municipality fixed effects and all time-invariant characteristics at the local level, while δ_{t}, the parameter for time fixed effects, accounts for shocks that are common to all observations in a given year. Importantly, municipality fixed effects absorb any static determinant of voting behavior including the historical presence of the *(Northern) League* or other radical-right parties at the municipality-level, as well as cross-sectional variation in the duration of refugee reception, the geographical municipality area, local infrastructure, cultural traits, and social norms. ϵ_{mt} is an idiosyncratic error component. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.

The identification of β as the causal effect of the share of asylum seekers on local political preferences hinges on the assumption that treatment allocation (the share of asylum seekers) is independent from any unobserved local feature, embodied in the error term ϵ_{mt}, that affects the outcome at the same time. If asylum seekers' allocation is correlated with municipality characteristics at the baseline that simultaneously affect local political preferences, and if the error term ϵ_{mt} is serially autocorrelated, the estimate of the causal impact will be spurious. To illustrate, assume for example that municipalities with higher exposure to asylum seekers perform differently in economic terms before the program launch. Then, preferences for anti-immigration parties may increase through channels not related to exposure to asylum seekers, and the estimation of causal effect will be biased upward.

In order to check whether local characteristics at the baseline are associated with the intensity of the treatment, we first run a balance test of the change in the share of allocated asylum seekers between 2013 and 2017 on a wide set of municipality-level variables in the pre-treatment period. Table 3 reports the results for balance tests. Each entry represents the outcome from the univariate cross-sectional regression of each local pre-treatment variable on the share of asylum seekers. In order to control for family-wise error rate (FWER), in the last column we report p-values adjusted for multiple hypothesis testing by group of outcomes, using the free step-down resampling method with 10,000 bootstrap repetitions (Westfall et al., 1993). Results reveal that the treatment is fairly balanced across almost all of the observables we consider.

We show the absence of a systematic correlation between the endline share of asylum seekers and local economic and demographic characteristics at baseline, i.e., (log) income per capita, unemployment rate, renting prices, (log) per user welfare expenditure (after controlling for FWER), share of foreign borns and share of population with college degree in the last available year before the program launch (2011–2013). Interestingly though, the share of asylum seekers is significantly and positively associated with the share of the population over 65 years old, i.e. municipalities with a higher fraction of elderly residents seem to receive, on average, more asylum seekers than municipalities with a lower share of elderly population.[40] The unbalanced age structure may potentially indicate a source of bias in refugee allocation: if private enterprises win CAS bids by lowering the price, they are most likely to locate CAS in municipalities that are depopulated and, plausibly, with low real estate prices. However, we do not find any statistical unbalance in local rent prices, as mentioned above. Moreover, in order to control for the local demographic unbalance, we include the local age structure in our empirical estimates.

We also exclude any correlation between asylum seeker assignment and the local institutional context. Results in the lower panel of Table 3 confirm the share of asylum seekers is unrelated with the opening of a SPRAR center over the same period and with the number of NGOs and local volunteers, as proxies for the level of civic capital. Also the treatment is independent from the quality of

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[38] While we have no precise data on refugee administrative registrations, we know that some municipalities registered refugees hosted in CAS centers among the resident population, while others did not (registration is generally the rule though, since it allows asylum seekers to get access to basic health and social services). This registration issue may generate inconsistencies in the population size across municipalities depending on the allocated number of asylum seekers. For this reason, we standardize the number of asylum seekers with total population size in 2013, i.e. just before the CAS system was introduced.

[39] In a set of robustness checks, we use the maximum share of asylum seekers hosted at any point in time between 2014 and 2017 as our endline observation. Results are qualitatively the same (available upon request).

[40] This is the result of the dispersal policy whereby asylum seekers do not choose where to live, while young natives do. Differently said, while asylum seekers are dispersed across municipalities, the age-pyramid is not. This is related to the demographic structure and geographical distribution of the Italian population. While the latter is ageing (22.8 percent of the total population was 65 years old in 2019, the oldest population in the EU) and elderly people are relatively spread out, young people are more geographically concentrated (e.g. in metropolitan areas). Hence, the latter concentration contrasts with the dispersion of asylum seekers, which mechanically mimics the dispersion of elderly people.

local institutions, measured by an indicator for municipality administrations being under receivership in the period 2007–13, and the presence of mafia infiltration.

As for political variables, the share of asylum seekers is not significantly associated with the share of votes for anti-immigration parties, PDL and center-left coalition in the 2013 election for the *Chamber of Deputies*. Yet, it is (weakly) negatively associated with the share of votes for 5SM at the municipalities level, although the significance vanishes after controlling for FWER.

We also provide additional support for our identification strategy by examining whether the allocation of asylum seekers in 2017 is independent from pre-treatment trends in local political preferences and economic trajectories. More specifically, in Table 4 we regress political outcomes for elections occurred in the period before treatment (2001, 2006, 2008, 2013, where the first one is the reference year) on the treatment variable interacted with time fixed effects, while controlling for municipality and time fixed effects. It is worth noting that the political spectrum changed remarkably between 2001 and 2013. New parties that did not exist in 2001, e.g. BoI and 5SM, emerged and gained consensus, while others disappeared from the political scene. Thus, we can test for parallel pre-trends only for parties existing throughout the period (i.e. League and PD).[41] We also reconstruct the evolution of political preferences for the anti-immigration front over time by considering the vote shares obtained by those parties that presented anti-immigration stances in each election.[42]

The results in Table 4 show that the share of allocated asylum seekers in 2017 is not significantly associated with pre-trends in political preferences for the anti-immigration front (Column 1) and for the League (Column 2), the most voted anti-immigration party. We find that the share of asylum seekers afterwards is correlated with the growth of the vote shares between 2008 and 2013 for PD, the main party of the center-left coalition (Columns 3). Yet, this diverging trends is unlikely to affect estimates of the causal effect in Eq. (1), but it can eventually lead to a lower-bound interpretation of our estimates.

Finally, to exclude that long-term economic trends drive the local allocation of refugees, we also perform a pre-trend analysis of income per capita over the period 2008–2013. Results reported in Table 5 do not yield any significant correlation between asylum seeker allocation and pre-treatment income trends. Municipalities hosting a higher share of asylum seekers are not on a different economic growth trajectory in the years before the refugee crisis.

5. Results

5.1. Political impact

In Table 6, we present results for our benchmark model as in Eq. (1), where the dependent variable is the share of votes by party. We find that asylum seekers significantly increase the support for anti-immigration parties, yet the impact is small in magnitude. A 1 p.p. change in the share of allocated asylum seekers – which is roughly equal to the average change among municipalities hosting a CAS – is associated with an expected increase by 0.17 p.p. in the share of votes for anti-immigration parties in the *Chamber of Deputies* election and by 0.16 p.p. for the *Senate* election (Column 1). If we consider the standard deviation of the change in the asylum seekers share (1.6 p.p.), the impact amounts to 0.27 p.p. This corresponds to 3.4% of the standard deviation of the change between 2013 and 2018 in the share of votes for anti-immigration parties for the *Chamber of Deputies* election (7.88 p.p.).

In Columns 2 and 3, the outcome is the share of votes for, respectively, the *League* and BoI. The estimated coefficients show that the allocation of asylum seekers increases the local share of preferences for both parties. Point estimates reveal that the impact is quantitatively higher for the share of votes for the *League*, although it is not significantly different from 0 for the Senate election.

The positive impact on the support for anti-immigration parties is offset by the loss in consensus for the center-left parties and 5SM. An increase of 1 p.p. in the share of allocated asylum seekers leads to a reduction in the share of votes for center-left equal to 0.11 p.p. for the Chamber of Deputies election and to 0.14 p.p. for the Senate (Column 6). Likewise, the share of votes for 5SM falls by 0.11 p.p. for the Chamber of Deputies election and by 0.13 for the Senate (Column 5). Lastly, the presence of asylum seekers does not seem to affect the share of preferences for the center-right (PDL) (Column 4) and the electoral turnout (Column 7). This may imply that a fraction of center-left voters shifted to the anti-immigration parties. Alternatively, some center-left voters shifted to center-right parties, while some of the latter's voters shifted to far-right parties, leaving the preferences for the center-right unchanged.

Even though we leverage the dispersal policy design, we further test the robustness of our results to extra time-varying factors at the municipality level, especially the demographic structure showing unbalance at the baseline. Indeed, population ageing may induce a "natural" shift in the share of votes for right-wing parties. In Table 7, we run the same regressions as above while controlling for the share of the population over 65 years old.[43] The introduction of this time-varying control does not alter the direction and significance of the estimated impact, while the magnitude of point estimates is slightly higher. A 1 p.p. change in the share of asylum seekers increases the share of votes for anti-immigration parties by 0.19 p.p. in parliamentary elections.

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[41] PD was officially founded in 2007 from the merger of *Democratici di Sinistra* and *La Margherita*. Thus, we consider the sum of vote shares for these two parties for pre-trend analysis in 2001 and 2006.

[42] Following the Manifesto Project data, we identify the following parties as anti-immigration forces: Northern League, Alleanza Nazionale, Forza Nuova, Fiamma Tricolore in 2001; Northern League, Alleanza Nazionale, Alleanza Sociale Mussolini, Fiamma Tricolore in 2006; Northern League, Forza Nuova, Alleanza Sociale Mussolini, Fiamma Tricolore - Destra Sociale in 2008; Northern League, Fratelli d'Italia, Forza Nuova, Casa Pound in 2013.

[43] In a different robustness check we further control for (log) native born population as well as the inverse of the latter. Results are unaffected (available upon request), which is reassuring also as for the potential 'share regression bias' (see Kronmal, 1993).

Table 3

Balance tests.

Baseline municipality characteristics:	Share of refugees in 2017	Std. err.	p-value	p-value FWER
Political outcomes - Chamber of Deputies				
Anti-immigration (%)	−0.005	0.058	0.935	0.996
League (%)	−0.012	0.057	0.833	0.988
BoI (%)	0.005	0.015	0.749	0.988
PDL (%)	−0.002	0.051	0.968	0.996
5SM (%)	−0.104	0.055	0.061*	0.291
Center-left (%)	0.110	0.071	0.125	0.460
Election turnout (%)	−0.079	0.066	0.237	0.656
Economic and demographic characteristics				
Income per capita (log)	−0.001	0.002	0.718	0.712
Unemployment rate	−0.036	0.053	0.499	0.709
Tertiary education rate	−0.024	0.021	0.263	0.651
Share of immigrants (% pop.)	−0.037	0.044	0.401	0.709
Rent prices sqm. (log)	−0.023	0.016	0.168	0.562
Share of over 65 (% pop.)	0.201	0.063	0.002***	0.047**
Municipality expenditure (log)	−0.017	0.010	0.084*	0.406
Local institutions and civic/social capital				
Municipality hosted a SPRAR	−0.001	0.001	0.288	0.907
Municipality under receivership 2007–13	−0.002	0.002	0.250	0.907
Mafia presence 1982–2013	0.002	0.004	0.686	0.970
Share of NGOs serv. soc. emerg. (% pop.)	0.001	0.001	0.258	0.907
Share of NGOs int. coop. (% pop.)	0.007	0.000	0.977	0.985
Share of NGOs religion (% pop.)	0.001	0.001	0.322	0.907
Share of volunteers serv. soc. emerg. NGOs (% pop.)	0.010	0.016	0.512	0.947
Share of volunteers int. coop. NGOs (% pop.)	−0.002	0.002	0.394	0.907
Share of volunteers religion NGOs (% pop.)	0.001	0.007	0.880	0.985

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the province level in parentheses.* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the change in the share of asylum seekers hosted in the municipality between 2013 and 2017 (where the baseline is equal to zero) over the 2013 total population. Column 2 reports the coefficients of the regression of pre-treatment variables on AS shares. Column 3 reports the *p*-value of these regression. p-Values in Column 4 are adjusted for multiple hypothesis testing by group of outcomes using the free step-down resampling method with 10,000 bootstrap repetitions (Westfall and Young, 1993) to control the family-wise error rate (FWER). (Log) income per capita, share of over 65 and foreigners, SPRAR (dummy), per–user welfare expenditure, rent prices and electoral outcomes are measured in 2013; unemployment rate, % of population with tertiary education and % of NGOs and volunteers on total population are measured in 2011. Sample size includes 6,891 municipalities as in our estimation sample (data on rent prices are available for a restricted subset of municipalities ($N = 6,422$)).

Table 4

Pre-trends in election results (Chamber of Deputies) 2001–2013.

	(1) Anti-immigration	(2) League	(3) PD
2013 × AS share	−0.0231	−0.0039	0.1428***
	(0.0450)	(0.0346)	(0.0403)
2008 × AS share	−0.0191	0.0069	0.0334
	(0.0769)	(0.0586)	(0.0437)
2006 × AS share	0.0010	0.0469	0.0008
	(0.0537)	(0.0340)	(0.0350)
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	27,556	27,556	27,556

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. The estimation sample includes 6889 municipalities for which electoral data from 2001 to 2013 are available. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. In 2001 and 2008 the number of votes for the League party was set to zero for municipalities located in those constituency where the League party did not run, i.e. Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Lazio, Marche, Puglia, Sardegna, Sicilia, Umbria. The anti-immigration front consists of different parties in each election: Northern League, Alleanza Nazionale, Forza Nuova, Fiamma Tricolore in 2001; Northern League, Alleanza Nazionale, Alleanza Sociale Mussolini, Fiamma Tricolore in 2006; Northern League, Forza Nuova, Alleanza Sociale Mussolini, Fiamma Tricolore - Destra Sociale in 2008; Northern League, Brothers of Italy, Forza Nuova, Casa Pound in 2013.

In order to control for extra aggregate-level shocks that may play a role at the regional level, we run a more demanding specification with region-by-time fixed effects. Results are qualitatively the same (see Table A.3 in Appendix.). We also report

Table 5
Pre-trends in economic outcomes.

	(1) Log(Income per capita)
2013 × AS share	0.0004
	(0.0004)
2012 × AS share	0.0004
	(0.0005)
2011 × AS share	0.0003
	(0.0004)
2010 × AS share	−0.0003
	(0.0004)
2009 × AS share	0.0001
	(0.0003)
Municipality FE	Yes
Time FE	Yes
N	41,346

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Sample size includes 6,891 municipalities as in our estimation sample

Table 6
Election results — Baseline regressions.

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) Center-left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
	Chamber of deputies						
AS share	0.1678***	0.1178**	0.0533**	0.0051	−0.1119*	−0.1191***	0.0429
	(0.0576)	(0.0572)	(0.0247)	(0.0364)	(0.0580)	(0.0435)	(0.0317)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
	Senate						
AS share	0.1612**	0.0861	0.0698**	0.0226	−0.1326**	−0.1469***	0.0452
	(0.0626)	(0.0558)	(0.0337)	(0.0492)	(0.0593)	(0.0547)	(0.0324)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level.

additional results while controlling for another potential confounding factor, the share of asylum seekers hosted in SPRAR centers (Table A.4). Results remain qualitatively and quantitatively unchanged. It is worth recalling that the SPRAR system is directly influenced by political preferences at the municipality level, since this system is run directly by local administrators. In another robustness check we run our estimates excluding municipalities hosting a SPRAR center either at the beginning of the period or at any point in time during the period of 2014–2017, and results remain unchanged (see Tables A.5 and A.6 in Appendix).[44] Our main results are also robust to the introduction of a set of extra time-varying controls, i.e., the (log) income per capita, the (log) municipality per–user expenditure for public services, the total resident population (see Table A.7 in Appendix). Finally, in order to address potential bias deriving from pre-existing political trends, in Table A.8 in Appendix, we estimate the same model as in (1) controlling for pre-trends in voting outcomes in the years before the refugee crisis. The vector of pre-trends includes the votes share for the anti-immigration front and the center-left coalition in 2001, 2006, 2008 and 2013, interacted with a year dummy. Point estimates are not significantly affected.

Eventually, to assess our results are robust to the characteristics of the dispersal reception system at the local level, we dig deeper into the heterogeneity of both the spatial and time (duration) dimensions of the policy. Does the impact on voting vary with the length of exposure to asylum seekers? Is the shift of preferences towards anti-immigration parties driven by municipalities where the concentration of refugees is higher?

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[44] As described in the previous section, SPRAR centers represent a small fraction of the whole reception system. In particular, about 700 municipalities opened a SPRAR center in 2014–2017, 438 of which hosted a CAS as well.

Table 7
Election results — Municipality-level controls.

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) center-left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
				Chamber of Deputies			
AS share	0.1891***	0.1306**	0.0607**	−0.0058	−0.1356**	−0.1094**	0.0382
	(0.0557)	(0.0558)	(0.0249)	(0.0364)	(0.0582)	(0.0431)	(0.0312)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
				Senate			
AS share	0.1833***	0.0969*	0.0806**	0.0102	−0.1533***	−0.1423***	0.0404
	(0.0595)	(0.0551)	(0.0329)	(0.0484)	(0.0590)	(0.0545)	(0.0318)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

To answer the first question, we test whether the impact of refugee allocation is different for municipalities where reception centers were opened for the first time in 2017 vs. those where CAS centers were opened before then, and for more than one year. Hence, we interact our regressor of interest as above with a dummy whether a CAS has been opened before 2017 (long term exposure). Results (reported in Table A.9 in Appendix) point to positive support for anti-immigration parties being robust and greater (0.37 p.p.) in municipalities with a CAS that opened in the last year (recent exposure). Yet, the differential effect by time exposure on anti-immigration voting is either negative or non-significant (especially by–party), so overall results point in the same direction (or are slightly attenuated) in those municipalities hosting a CAS center since 2016 or before.[45]

We then exploit the granular variation in the Dispersal Policy, to investigate the role of the size and/or concentration of refugee reception centers. Indeed, given the high degree of heterogeneity in both the refugee reception system and municipality size in Italy, one concern is that our results may be driven by major hotspots (located in small areas) or large reception centers (hosting more than 100 people). We check this issue by excluding from our sample municipalities with (i) major governmental centers where first aid and identification procedures occur before asylum seekers are transferred to secondary reception centers; (ii) with centers hosting more than 100 people. Results (reported in Appendix in Tables A.10 and A.11 respectively) are in line with our baseline model and suggest that general findings on political support for anti-immigration parties are not driven by municipalities where refugee centers are larger.

6. Mechanisms: The socio–economic effects of refugee reception

Refugee migration can affect political outcomes through economic channels. In particular, vote shares for anti-immigration parties may increase if Italian citizens bear a net cost rather than a benefit from hosting asylum seekers in their cities (Ortega, 2005; Mayda, 2006). In this section, we assess whether the share of refugees allocated by the dispersal policy changed economic outcomes and prosperity in receiving municipalities. By employing the same fixed effects model as in Eq. (1) above, we estimate the impact of refugee allocation on local income, welfare expenditure, natives' migration flows and population size at the municipality level.

We report results on the economic effects in Table 8, where we consider $t_1 = 2017$ our endline (i.e. before the 2018 national election). Column 1 reports the impact of the share of allocated asylum seekers on municipality (log) income per capita (of both natives and immigrants).[46] The estimated coefficient is negative and significant, with a 1 p.p. increase in asylum seeker share being associated with a 0.31 percent reduction in income per capita. This seems to suggest that asylum seekers may take a toll on the local economy, for instance, by displacing local workers out of employment or depressing local wages. However, considering the limited labor market opportunities for refugees hosted in CAS, this is unlikely to be a relevant mechanism.[47] In fact, the drop in income per capita may be mechanically induced by the arrival of new residents (i.e. asylum seekers themselves, when registered among residents). These inflows inflate the denominator of income per capita, while bringing little or no contribution to the numerator

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[45] This evidence provides an additional element for the interpretation of the results. Indeed, part of the observed backlash might be triggered by the fact that the policy was launched as a temporary measure and then turn out to be a permanent solution. Thus, voters might be willing to penalize politicians for their lack of transparency. Then, we would expect the backlash being larger in those municipalities where the exposure to reception centers was longer and voters realized the opacity of the policy. However, this result rules out the hypothesis of backlash being exacerbated by politicians' inconsistency.

[46] Our data source does not allow to distinguish natives' income from income of immigrants and/or refugees.

[47] As already mentioned, less than 10 percent of asylum seekers hosted in the Italian reception system had a job contract between 2013 and 2017, thus competition between asylum seekers and local workers in the labor market is unlikely to be a relevant channel in our setting.

if new residents are non-income earning asylum seekers. We investigate this mechanical channel in Columns 2 and 3, where our dependent variables are the numerator (log income) and the denominator (log population) respectively. We find that a 1 p.p. increase in asylum seekers' share is significantly correlated with a decline of 0.1 percent in total income (Column 2) at the local level, and an increase of 0.21 percent in population size (Column 3).

Asylum seekers thus seem to bring a (small) positive net contribution to population growth, while being correlated with a decline in total income. If the latter is not related to the labor market channel, it may be the result of population dynamics involving asylum seekers replacing natives, or former migrants, in the local population. While using natives and the foreign-borns as dependent variables, Column 4 and 5 show that the share of asylum seekers is negatively related to native population growth and positively correlated with the growth in the number of foreign born residents. The latter is a mechanical effect while the former may be linked to the geographic 'displacement' of natives by asylum seekers, which may explain the total income drop (since, unlike natives, asylum seekers earn little or no income).[48]

We test this by checking whether the allocation of asylum seekers is associated with the cross-sectional variation in native population dynamics (internal migration, mortality and natality) over the time span considered. We show results in Table 9, where in Columns 1–3 outcome variables are population flows (between January 1st, 2014 and January 1st, 2018) as a fraction of 2013 municipality population.[49] Results show no significant geographical mobility or sorting across municipalities by natives in response to the inflow of asylum seekers.

Displacement of natives may likewise be related to 'intergenerational replacement'. Indeed, from the balance test in Table 3 we observe a positive correlation between the share of elderly population and the allocation of asylum seekers at the local level. Municipalities more exposed to the dispersal policy are also those with the highest share of elderly population at t_0, and are likely to experience higher mortality rates, lower birth rates and lower native population growth in the following years. The different age-structure at the baseline may therefore be responsible for the negative correlation between asylum seekers and native population growth. We test this hypothesis in Columns 4–7 in Table 9, where we estimate the cross-sectional correlation between the share of asylum seekers and death and birth rates between 2013 and 2018 over total population in 2013. We find that the share of asylum seekers is indeed significantly and positively correlated with the death rate during the treatment period, both among the total and native population, while it is negatively associated with the birth rate.

To account for the heterogeneity in these demographic dynamics, we estimate again the impact on the (log) native population, adjusting for the death and birth rates interacted with a year (2017) dummy (Column 6 in Table 8). The estimated refugee impact is not significant, with a point estimate equal to zero. Hence, municipalities receiving more asylum seekers are experiencing lower native population growth through a higher number of deaths and lower number of births. Once we control for these potential confounding factors, the negative and significant correlation between asylum seekers share and native population growth vanishes. We finally re-estimate the effect of asylum seekers on (log) total income with the inclusion of the share of deaths as a control (Column 7 in Table 8). This allows us to check whether a higher mortality rate among municipalities more treated by the dispersal policy, explains, at least partially, the negative impact on total income growth. Results show that, after conditioning on mortality rate, there is no significant correlation between asylum seeker share and total income growth.[50]

Overall, evidence points to small-to-zero income effects, driven by the settlement of asylum seekers in municipalities with a higher share of elderly population. Thus, as a result of the dispersal policy scheme, municipalities receiving refugees (i.e. low or no income earners) also experience higher mortality rates (of elderly income earners), which explains the overall income effect. At the same time, these findings show that refugees contribute positively to total population growth.

While we find weak evidence of income effects at the local level, we next test average welfare effects by looking at the allocation of municipality public expenditure.[51] Indeed, the latter may be diluted or may decrease as soon the pool of users grows, as in the case of substantial asylum seeker inflows.[52] The increase in competition for public resources may also be the reason behind the rising support for anti-immigration parties. In Table 10, we regress the (log) municipality per–user expenditure for public services in various categories on the share of asylum seekers.[53] If we exclude a significant increase in the expenditure for people with severe addictions, the share of asylum seekers is not significantly correlated with the expenditure in any of the categories considered. There

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[48] Geographical displacement can be driven by negative labor market externalities, i.e. asylum seekers reducing employment opportunities and compensations for local workers, as well as motivated by asylum seekers entering residents' utility function as a local dis-amenity in the framework of residential location choice.

[49] We use ISTAT data on new resident registrations and cancellations, from and toward other municipalities (or abroad), respectively, to construct measures of inflows and outflows. Their difference yields the net migration flow, which we standardize with the population in 2013. We use cross-sectional specifications here in order to compute all yearly population changes, which may overlooked by using a panel specification over 4-years span.

[50] We repeat the same analysis at a slightly different unit, which is the 'Labor Market Area' (LMA) instead of the municipality. LMAs are sub-regional geographical areas in Italy where the bulk of the labor force lives and works, and where establishments can find the largest amount of the labor force necessary to occupy the offered jobs. This allows us to check whether economic effects are triggered by the treatment at a level that is more economically relevant than the one defined by municipalities' boundaries. Results are reported in Table A.12 in Appendix and confirm our main results on the economic impact at the municipality level.

[51] Here we refer only to public expenditures for those welfare services that are managed directly by the municipalities.

[52] It is worth reminding that differently from the SPRAR system, the allowance for AS hosted in CAS system is not managed by the municipality authorities. Thus, we do not assist to an enlargement in municipality budgets linked to AS inflows. Moreover, most asylum seekers are not involved in income-generating activities, so they do not contribute to municipality budgets through income tax revenues.

[53] We consider the dependent variables and the share of asylum seekers until 2016 as ISTAT data on municipality expenditure are not available after that year. In Table A.13 in Appendix we report the same estimation model while including an additional control for the share of population over 65, and results are confirmed.

Table 8

Effects on municipality income and population.

	(1) log(income p.c.)	(2) log(income)	(3) log(pop.)	(4) log(native pop.)	(5) log(foreign pop.)	(6) log(native pop.)	(7) log(income)
AS share	−0.0031***	−0.0010**	0.0021***	−0.0014***	0.0530***	−0.0001	−0.0003
	(0.0008)	(0.0004)	(0.0007)	(0.0004)	(0.0137)	(0.0003)	(0.0005)
Death rate 2013–2017						−0.0114***	−0.0124***
						(0.0007)	(0.0008)
Birth rate 2013–2017						0.0218***	
						(0.0007)	
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Death rate (2013–2017) is the municipality fraction of Italian citizens who died between 2013 and 2017 over population in 2013. Birth rate (2013–2017) is the municipality fraction of Italian citizens born between 2013 and 2017 over population in 2013. Both are interacted with a year dummy in order to compare municipalities with similar levels of the two variables in the treatment period (2013–2017).

Table 9

Population dynamics (natives' internal migration, mortality, natality)

	(1) Natives' migration	(2)	(3)	(4) Death rate	(5)	(6) Birth rate	(7)
	Net flows	Inflows	Outflows	Total	Natives	Total	Natives
AS share	−0.0045	0.0258	0.0304	0.0577**	0.0568**	−0.0352***	−0.0319***
	(0.0192)	(0.0348)	(0.0271)	(0.0238)	(0.0233)	(0.0058)	(0.0069)
N	6,891	6,891	6,891	6,891	6,891	6,891	6,891

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at province level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the share of asylum seekers allocated to the municipality in 2017 on 2013's total population. The dependent variable in specifications in Col.1–3 considers the share of people who moved across municipalities, between January 1st 2014 and January 1st 2018, over the municipality population in 2013. The dependent variable in Column 2, for example, represents the number of natives who moved into the municipality in the above time span, standardized over population in 2013. The dependent variables in Columns 4 and 5 considers the share of people who died, between January 1st 2014 and January 1st 2018 over the municipality population in 2013. The dependent variables in Columns 6 and 7 represent the share of birth, between January 1st 2014 and January 1st 2018, over the population in 2013.

Table 10

Municipality expenditure.

	(1) Log(Total)	(2) Log(Families)	(3) Log(Addicted)	(4) Log(Poverty)	(5) Log(Elderly)	(6) Log(Disabilities)	(7) Log(Immigrants)
AS share	0.0003	−0.0013	0.0061***	0.0023	0.0010	−0.0089	0.0116
	(0.0063)	(0.0074)	(0.0021)	(0.0070)	(0.0100)	(0.0307)	(0.0111)
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. The estimation sample includes municipalities for which data on expenditure for public services are available ($N = 6,728$).

is therefore no evidence that the arrival of asylum seekers leads to a reduction in the availability of total public resources for local residents. This finding also suggests that there were no additional expenditures imposed on local authorities hosting refugees on top of the national subsidy that fully cover the costs of refugee reception centers.

7. The role of political propaganda

Since electoral preferences do not seem to be rooted in actual economic mechanisms, in this section we examine whether voting behavior may be influenced by ideological or political factors. In particular, we assess the impact of political propaganda from right-wing candidates (including the *League*'s M. Salvini and the BoI's G. Meloni) on the backlash against refugee reception in Italy during the 2018 election campaign. We measure the electoral campaigns of right-wing parties that embraced anti-immigrant rhetoric to formally investigate whether local exposure to such propaganda between January and March 2018, just before the elections, exacerbates the political consequences of refugee reception.[54] By focusing on right-wing rallies, we identify political propaganda

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[54] For instance, the *League*'s slogan during the electoral campaign was 'Italians first' and its leader, Matteo Salvini frequently refers to migration phenomenon as "immigrant invasion", "threat to national identity" and "great replacement".

Table 11

Propaganda exposure — Balance tests on AS share.

	Anti-immigration (League or BoI) rally	League rally	BoI rally
AS share	−0.0651	−0.0546	−0.0683
	(0.0393)	(0.0439)	(0.0679)
N	6,891	6,891	6,891

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers in 2017 over total baseline population at the municipality level. Column 2 reports the coefficients of the regression of AS share on dummy variables identifying municipalities where visited at least once by candidates from anti-immigration parties

Table 12

Anti-immigration propaganda — Balance tests on political outcomes at baseline.

Voting outcomes - Chamber of Deputies				
Political outcome	Propaganda	Std. err.	*p*-value	*p*-value FWER
Anti-immigration (%)	−0.422	0.671	0.531	0.896
League (%)	−0.458	0.684	0.505	0.882
BoI (%)	0.058	0.123	0.635	0.896
PDL (%)	0.513	0.518	0.324	0.790
5SM (%)	0.761	0.546	0.167	0.629
Center-left (%)	−0.037	0.460	0.936	0.935
Election turnout (%)	1.446	0.595	0.017**	0.163
Anti-immigration coalition most voted party	−0.510	0.347	0.146	0.629
Political competition index (2001–2013)	−0.402	0.276	0.149	0.629

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the province level in parentheses.* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Column 2 reports the coefficients of the regression of pre–treatment variables on a dummy equal to 1 if the municipality hosted an anti-immigration rally. Column 3 reports the *p*-value of these regression. p-Values in Column 4 are adjusted for multiple hypothesis testing by group of outcomes using the free step-down resampling method with 10,000 bootstrap repetitions (Westfall and Young, 1993) to control the family-wise error rate (FWER).

over and above political stances fueled by social media and engagement. This is in line with the importance of traditional ground campaigns and with the literature on the role that charismatic leaders often play in the electoral success of populist right-wing parties.

A total of 851 municipalities were visited by right-wing candidates between January, 1st and March, 4th, the date of the general elections (see Fig. A.4 in Appendix). Since political rallies take place just before the elections but after the refugee allocation process, we first estimate whether right-wing rallies are systematically held in municipalities with a higher proportion of refugees, where the political returns of anti-immigration propaganda may be more pronounced. Table 11 shows that (ex-post) right-wing rallies are fairly balanced across municipalities according to the share of hosted refugees.[55] This evidence suggests that there is no statistically significant correlation between refugee shares and political rallies held during the 2018 electoral campaign. In other words, political rallies do not systematically take place in municipalities hosting refugees. In addition, we further test whether the right-wing campaign is balanced with respect to local political preferences at baseline, including proxies for political competition.[56] The results in Table 12 show that right-wing candidates do not sort into rally locations according to the local level of anti-immigration sentiment or the degree of contested election results.

Hence, we perform an heterogeneous analysis and examine how the treatment effect varies as a function of the local exposure to anti—immigration propaganda. Specifically, we estimate the same fixed effects model as in Eq. (1) above, while adding the interaction between the share of asylum seekers and a dummy equal to 1 if a rally or political event organized by the main anti-immigration parties *League*, BoI took place in the municipality during the 2018 electoral campaign. We include an indicator for anti-immigration rallies all together, and in different specifications we include party-specific rally indicators separately.

Results in Table 13 show that right-wing rallies have a significant additional effect on the share of votes for anti-immigration parties. While the political impact of the share of refugees at the municipality level is in line with our baseline model (slightly smaller), the coefficients of the interaction terms are positive and greater in magnitude, suggesting that the anti-immigration backlash for refugee hosting is significantly higher in municipalities visited by right-wing electoral rallies, especially for what concerns the *League* campaign (Column 2).

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[55] It may still be worrying that the share of refugees allocated by the dispersal policy has *changed* the location of political rallies in host municipalities between 2013 and 2018. Using data on the rallies of *League* and BoI candidates in 2013, again collected through Twitter accounts in a similar way as for 2018, we assess whether the allocation of refugees is associated with *changes* in the location of right-wing rallies over the period under consideration. Specifically, we estimate a fixed effects model as in (1) with a dummy variable for a right-wing rally as the outcome. Consistent with the findings presented in Table 11, we observe no significant association between the share of refugees and the change in location of right-wing rallies (see A.14 in Appendix). This confirms that right-wing parties did not strategically choose to hold campaign events in municipalities with a higher presence of refugees.

[56] We include a dummy for anti-immigration front being the most voted coalition in baseline elections and an index for political competition. We measure political competition following Barone et al. (2016) and making use of electoral data from the last four national elections (2001, 2006, 2008, 2013). The index is computed as the average of the differences in the vote share between the first and second party across these four elections in each municipality. A lower value of the index corresponds to a stronger political competition at the local level.

Table 13
Election results — Interaction with political propaganda.

	(1) Anti-immigration	(2) League	(3) BoI
	Chamber of deputies		
AS share	0.1776***	0.1177**	0.0607**
	(0.0559)	(0.0566)	(0.0249)
anti-immigration campaign × AS share	0.7968		
	(0.4891)		
League campaign × AS share		1.2966***	
		(0.3114)	
BoI campaign × AS share			−0.0157
			(0.3999)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92
	Senate		
AS share	0.1744***	0.0856	0.0825**
	(0.0604)	(0.0555)	(0.0327)
anti-immigration campaign × AS share	0.6220		
	(0.4331)		
League campaign × AS share		1.1268***	
		(0.3370)	
BoI campaign × AS share			−0.4244
			(0.5018)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

In order to check for the robustness of the differential effect of propaganda, we further estimate specifications that control for the interactions between our treatment variable and a vector of municipality-specific factors potentially correlated with holding a rally, including a provincial capital city indicator and several economic and demographic variables. This check rules out the possibility that local socio-economic characteristics, rather than exposure to propaganda, drive the observed results. In particular, we further include the interaction between refugee share and municipality-specific media exposure through web access, in order to control for time-varying spillover effects of propaganda through (social) media (see Table A.15 in Appendix). Notably, the differential effect of propaganda on political backlash remains positive and significant, after controlling for these additional interaction terms. This is to say that, all other things being equal, the political backlash against refugee reception is higher when anti–immigration propaganda is in place.[57]

To better isolate the "dog whistle" effect of direct exposure to xenophobic propaganda, we identify the events held by hate-speech candidates during election campaigns. To do so, we match Amnesty International's hate-speech dataset with our data tracking the geo-localized electoral campaigns of right-wing candidates. We identify 36 "hate-speech" candidates who also held a rally during the 2018 election campaign. In Table 14, right-wing propaganda exposure is measured by a dummy equal to 1 if a "hate-speech" candidate held a campaign rally in municipality m between January and March 2018. The dummy equals 1 for 231 municipalities. As before, the coefficients on the interaction terms are significantly positive and even larger in magnitude, suggesting that rallies by hate-speech candidates have a greater effect on the vote share of anti-immigration parties than general right-wing rallies.

As before, we ensure the robustness of this analysis by introducing additional interaction terms between the treatment and several socio-economic dimensions at municipality level (see Table A.16). Even in this case, results are reassuring in ruling out that findings are driven by different municipality dimensions, other than the "hate-speech" propaganda.

Overall, these findings provide evidence in support of the role of anti-immigration political propaganda in boosting divisive negative views towards alien groups through a 'dog-whistle effect', hence mobilizing voter support and boosting their electoral prominence. The effect is greater the more xenophobic views are made explicit by the member of anti-immigration parties, and leaves venue for accurate information campaigns and active programs against nativist and divisive stances.

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[57] It may be the case that political propaganda is an impact-modifier in some locations but not in others, e.g. in small vs big municipalities or in location with high vs low political competition (swing municipalities). In Fig. A.5 in Appendix we report the coefficient of the differential effect of propaganda across sub-samples of municipalities according to their level of political competition, population size and level of development (economic index including income, employment, activity rate, tertiary education rate). Results show that propaganda is an impact-modifiers especially in economically worse–off municipalities, while there is no statistical difference according to population size or political competition.

Table 14
Election results — interactions with hate–propaganda.

	(1) Anti-immigration	(2) League	(3) BoI
	Chamber of deputies		
AS share	0.1859***	0.1282**	0.0600**
	(0.0559)	(0.0560)	(0.0250)
rally by hate-speech cand. × AS share	2.7452***	2.1098***	0.5989***
	(0.9293)	(0.7795)	(0.2273)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92
	Senate		
AS share	0.1800***	0.0944*	0.0798**
	(0.0598)	(0.0552)	(0.0330)
rally by hate-speech cand. × AS share	2.8644***	2.1203**	0.6921***
	(1.1102)	(0.9523)	(0.2411)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

8. Conclusions

This paper contributes to a growing literature about the economic and political impact of refugees on receiving societies by exploiting an unprecedented surge in the arrival of asylum seekers and informal immigrants to Italy, mainly through the Mediterranean route. The Italian Dispersal Policy, implemented from 2014 onwards, allocated these massive inflows into CAS reception centers across Italian municipalities on a quasi-random basis. This policy was in line with what was implemented in the rest of the EU region, with the aim of spreading the 'burden' of refugee reception, increase the perception of fairness among the local population, prompt asylum seeker integration and avoid native public discontent.

We use unique administrative data on the number of asylum seekers allocated to each municipality between 2014 and 2017 to study the effect of the dispersal policy on the local share of votes for anti-immigration parties, as well as parties over the rest of the political spectrum, between two national elections held in 2013 and 2018.

After showing that the resettled share of asylum seekers is fairly balanced with respect to local characteristics at the baseline, we find that a 1 p.p. increase in the refugee share in 2017, at the peak of the refugee crisis, is correlated with a small but significant increase in the vote share for anti-immigration parties, leading to a drop in the support for both the main populist party and the center-left. This effect is robust to the inclusion of time-varying controls, in particular municipality local demographic composition, and it is not associated to any significant change in voter turnout.

We explore whether refugee migration affected political outcomes through economic channels. We examine the impact of asylum seekers first on income per capita and then on per user expenditure for local public services. Both analyses do not yield significant short-run effects on actual economic costs, supporting the idea that ideological traits or culture-related fears may have driven voting behavior and political outcomes in Italy during the refugee crisis. Thus, we investigate the role of political propaganda during the electoral campaign, in mobilizing voters' support. Our results provide evidence that radical-right propaganda boosts divisive negative views about the presence of asylum seekers. Indeed, the anti-immigration backlash for refugee hosting is higher in municipalities where right-wing propaganda took place. The effect is larger where anti-immigrant propaganda is harsher, as measured by hate speech. Our evidence also suggests that xenophobic campaigns may be more effective in mobilizing consensus in communities that receive refugees than in those that do not, highlighting the role of issue salience in shaping people's attitudes.

Overall, our findings provide new insights into the policy debate on the implementation of dispersal policies and integration models for asylum seekers and refugees. Focusing on the public reception system, Gamalerio et al. (2023) found that hosting refugees in locally managed reception facilities with the same municipal accountability can reduce backlash. However, this model has been largely rejected by most Italian local administrations. Our study suggests that temporary reception centers, i.e. without adequate integration services, local management involvement and proper information campaigns, can lead to discontent and political costs.

Efforts to build a global consensus on migration and asylum policies are often hampered by the pursuit of quick fixes. More integrated and long-term reception policies, involving both central and local governments, are better suited to meet local needs and benefit both newcomers and host communities.

Table A.1

Manifesto Project dataset — Italian parties' ideology about immigration.

Category:	2013					2018				
	League	BoI	PDL	5SM	PD	League	BoI	PDL	5SM	PD
Multiculturalism: Positive	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.23
Multiculturalism: Negative	0.00	1.52	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.75	3.85	0.00	0.00	0.00
Immigration: Negative	–	–	–	–	–	2.98	1.65	2.08	0.02	0.00
Immigration: Positive	–	–	–	–	–	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.09	0.39
Immigrants Assimilation	–	–	–	–	–	1.91	2.20	0.00	0.00	0.00

Note: This table shows data on party ideology concerning assimilation and immigration in 2013 and 2018, by party. Data on immigration ideology are not available for 2013. *Source:* The Manifesto Project; for reference see https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/.
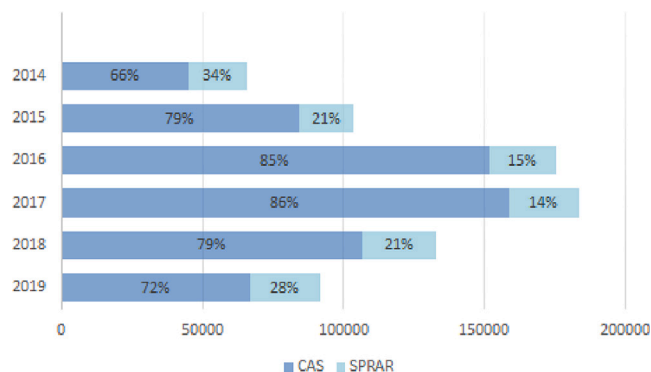
Fig. A.1. Asylum Seekers in CAS and SPRAR Systems,2014–2019.
Notes: This Figure shows the percentage of total asylum seekers in Italy who are hosted in CAS and SPRAR centers between 2014 and 2019.
Source: Authors' elaboration from Def 2019 - *Documento di Economia e Finanza*.
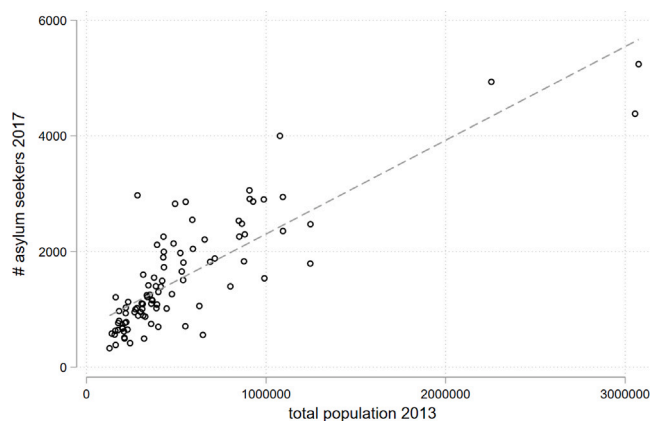
Fig. A.2. Number of asylum seekers hosted in 2017 on 2013 province population.
Notes: This Figure plots the number of assigned refugees per province in 2017 over the pre-policy province population in 2013, and their estimated correlation.
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Appendix A

A.1. Appendix tables

See Tables A.1–A.16.

A.2. Appendix figures

See Figs. A.1–A.5

Table A.2

Balance tests — sample municipalities.

Baseline characteristics	(1) Final sample	(2) Out of sample	(3) Diff.	(4) Std. diff.
Political outcomes (Chamber of deputies)				
Anti-immigration (%)	8.441	7.046	−1.396	−0.143
	(7.356)	(6.403)	(1.831)	
League (%)	5.984	3.803	−2.182	−0.242
	(7.216)	(5.384)	(1.836)	
BoI (%)	2.076	2.845	0.769	0.154
	(2.584)	(4.258)	(0.778)	
PDL (%)	21.078	19.427	−1.651	−0.155
	(6.526)	(8.396)	(2.225)	
5SM (%)	22.952	20.741	−2.210	−0.204
	(6.507)	(8.694)	(2.451)	
Center-Left (%)	25.574	24.393	−1.181	−0.098
	(8.074)	(8.967)	(2.223)	
Election Turnout (%)	74.656	76.438	1.782	0.166
	(7.712)	(7.428)	(1.805)	
Economic and demographic characteristics				
Log(income per capita) in 2013	9.043	9.087	0.045	0.142
	(0.214)	(0.229)	(0.067)	
Unemployment rate (%)	10.088	9.840	−0.247	−0.029
	(5.919)	(6.327)	(1.764)	
Rent prices (sqm.)	3.541	3.746	0.205	0.074
	(1.735)	(2.167)	(0.441)	
%. univ. degree	0.100	0.107	0.007	0.239
	(0.017)	(0.026)	(0.009)	
% of foreign born	6.212	6.606	0.393	0.060
	(4.364)	(4.844)	(1.092)	
Log(welfare exp. per user) - 2013	4.082	4.260	0.178	0.131
	(0.982)	(0.933)	(0.259)	
Share of over 65	23.060	22.648	−0.412	−0.048
	(5.543)	(6.538)	(1.226)	
Local institutions and civic/social capital				
Municipality under receivership (2007–2013)	0.101	0.095	−0.006	−0.015
	(0.302)	(0.294)	(0.027)	
% of NGOs int. coop. p.c.	0.004	0.006	0.002	0.038
	(0.019)	(0.040)	(0.002)	
% of NGOs religion p.c.	0.016	0.033	0.017	0.179
	(0.059)	(0.073)	(0.017)	
% of NGOs serv. soc. emerg. p.c.	0.057	0.082	0.025	0.175
	(0.086)	(0.113)	(0.025)	
% vol. int. and coop. NGOs p.c	0.090	0.090	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.649)	(0.462)	(0.026)	
% vol. religious NGOs p.c	0.282	0.581	0.299	0.105
	(2.401)	(1.525)	(0.290)	
% vol. serv. soc. emerg. NGOs p.c	0.805	1.439	0.634	0.216
	(1.669)	(2.420)	(0.637)	
Observations	6,891	914	7,806	

Notes: Standard errors clustered at the province level in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. *Out of sample* is a dummy equal to 1 if municipality is excluded from sample. Column 2 reports the coefficients for the regression of this dummy on each pre–treatment variables.(Log) income per capita, share of over 65 and foreigners, per–user welfare expenditure and electoral outcomes refer to 2013; unemployment rate, % of population with tertiary education and % of NGOs on total population refer to 2011.

Table A.3
Election results — region by time fixed effects.

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) Center-left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
			Chamber of Deputies				
AS share	0.1323***	0.0682**	0.0693***	0.0038	−0.0360	−0.1282***	0.0336
	(0.0383)	(0.0345)	(0.0236)	(0.0334)	(0.0366)	(0.0347)	(0.0292)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
			Senate				
AS share	0.1507***	0.0505	0.0950***	0.0025	−0.0540*	−0.1144***	0.0375
	(0.0414)	(0.0345)	(0.0295)	(0.0414)	(0.0301)	(0.0369)	(0.0298)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region-Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

Table A.4
Election results — control for AS share hosted in SPRAR projects.

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) Center-left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
			Chamber of Deputies				
AS share	0.1937***	0.1347**	0.0611**	−0.0067	−0.1410**	−0.1090**	0.0381
	(0.0554)	(0.0557)	(0.0248)	(0.0365)	(0.0586)	(0.0431)	(0.0313)
AS share in SPRAR	−0.8739**	−0.7645**	−0.0868	0.1805	1.0039**	−0.0845	0.0153
	(0.3418)	(0.3458)	(0.1683)	(0.1914)	(0.5115)	(0.1671)	(0.1327)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
			Senate				
AS share	0.1882***	0.1006*	0.0817**	0.0088	−0.1590***	−0.1412***	0.0404
	(0.0589)	(0.0552)	(0.0327)	(0.0484)	(0.0591)	(0.0544)	(0.0319)
AS share in SPRAR	−0.9192***	−0.6976**	−0.2117	0.2651	1.0782**	−0.2075	0.0119
	(0.3421)	(0.3449)	(0.1433)	(0.1751)	(0.5204)	(0.2214)	(0.1335)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

Table A.5
Election results excluding municipalities hosting a SPRAR before treatment.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
		Anti-immigration		PDL	5SM	Center-left	Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
Chamber of Deputies							
AS share	0.1761***	0.1172**	0.0600**	−0.0093	−0.1266**	−0.1190***	0.0343
	(0.0559)	(0.0565)	(0.0251)	(0.0363)	(0.0571)	(0.0438)	(0.0311)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
Senate							
AS share	0.1734***	0.0837	0.0835**	0.0082	−0.1417**	−0.1512***	0.0373
	(0.0601)	(0.0555)	(0.0329)	(0.0485)	(0.0583)	(0.0556)	(0.0318)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,146	13,146	13,146	13,146	13,146	13,146	13,146

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

Table A.6
Election results excluding municipalities ever hosting a SPRAR.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
		Anti-immigration		PDL	5SM	Center-left	Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
Chamber of Deputies							
AS share	0.1726***	0.1276**	0.0443**	−0.0237	−0.1215**	−0.1032**	0.0192
	(0.0587)	(0.0550)	(0.0180)	(0.0375)	(0.0610)	(0.0401)	(0.0319)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
Senate							
AS share	0.1803***	0.0875	0.0841**	−0.0301	−0.1503**	−0.1291**	0.0204
	(0.0615)	(0.0567)	(0.0354)	(0.0373)	(0.0596)	(0.0530)	(0.0317)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	12,370	12,370	12,370	12,370	12,370	12,370	12,370

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

Table A.7

Election results — control for time-varying covariates.

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) Center-left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
			Chamber of Deputies				
AS share	0.2473***	0.1838***	0.0639**	−0.0169	−0.2059***	−0.0849**	0.0397
	(0.0503)	(0.0508)	(0.0253)	(0.0370)	(0.0618)	(0.0421)	(0.0317)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
			Senate				
AS share	0.2414***	0.1480***	0.0850**	0.0009	−0.2242***	−0.1187**	0.0405
	(0.0539)	(0.0519)	(0.0340)	(0.0488)	(0.0609)	(0.0533)	(0.0324)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline, share of asylum seekers hosted in SPRAR projects, (log) income per capita, (log) municipality per user expenditure for public services, total resident population. The estimation sample includes municipalities for which data on municipality expenditure for public services are available ($N = 6,728$).

Table A.8

Election results — control for pre-trends in voting outcomes.

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) Center-Left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
			Chamber of deputies				
AS share	0.1646***	0.1265***	0.0439*	−0.0076	−0.1253**	−0.0707**	0.0407
	(0.0453)	(0.0443)	(0.0234)	(0.0368)	(0.0594)	(0.0325)	(0.0313)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
Pre-trends voting Time	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,778	13,778	13,778	13,778	13,778	13,778	13,778

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. The estimation sample includes 6889 municipalities for which electoral data from 2001 to 2013 are available. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. The vector of pre-trends includes the votes share for the anti-immigration front and the center-left coalition in 2001, 2006, 2008 and 2013 interacted with a year dummy.

Table A.9

Election results — time exposure.

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) Center-left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
				Chamber of deputies			
AS share	0.3559***	0.3033**	0.0488**	−0.0409	−0.2553	−0.1086**	0.0424
	(0.1223)	(0.1330)	(0.0230)	(0.0733)	(0.1584)	(0.0431)	(0.0347)
long time × AS share	−0.2248	−0.2326	0.0160	0.0474	0.1612	−0.0011	−0.0057
	(0.1421)	(0.1511)	(0.0393)	(0.0853)	(0.1734)	(0.0693)	(0.0522)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
				Senate			
AS share	0.4077***	0.2530	0.1212***	−0.0743	−0.2917**	−0.1013**	0.0349
	(0.1111)	(0.1563)	(0.0424)	(0.0686)	(0.1435)	(0.0479)	(0.0329)
long time × AS share	−0.3022**	−0.2103	−0.0547	0.1139	0.1864	−0.0553	0.0074
	(0.1331)	(0.1710)	(0.0546)	(0.0921)	(0.1611)	(0.0824)	(0.0514)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

Table A.10

Election results excluding municipalities with government centers (CARA, CPR, Hotspots)

	(1)	(2) Anti-immigration	(3)	(4) PDL	(5) 5SM	(6) Center-left	(7) Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
				Chamber of deputies			
AS share	0.1811***	0.1174**	0.0650**	0.0085	−0.1372**	−0.1190**	0.0518
	(0.0597)	(0.0587)	(0.0290)	(0.0412)	(0.0676)	(0.0508)	(0.0354)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
				Senate			
AS share	0.1738***	0.0812	0.0857**	0.0218	−0.1613**	−0.1626**	0.0548
	(0.0654)	(0.0579)	(0.0381)	(0.0564)	(0.0677)	(0.0653)	(0.0360)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on the total population.

Table A.11

Election results — excluding municipalities with large centers (≥100)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
		Anti-immigration		PDL	5SM	Center-left	Turnout
	Total	League	BoI			PD + Left	
			Chamber of deputies				
AS share	0.2906***	0.2386***	0.0511**	−0.0007	−0.2450***	−0.0925*	0.0506
	(0.0654)	(0.0631)	(0.0224)	(0.0424)	(0.0854)	(0.0491)	(0.0383)
Average within variation	17.55	14.67	1.92	−7.40	4.64	−7.12	−0.83
			Senate				
AS share	0.2948***	0.1912***	0.0916**	−0.0253	−0.2844***	−0.1421**	0.0483
	(0.0604)	(0.0704)	(0.0436)	(0.0437)	(0.0798)	(0.0668)	(0.0377)
Average within variation	17.58	14.79	1.85	−7.72	6.07	−7.41	−0.69
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.
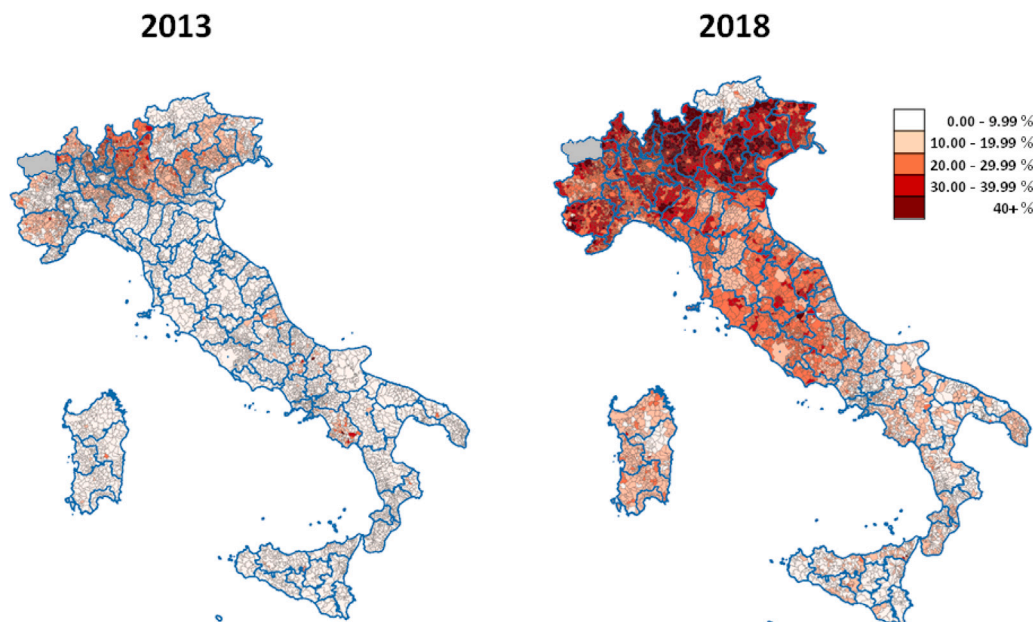
Fig. A.3. Vote shares for anti-immigration parties (League + BoI),2013–2018.
Notes: This Figure shows the distribution of vote shares for anti-immigration parties, including League and BoI, across Italian municipalities in the two national election of 2013 and 2018.
Source: Authors' elaboration from the Home Office data warehouse — Electoral results (*Eligendo*).

Table A.12
Effect on income and population — robustness checks at LMA level.

	(1) log (income p.c.)	(2) log (income)	(3) log (pop.)	(4) log (native pop.)	(5) log (foreign pop.)	(6) log (native pop.)	(7) log (income)
	(a) Top 5% asylum seekers share municipalities excluded						
AS share	−0.0039**	0.0083***	0.0122***	0.0060***	0.1084***	0.0045***	0.0052***
	(0.0018)	(0.0019)	(0.0015)	(0.0015)	(0.0123)	(0.0011)	(0.0018)
death rate (2013–2017)						−0.0094***	−0.0109***
						(0.0006)	(0.0007)
birth rate (2013–2017)						0.0183***	
						(0.0006)	
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,092	13,092	13,092	13,092	13,092	13,092	13,092
	(b) Government reception centers excluded						
AS share	−0.0035***	−0.0010**	0.0025***	−0.0016***	0.0621***	0.0000	−0.0000
	(0.0009)	(0.0005)	(0.0008)	(0.0005)	(0.0168)	(0.0004)	(0.0006)
death rate (2013–2017)						−0.0093***	−0.0107***
						(0.0006)	(0.0007)
birth rate (2013–2017)						0.0181***	
						(0.0006)	
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746	13,746
	(c) centers above 100 guests excluded						
AS share	−0.0028***	−0.0009	0.0019**	−0.0020***	0.0559***	0.0000	0.0003
	(0.0008)	(0.0005)	(0.0008)	(0.0007)	(0.0180)	(0.0004)	(0.0007)
death rate (2013–2017)						−0.0093***	−0.0108***
						(0.0006)	(0.0007)
birth rate (2013–2017)						0.0182***	
						(0.0006)	
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390	13,390
	(d) labor Market Area estimates						
AS share	−0.0076**	−0.0063**	0.0013	−0.0034	0.0668***	0.0003	−0.0033
	(0.0035)	(0.0030)	(0.0027)	(0.0025)	(0.0175)	(0.0020)	(0.0039)
death rate (2013–2017)						−0.0149***	−0.0129***
						(0.0010)	(0.0016)
birth rate (2013–2017)						0.0044**	
						(0.0018)	
LMA FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	1,082	1,082	1,082	1,082	1,082	1,082	1,082

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at municipality/LMA level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at municipality/LMA. Death rate (2013–2017) is the municipality/LMA fraction of Italian citizens who died between 2013 and 2017 over the 2013 population. Birth rate (2013–2017) is the municipality/LMA fraction of Italian citizens born between 2013 and 2017 over the 2013 population. Both are interacted with a year dummy in order to compare municipalities/LMAs having similar levels of the two variables in the treatment period (2013–2017).

Table A.13

Municipality expenditure — controls.

	(1) Log (Total)	(2) Log (Families)	(3) Log (Addicted)	(4) Log (Poverty)	(5) Log (Elderly)	(6) Log (Disabilities)	(7) Log (Immigrants)
AS share	0.0013 (0.0062)	−0.0016 (0.0075)	0.0060*** (0.0021)	0.0030 (0.0072)	0.0029 (0.0098)	−0.0093 (0.0309)	0.0116 (0.0111)
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456	13,456

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at municipality level. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline. The estimation sample includes municipalities for which data on municipality expenditure for public services are available (N=6,728).

Table A.14

Effect of asylum seekers reception on anti-immigration parties' electoral campaign.

	(1) Anti-immigration	(2) League	(3) BoI
Share AS	0.0006 (0.0011)	0.0003 (0.0009)	0.0005 (0.0007)
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Outcome variables in Column 1–3 are dummies identifying municipalities that hosted an anti-immigration, League or BoI rally, respectively.

Table A.15

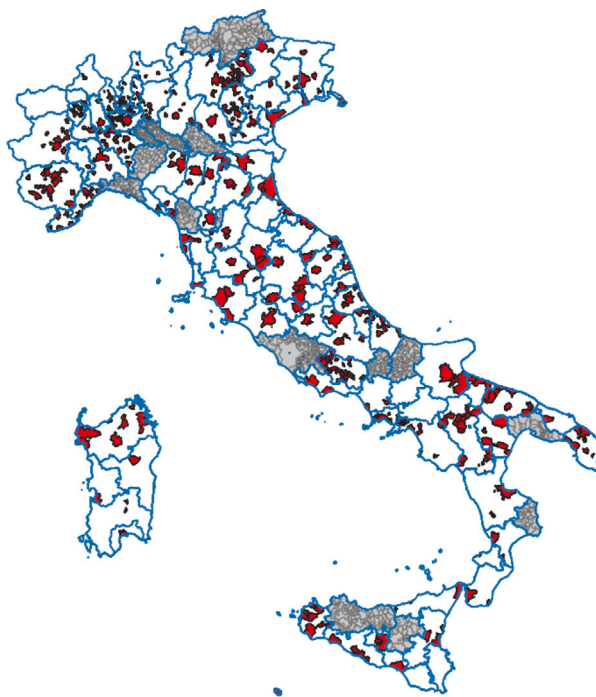Election results — interactions with political propaganda and other controls.

	(1) Anti-immigration	(2) League	(3) BoI
	Chamber of deputies		
AS share	0.1977 (0.1245)	0.1323 (0.1106)	0.0664*** (0.0230)
Anti-immigration campaign × AS share	0.8838** (0.3965)		
League campaign × AS share		1.2970*** (0.3912)	
BoI campaign × AS share			−0.1060 (0.4272)
Average within variation	17.55	14.76	1.92
Interacted municipality controls:			
Province capital city indicator × AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
Share of residents over 65 × AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
Economic index × AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
No access to wireline network (%)×AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Economic index is a principal component index combining (i) (log) income per capita, (ii) activity rate and (iii) employment rate. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

Table A.16
Election results — interactions with hate–propaganda and other controls.

	(1) Anti-immigration	(2) League	(3) BoI
	Chamber of deputies		
AS share	0.2043*	0.1396	0.0655***
	(0.1237)	(0.1111)	(0.0231)
rally by hate-speech cand. × AS share	3.7867***	3.3723***	0.3653
	(0.9761)	(0.8437)	(0.2619)
Average within variation	17.55	14.76	1.92
	Senate		
AS share	0.2041*	0.1026	0.0920***
	(0.1097)	(0.1158)	(0.0294)
rally by hate-speech cand. × AS share	3.9040***	3.4611***	0.3932
	(1.1298)	(0.9830)	(0.2592)
Interacted municipality controls:			
Province capital city indicator × AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
Share of residents over 65 × AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
Economic index × AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
No access to wireline network (%)×AS share	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	13,782	13,782	13,782

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses clustered at the municipality level. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. AS share is the fraction of asylum seekers over total baseline population at the municipality level. Economic index is a principal component index combining (i) (log) income per capita, (ii) activity rate and (iii) employment rate. Municipality controls: share of residents over 65 on total population at baseline.

Fig. A.4. Right-wing rallies/campaign events during the electoral campaign 2018.
Notes: This Figure maps rallies and other campaigning events held by candidates from right-wing parties between January, 1st and March, 4th, 2018.
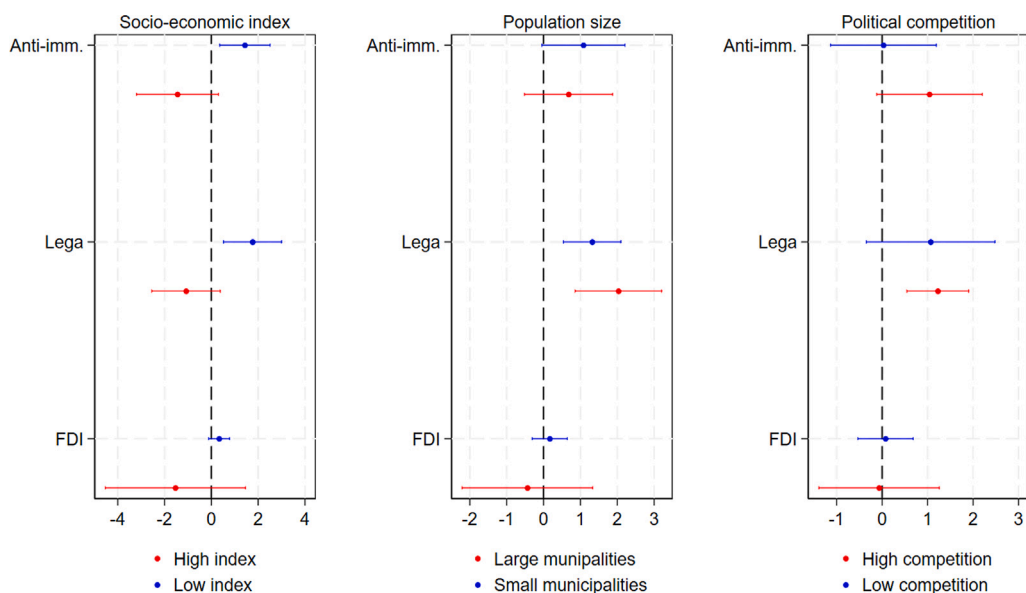*Source:* Authors' elaboration from Twitter data.

Fig. A.5. The differential effect of propaganda across municipality sub-samples.
Notes: The graph plots the coefficient of the differential effect of propaganda across sub-samples of municipalities according to their: (i) level of socio-economic status measured by an index combining income, employment, activity rate and tertiary education rate, (ii) population size, (iii) political competition.

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2024.104826.

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