

Explaining the rise of anti-immigration parties: changes in preferences and issue salience after the 2015 refugee crisis in Italy

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Immigration to Europe increased substantially in the 2000s, culminating in a ‘*refugee crisis*’ in 2015. This coincided with economic turmoil caused by the Eurozone crisis. Subsequently, far-right populist parties celebrated significant electoral victories across Europe. Often, these parallel processes are assumed to demonstrate that accelerated migration sours public opinion towards foreigners, especially during times of economic crisis. In this paper we use linear models and multinomial logistic models to analyse public opinion data from Italy. We find that immigration preferences remained stable over this period. Instead, we demonstrate that the political salience of immigration changed decidedly and find that immigration preferences only significantly predict vote choice in those years in which the issue is highly salient. These findings imply that issue-attentiveness, rather than changed preferences, explains the electoral success of the far-right in Italy, which is in line with recent research indicating similar results for other European countries.

Keywords: public opinion; immigration; Italy; refugee crisis; Eurozone crisis; salience

Introduction

In recent decades, Western European countries have experienced profound increases in immigration, composed of both migration from free movement within the European Union (EU), as well as refugees and asylum seekers primarily from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This process culminated in an unprecedented influx of refugees in 2015³, which tested the recipient countries' ability to accommodate and integrate new arrivals and imposed significant administrative costs on transit countries. Simultaneously, the Eurozone experienced tremendous economic hardship, caused by a sovereign debt crisis. In the same time period, right-wing populist parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland - AfD) in Germany, the Front National in France, and the Lega in Italy, have gained significant electoral victories. Often, these parallel processes are described as evidentiary of the proposition that accelerated migration can sour public opinion towards foreigners, especially during periods of economic distress.

In this paper we focus on Italy, which has undergone a significant increase in immigration in recent years and seen anti-immigration parties achieve considerable electoral successes. Unlike other European countries, Italy has featured an explicitly anti-immigrant party, the Lega Nord, since 1991. However, the fortunes of the Lega declined substantially before the recent increase in immigration. Then, in 2018, the Lega received 17.6% of the vote in the national election, and a staggering 34.3% in the 2019 European Parliament election. The primary question we investigate in this paper is whether an exogenous shock, such as the sudden influx of immigrants and refugees after 2015, changes preferences for immigration, or whether the rise of anti-immigration nativist parties is the result of a change in salience of immigration.

³ According to Frontex the number of illegal border crossings went up from 77,932 in 2012 to 283,175 in 2014 to about 1,800,000 in 2015. Available at: <https://frontex.europa.eu/publications/ara-2016-EZGrEA>

We therefore test two competing hypotheses that could potentially explain the rise of nativist parties after a sudden increase in migration. According to conflict theory, feelings towards immigrants are sensitive to increases in immigration (Quillian, 1995), as well as economic performance (Schneider, 2007). Hence, a sudden increase in migration, such as the refugee crisis, is expected to decrease natives' willingness to accommodate new arrivals, through radicalizing previously moderate positions (Blumer, 1958; Dixon, 2006; Hjerm and Nagayoshi, 2011; Schneider, 2007; Quillian, 1995). Furthermore, in line with 'resource stress theory', this negative effect on preferences may be exacerbated by the economic vulnerability caused by the Eurozone crisis starting in 2010, especially in countries affected more harshly (i.e. Italy). Conversely, theories of dormant preferences predict that increased migration does not affect preferences for immigration at all, because such traits are acquired early in life. Rather, an external shock such as the Eurozone or refugee crisis may affect the issue salience of immigration, hence activating these dormant traits to make them politically important (Ardag et al., 2019; Gidron and Hall, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Jones, 1994; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Taylor, 1998).

Hence, the analysis of this paper takes the recent electoral success of the anti-immigrant Lega as a starting point, and seeks to investigate its main driver. Assuming that recent increases in immigration can be treated as an exogenous shock, this paper seeks to determine whether changes in substantive attitudes towards immigration or changes in their political salience affect voting for anti-immigrant parties.

To test our hypotheses we analyse survey data from the Italian National Election Studies (ITANES), from three waves: 2006, 2013, and 2018. In order to adjudicate between changes in preferences and issue salience we first focus on the changes in preferences for immigration before and after the Eurozone and refugee crisis, and then we look at the probability that a respondent mentions immigration as the most important problem that their country must confront to measure

salience. Finally, we also investigate, using multinomial logistic regressions by election year, whether preferences for immigration explain differential voting behaviour.

Although the recent success of anti-immigration parties has widely been interpreted as a structural change in public preferences toward migration⁴, we find no evidence for the suggestion that preferences over immigration have become more restrictive in the time period under investigation. Rather, we find that preferences for immigration became slightly more open. Instead, it emerges that the political salience of immigration dramatically changed after 2015 – as the frequency with which respondents mention immigration as the most important problem for Italy increased significantly after the refugee crisis. If we assume that preferences are multidimensional, and that people assign varying importance to different issues at different times, voting decisions can change abruptly when the context changes, although preferences remain stable (Jones, 1994). This suggests that for people who are opposed to immigration in the first place, preferences may remain ‘dormant’ until activated. Once a shock, such as the refugee crisis hits, these preferences are suddenly switched on from stand-by mode. Then, this newly articulated demand can be capitalized on by political entrepreneurs (Mader and Schoen, 2019). Results from our multinomial logistic models further support this story: preferences for immigration are only significantly relevant in explaining differential voting behaviour in the years in which immigration is more salient. Thus, interpreting the political success of far-right parties as the result of preference change facing increased migration is misleading. Rather, the political salience of immigration as a

⁴ ‘Migrants Are on the Rise Around the World, and Myths About Them Are Shaping Attitudes’ available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/20/business/economy/immigration-economic-impact.html>; ‘Europe and right-wing nationalism: A country-by-country guide’ available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006>; ‘Right-wing nationalists are on the rise in Europe — and there’s no progressive coalition to stop them’ available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/07/right-wing-nationalists-are-rise-europe-theres-no-progressive-coalition-stop-them/>

policy issue, rather than a change in preferences towards immigration, explains the political rise of the far-right in Italy.

If increased immigration could change preferences in the short-term, the 2015 refugee crisis should have made a marked and measurable impact. Rather, we find no evidence that preferences for immigration became more restrictive in the time period under investigation for Italy. In contrast, the findings on the salience of immigration and on its importance in explaining vote choice post-2015 indicate that the rise of the far-right in Italy is heavily dependent on the political attention put on this issue area. It remains to be seen whether debates over immigration and national identity will become a permanent fixture of political competition across Europe. Thus, the future of parties dependent on the political salience of these issues is likewise uncertain.

Conceptual Framework

The rise of the Lega in Italy

The Lega, since its establishment in 1991 as Lega Nord, rebranded as Lega in 2018, has been openly anti-immigration and nativist. The oldest party in the Italian parliament, it went from receiving 8.7% of the national vote in 1992 to 17.6% in 2018, while never reaching double digits between 1996 and 2018 (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone, 2018). In the most recent 2019 European Parliament elections the Lega received an unprecedented 34.3% of the national vote, becoming Italy's biggest party (up from 6.2% in the 2014 EU ballot)⁵.

The Lega Nord was established in 1991 as a regionalist populist party. It long maintained an anti-southern Italian stance, with its defining issue being greater Northern autonomy, as it saw

⁵ 'Salvini's far-right party tops Italy's EU election polls' available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/27/matteo-salvini-far-right-league-party-tops-italy-eu-election-polls>

Northern regions (Padania) as distinctive from the rest of the country (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone, 2018; Passarelli, 2013). The party initially adopted anti-immigration positions against southern Italians and then against non-Italian immigrants as well (Passarelli, 2013). The party began to radicalize its position on immigration after 9/11, framing it as an existential threat to the survival of the identity of northern Italians (Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone, 2018). Until then, the issue of immigration was not particularly politically salient in Italy. As a matter of fact, Italy has only recently become a country of immigration, after being for decades a country of emigrants. From 2001 to 2006 the number of migrants living in Italy nearly doubled (from 1,379,749 to 2,670,514)⁶. Migration thus started to make its appearance on the political agendas of the major political parties. In those years, the Lega Nord was part of the majority centre-right coalition in power, led by Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister. Consistently with his coalition partner's positions, Berlusconi also maintained a hard stance on migration: the law Bossi-Fini approved in 2002 introduced very restrictive measures on immigration⁷. Although immigration was completely absent from Berlusconi's 2001 electoral program⁸, in 2006 the centre-right's electoral program was centred around the importance of values such as liberty, identity, and security. The program stressed the risk of terrorism and of the potential clash of civilizations. In this context, identity and Judeo-Christian cultural roots were underlined by the centre-right coalition as 'absolutely essential to defend against any fundamentalism'⁹.

⁶ 'Stocks of foreign population' available at: stats.oecd.org

⁷ 'Primo Rapporto sugli Immigrati in Italia 2007' available at:
https://www1.interno.gov.it/mininterno/export/sites/default/it/assets/files/15/0673_Rapporto_immigrazione_BARBAGLI.pdf

⁸ 'Man in the News; Italy's Billionaire Victor; Silvio Berlusconi' available at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/15/world/man-in-the-news-italy-s-billionaire-victor-silvio-berlusconi.html>

⁹ 'CdL (2006) 'Programma Elettorale', manifesto 2006' available at: <http://www.decesare.info/programmamacdl2006:pdf>

While the Lega Nord was going through a process of profound ideological transformation between 2012 and 2013, Italy was caught in the middle of the Eurozone crisis. In 2011 Italy was hit by a financial storm: a sharp decline in the Italian sovereign debt credibility brought the country to the verge of collapse (Fornero 2015; Sacchi, 2015). The Berlusconi government's failure to introduce wide-ranging reforms (specifically in the labour market and pensions) under the pressure of the EU and financial markets, eventually led to its resignation and to the appointment of an academic, Professor Mario Monti, as prime minister. The newly appointed technocratic government, composed of experts drawn from civil society and with no political affiliation, introduced structural reforms and austerity measures which avoided formal conditional aid programs administered by the Troika (Fornero 2015; Sacchi 2015). However, as also documented by recent studies (Armingeon and Ceka, 2014; Armingeon, Guthmann, and Weisstanner, 2016; Dotti Sani and Magistro, 2016), the negative effects of the economic crisis, the EU/IMF conditionality programs, and the disregard of citizens' choices at the polls affected their support for democracy both at the national and at the EU level. The crisis not only caused economic hardship, but also placed considerable fiscal strains on national governments.

Many voters reacted to this by turning their back on traditional parties and choosing instead new, or reinvigorated, challenger parties that rejected the mainstream consensus of austerity and European integration (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016). The Lega was a case in point: after the change of leadership, from Umberto Bossi to Matteo Salvini in 2013, the Lega had undergone a profound ideological transformation where regionalism was replaced by nativist nationalism. The EU, rather than Rome, became the new enemy. Salvini decided to drop the term 'North' from the electoral symbol, which completed the switch to a nationalist party from a regionalist one. With the Eurozone crisis still lingering on and economic growth not picking up, in 2015 Italy found itself in the midst of the refugee crisis, incapable of dealing with the sudden increase in the influx of sea

arrivals. Sea arrivals during the refugee crisis increased from about 13,000 in 2012, to 43,000 in 2013, 170,100 in 2014, 153,842 in 2015 and 181,436 in 2016¹⁰. By 2018, the number of migrants since 2001 had actually quadrupled from 1,379,749 to 5,144,440¹¹. The political response by Salvini came immediately. While the territorial cleavage had almost disappeared from the political agenda of the Lega, ‘in a context characterized by an entrenched economic crisis, heightened levels of migration and mounting terrorist threats, nativist nationalism was evidently seen as having the potential to “sell” better than regionalism, thus giving the LN’s leader a chance to boost the party’s electoral performance and stamp his name on its “reinvention”’(Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone, 2018, p.660). Social media, through the opportunity of campaigning permanently, allowed Salvini to shape domestic political debates on issues regarding identity, immigration, and law and order, changing the Lega’s message towards his favoured direction. Specifically, through content analysis of the Lega’s Facebook posts, Albertazzi, Giovannini, and Seddone (2018) show that while northern interests, needs, and values lose salience over time for the Lega, immigration, security, and terrorism are consistently central to the party’s and Salvini’s narrative. At the culmination of this process, in 2018, running on a similar populist agenda, centred on promises to reintroduce early retirement, deport migrants, institute a guaranteed minimum income, along with tax cuts, the Five Star Movement and the Lega formed a coalition government. The anti-immigrant Lega took over Berlusconi’s Forza Italia to emerge as the dominant party on the political right.

¹⁰ Data available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>,
<https://www.interno.gov.it/it/sala-stampa/dati-e-statistiche/relazione-parlamento-sullattivita-forze-polizia-sullo-stato-dellordine-e-sicurezza-pubblica-e-sulla-criminalita-organizzata>,
<http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>

¹¹ ‘Stocks of foreign population’ available at: stats.oecd.org

Preferences for Immigration

Several studies have investigated the relationship between changes in immigration and the success of right-wing parties. Multiple studies find that increases in immigration improve the electoral success of far-right anti-immigrant nationalist parties in both national and municipal elections across several EU countries (Halla, 2017; Harmon, 2018; Otto and Steinhard, 2014). Mudde (2007) argues that the smallest common denominator of far-right parties is their nativism - which subsumes racism, ethnocentrism, and anti-immigration sentiments (Arzheimer, 2015). Nativism expresses that non-native elements, including persons, ideas, policies, and values pose a threat to the nation, requiring efforts for insulation and defence. While nativism can be found among mainstream parties, Mudde (2007) argues that the far-right additionally displays authoritarian tendencies incompatible with principles of liberal democracy such as tolerance, pluralism, and protection and rights of minorities.

What explains the recent increase in the appeal of such political stances? Why does immigration appear to improve the electoral performance of right-wing parties that stress nativist rhetoric? In the literature, several potential causal pathways have been theorized. Changes in the level or speed of immigration might have a direct impact on key political attitudes or preferences. The studies presented above assume that immigration changes right-wing electoral success through the causal pathway of public preferences toward immigration. However, while most of these studies do find an effect of changes in immigration on voting behaviour, they do not investigate whether changes in immigration directly affect preferences for immigration. Usually, it is assumed that right-wing vote is determined by reduced acceptance of immigration, implying that migration changes public preferences to favour more restrictive policies, strengthening parties advocating such policies in the process.

Conflict Theories

Conflict theories of immigration posit that restrictive preferences towards immigration evolve as a reaction to a perceived threat from an outgroup over scarce resources, such as jobs, access to housing, and other opportunities (Downs, 1957; Dustmann and Preston, 2007; Facchini and Mayda, 2009; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001). Thus, conflict theory predicts that increased immigration leads to reduced willingness to accept further immigration and amplifies nativism (Blumer, 1958; Dustmann, Vasiljeva, and Piil Damm, 2019). Dixon (2006) and Hjerm and Nagayoshi (2011) extend this argument to include resources such as culture and national identity, which can also be seen as rivaled by immigration (see also Key 1949; see also Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967; Bobo 1983). According to conflict theory, feelings towards immigrants are sensitive to economic performance (Schneider, 2007) as well as increases in immigration (Quillian, 1995). Further, Quillian (1995) and Lahav (2004) argue that the larger the fraction of immigrants already in the country, the larger the threat natives perceive from additional immigrants and the stronger the appeal of nativist positions becomes.

A further specification of conflict theory is the prediction that ‘resource stress’ (Esses et al., 2001) or ‘economic vulnerability’ (Citrin et al., 1997) will enhance perceptions of the threat posed by competing groups, an assumption that is highly relevant when areas experiencing economic difficulty experience immigration. Macionis and Plummer (2008) argue that immigrants are often scapegoated by host populations for domestic issues. According to Savelkoul et al. (2011) such emotions may increase during times of crisis, leading to an increase in nativism and negative attitudes directed toward immigrants. Following this logic one assumption in the context of recent developments in Europe is that increased frustration toward immigration may be connected to the Eurozone crisis. Thus, for the purposes of our analysis below, we identify the pre-crisis period as

the years before 2010, before the Eurozone crisis began¹² (Vogt Isaksen, 2019). Economic downturn could lead to more restrictive preferences for immigration, especially in countries with the weakest economies. Thus, the 2010 Eurozone crisis might significantly account for any observed worsening in public opinion towards immigration before 2015. Unemployment in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Ireland increased markedly. Virtually all countries within the Eurozone have experienced prolonged periods of fiscal austerity - reportedly increasing public demands for government assistance (Lane, 2012). Reduced openness to immigration could thus be interpreted as resulting from exacerbated resource scarcity, stemming from economic downturn/stagnation, and austerity-focused public policy.

Dormant preferences and changes in issue salience

Alternatively, it is conceivable that immigration does not change people's preferences for immigration in the short-term. In this vein, some authors rationalize voting for the radical right as stemming from long-dormant traits that are activated by erosion in living standards (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2017). In this understanding, preferences for immigration are relatively stable, and unchanged by immigration itself. In a related context, Ardag et al. (2019) argue that support for populism is a latent disposition among large numbers of citizens. Populist attitudes and preferences can lay dormant in individuals who have them. However, given the right cues and contextual environment, these latent dispositions can be activated and turn into observable attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. Activation would thus not change preferences,

¹² If we identified the years before the refugee crisis (pre 2015), as the pre-crisis years, we may be failing to account for the potential effect the Eurozone crisis on migration preferences. If, as the 'resource stress' theory predicts, economic hardship can exacerbate restrictive preferences for immigration, then opinions may begin to sour already post-2010 and pre-2015. Hence we identify the pre-2010 period as the pre-crisis period (pre-Eurozone and pre-refugee crisis) and analyse the change in preferences for immigration by year (for each available year in the datasets after 2010) to isolate the effects of the two shocks, the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis.

but rather induce voters to express their political opinions, or explicitly act on the basis of specific opinions rather than others. In the context of immigration to the United States, Hopkins (2010) argues that attitudes toward immigrants are significantly affected by negative political rhetoric, rather than actual levels of immigration. Sides and Citrin (2007) suggest that the level of politicization of immigration is more impactful for opinion formation than actual demographic realities. In a similar way, Taylor (1998) suggests that increased exposure to immigration might increase the issue's salience and thus impact political behaviour.

Similarly, Jones (1994) argues that choice reversals of political decision makers need not reveal inconsistencies, changed preferences, or irrationality. Instead, he argues that preferences are multidimensional and that people assign varying importance to these different dimensions according to different decision contexts. Jones (1994) thus treats preferences as relatively fixed, but points out that differing contexts can probe individuals to base their political choices more on one dimension rather than another. Thus, the interaction of preferences and context yields different choices at different times, often without a change in any of the underlying preference dimensions (Jones, 1994; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005).

Although people's preferences for immigration may not change substantively, it is possible that they suddenly become salient as people start to witness more immigration, and the anti-immigrant rhetoric surrounding it. Exogenous shocks may not change policy preferences but may change issue salience and thereby affect political behaviour (Ardag et al., 2019; Gidron and Hall, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Jones, 1994; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Mader and Schoen, 2019; Mudde, 2007; Taylor, 1998). Because of the complexity of political choices, the relative importance given to different policy dimensions can change political decisions without changing preferences (Jones, 1994). Consistently with these theories, Kustov, Laaker, and Reller (2019), drawing on seven panel datasets, find that preferences for immigration are largely stable over time.

Dennison and Geddes (2019) argue that the recent increase in immigration has primarily affected the political salience of immigration, but has not substantively impacted attitudes themselves. Similarly, Mader and Schoen (2019) present evidence indicating that changes in political salience of immigration was a key driver of the political ascent of the AfD in Germany (also see Arzheimer and Berning, 2019).

Hypotheses

Given the above discussion, we test two competing hypotheses, which yield different predictions about the potential impacts of the refugee crisis on individual preferences for immigration, and on the subsequent electoral success of nativist parties.

- **Conflict hypotheses:**

- According to conflict theory, increased immigration leads to reduced willingness to accept further immigration and amplifies nativism. Hence, as a result of the refugee crisis, we expect to see more restrictive preferences for immigration (H1A).
- Furthermore, in line with the ‘resource stress’ theory, the Eurozone crisis starting in 2010 and the ensuing economic vulnerability, may have enhanced perceptions of the threat posed by immigrants. Hence, as a result of the Eurozone crisis, we expect to see more restrictive preferences for immigration starting in 2010 (H1B).

- **Dormant Preferences and Salience hypothesis:**

- According to the dormant preferences theory, increased immigration does not affect preferences for immigration, since such opinions are acquired early in life, but it may impact the salience of immigration as a political

issue, activating these dormant traits. Hence, as a result of the refugee crisis, we expect to see no changes in preferences for immigration but we expect to see an increase in the salience of immigration (H2).

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses we use data from the Italian National Election Studies (ITANES), from three waves 2006, 2013, and 2018 (ITANES, 2006; ITANES, 2013; ITANES, 2018). Unfortunately, this is not panel data, hence different individuals are interviewed in each wave. Since individual-level characteristics are not constant over time in this dataset, we provide alternative model specifications in the appendix in which we control for potential confounders in all models as well. Depending on our variable of interest, our sample consists of a total of between 808 and 2,488 respondents each year.

First, we want to track how preferences for immigration change over time as different crises (Eurozone and refugee) hit Italy. Hence, our first dependent variable of interest measures preferences for immigration and it is a continuous variable ranging from 1 (immigration opportunities should be restricted) to 7 (immigration opportunities should be facilitated) in Italy. This is measured in 2006, 2013, and 2018. The Eurozone crisis began in early 2010, while the refugee crisis started in 2015. To capture the effect of the crises on preferences for immigration we run a linear model with preferences for immigration as our dependent variable, and the year variable as our independent variable. In Appendix C we also add interactions with age, gender, political ideology (1 - left to 10 - right), college degree, the size of the city the respondent lives in (city below 10,000 inhabitants, city between 10,000 and 30,000 inhabitants, city between 30,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, or city above 100,000 inhabitants) and the region group (North-West, North-East, Centre, South, Islands).

Second, we want to track how the salience of immigration changed over time and whether this affected voting decisions. To do this, our dependent variable of interest captures the salience of immigration in different election years (2006, 2013, 2018) and it measures whether the respondent rated immigration as the first or second most important problem for Italy. The constructed variable is a dummy variable taking value 1 if the problem relates to immigration in any way, and 0 otherwise. We use a linear model to measure the effect of the crises on the salience of immigration over time, where salience is our dependent variable and time is the independent variable. In Appendix B and C we also provide results from a logistic model due to the binary nature of the dependent variable, and results from a model with controls for socio-demographic characteristics.

Finally, to demonstrate the importance of issue salience, we investigate if immigration is a relevant determinant of voting behaviour in all three periods under analysis or just when it is salient as a political issue. To do this, the dependent variable is the party voted in the last election, which due to the very high number of parties in certain years, we group into coalitions¹³. This is available in 2006, 2013, and 2018. We decide to run separate multinomial logistic models for each year to see which variables explain voting for each party in each year, we are particularly interested in whether preferences for immigration explain voting for certain parties, and whether this is true across all three periods. Multinomial logistic models are useful for dependent variables with more than two categories that cannot be substantively ordered, as is the case here. The variables we consider are preferences for immigration, age, gender, region group, education, a measure of

¹³ In 2006 there are 16 parties, while in 2013 there are 23. We hence recode individual parties into the coalitions they were running with, and get rid of parties below 3%. The Lega, although part of the centre-right coalition in both 2006 and 2013 is considered on its own due to it being the main anti-immigrant party on the political spectrum. More information is available in Appendix A.

perception of personal and national economic situation, unemployment, support for EU membership, and political ideology (1 - left to 10 - right)¹⁴.

Appendix A provides tables for the descriptive statistics. Appendix B provides regression tables for all of the models. Finally, in Appendix C we also provide regression tables and plots of heterogeneous effects to test whether the effects are significantly different for any specific group.

Findings

First, we test whether the refugee crisis affected preferences for immigration, more specifically whether they became more restrictive (H1A), or stayed the same (H2), analysing changes by year to also account for the Eurozone crisis (H1B). Figure 1 illustrates our findings. Figure 1 suggests that preferences for immigration did not change after the Eurozone crisis hit (0.09, $p > 0.05$), while they actually became slightly more open in 2018 compared to 2006 (0.33, $p < 0.001$), before the Eurozone and the refugee crises respectively hit. Given that the 2015 increase in immigration represented an unprecedented phenomenon that was coinciding with relatively weak economic prospects, this case should be most conducive to the kind of opinion change hypothesized by conflict theories of immigration. However, our findings do not provide evidence for the conflict hypotheses (H1A or H1B). Furthermore, in Appendix C we also provide plots (figures C1 to C6) of heterogeneous effects and show that effects are not substantively different for any specific group, including age, gender, education, region of residence, size of the city, and

¹⁴ We use different measures to try and capture income, including subjective measures of the state of the national economy (1 - worse to 5 - better, available in all waves), subjective measures of one's personal economic situation in the last year (1 - worse to 5 - better, available only in 2006), whether the individual has struggled economically in the past year (Yes or No, available only in 2013), whether the individual's income allows her to live comfortably or with difficulty (available only in 2018), and unemployment (available in all waves), since there is no objective measure of income in the dataset. Support for the EU is only measured in 2013 and 2018. We do not include the variable region group in 2006 and 2013 since the Lega, which was still Lega Nord at the time, was not present in the South.

political ideology. Although the size of the effects varies across groups, for no group do preferences for immigration become more restrictive over time.

Figure 1 about here

Even though people's preferences for immigration did not change substantively, it is possible that they suddenly became salient as they started to witness more immigration.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 illustrates changes in the probability that a respondent would mention immigration as the first or second problem that Italy had to confront. The results are interesting because immigration seemed to be somewhat salient already in 2006, as about 13% of people stated that immigration was the first or second most important problem. Then this number decreased to 2% at the height of the Eurozone crisis in 2013, and then surged to 23% in 2018, likely due to the refugee crisis.

The context provided in the section above on the rise of the Lega helps shed light on why immigration was quite salient in 2006. Immigration had doubled in a five-year time span and the Lega Nord, which had a very strong anti-immigration stance, was part of the centre-right governing coalition, which had forced Berlusconi to take a clear position on this issue. This was apparent in his 2006 electoral program, which especially emphasized the importance of liberty, identity, and security, against terrorism and a potential clash of civilizations. With no other major issues at the top of the political agenda, immigration had centre stage in the 2006 elections. Then, at the height of the Eurozone crisis in 2013, immigration almost disappeared from the electoral programs of most parties, and very few people (around 2%) considered it one of the most important problems Italy had to deal with. At that time the Lega Nord received less than 4% of the vote. The issue then

resurfaced at the top of the political agenda in 2018, after the refugee crisis of 2015 and the rebranding of the Lega as a nativist and nationalist party from a regionalist one.

Appendix B provides results for the same model using logistic regression. The results do not vary from those of the linear model. Furthermore, figures C7 to C12 in appendix C show heterogeneous effects across groups. The size and direction of the effects are not substantively different for any variable, except for political ideology. As figure C11 shows, people at the extreme right (10) were much more likely to state that immigration was Italy's first or second problem in 2018 compared to 2013 or 2006, while people at the extreme left were much less likely to say so in any year.

Next, we further investigate whether increased salience is indeed the mechanism at play by testing whether different preferences for immigration explain the probability to vote for one party versus another across different years.

Figure 3 displays the first differences in the probability that an individual would vote for each party shifting from being pro-immigration (mean - 1sd) to being anti-immigration (mean + 1sd) by year.

Figure 3 about here

The results match the level of salience for immigration each year. In 2006, when immigration is salient, the probability of voting for the centre-right coalition and the Lega increase significantly as one becomes more opposed to immigration, while that of voting for the centre-left decreases. In 2013, when immigration is not salient, none of these differences is significant (except for the centre-left's, which is barely significant). Then in 2018, immigration is back on the agenda, and it is quite clear how it is suddenly relevant: the probability of voting for the M5S, the Lega, and the rest of the centre-right increases when one becomes more opposed towards immigration, while the probability of voting for a centre or centre-left party decreases.

Thus, the Italian case provides evidence for the conclusion that salience of immigration as a political issue is key to understanding the electoral success of right-wing nativist parties.

Conclusion

If immigration can indeed cause right-wing political parties' success by changing people's preferences in the short-term, the European refugee crisis should be the most paradigmatic case for this effect. Italy experienced unprecedented changes in immigration and also dramatic changes in the success of far-right anti-immigration parties. Yet, we find no evidence that preferences for immigration worsened substantially in the relevant time period – rather they became slightly more open.

However, the finding of this paper does not contradict recent studies that document robust evidence for the link between immigration and electoral successes for far-right nativist parties. Rather, this paper investigates the mechanism behind this phenomenon, suggesting that immigration does not need to change policy preferences to radically impact electoral outcomes. Instead, our evidence suggests that although preferences for immigration remained relatively unchanged in Italy, the salience of immigration changed significantly. This finding is in line with recent scholarship by Mader and Schoen (2019), Dennison and Geddes (2019) as well as Arzheimer and Berning (2019), all demonstrating the crucial importance of issue salience in explaining recent increases in vote choice for anti-immigrant parties across different European countries.

An important question for future scholarship on far-right parties and immigration in Europe is whether the political importance of the issue of immigration will remain sufficiently high for nativist parties to continuously benefit, or whether support for nativist parties will remain stable or further increase as issue salience decreases. Should cultural issues decline in political

salience and other issues arise instead it is unclear what the fate of newly-arisen nativist anti-immigrant parties would be; the decline of the Lega in the face of the Eurozone crisis in the 2013 elections exemplifies how quickly electoral fortunes can turn when support is contingent on one-dimensional issues.

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Figure 1: Predicted values of preferences for immigration in Italy. Bars indicate the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities that individuals mention 'immigration' as first or second problem for Italy. Bars indicate the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 3: First differences in probability that individual votes each party shifting from being anti- immigration to pro-immigration by year in Italy. Bars indicate the 95% confidence interval.