

# **The rise and fall of anti-immigration parties in Italy: changes in immigration preferences and issue salience**

## *Abstract*

In many European countries, the recent electoral success of far-right parties coincided with increased immigration throughout the 2000s. While some have argued that these parallel trends suggest that immigration sours public opinion towards foreigners, a growing literature notes that immigration preferences remained stable. According to others, rising immigration activates related preferences politically, inducing people to vote based on their opinions on this issue. In this paper, we investigate the overlooked case of Italy, which has featured anti-immigration parties for decades. Using ITANES data, we find that immigration preferences remained stable throughout the 2000s but that the political salience of immigration varied considerably, closely tracking the anti-immigration vote. We find that anti-immigration voters are more likely to vote for an anti-immigrant party when immigration is a high- (rather than low-) salience issue to them, suggesting that issue-salience, rather than changing preferences, drives the electoral success of the far-right in Italy.

**Keywords:** public opinion; immigration; Italy; refugee crisis; far-right; salience

## Introduction

Far-right political parties have celebrated significant political successes in recent decades in a variety of countries. The requisite literature has indicated that economic variables, such as the effects of globalization on labour markets, the 2008 Financial Crisis or the European Sovereign Debt Crisis and subsequent unemployment have played a significant, but limited role in explaining the rise of far-right political parties (see Margalit, 2019 for a review).

As a result, analysts have recently stressed the importance of cultural factors - often related to immigration - as more fundamental in explaining shifts towards the political right (Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Margalit, 2019). Immigration appears acutely important in the European context, as Western European countries have experienced especially profound increases in immigration in the 2000s. This was 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. This process culminated in an unprecedented influx of refugees in 2015<sup>1</sup>, which tested the recipient countries' ability to accommodate and integrate new arrivals and imposed significant administrative costs.

In the same time period, right-wing populist parties in Europe, such as the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland - AfD) , the French Front National, and the Italian Lega, have gained significant electoral victories, stressing the perceived dangers associated with immigration in their political platforms. In many cases, these parties dramatically improved their vote share relative to the previous elections.

Often, these parallel processes are described as evidentiary of the proposition that accelerated migration can sour public opinion towards foreigners - demonstrating the crucial

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

importance of perceived cultural grievances to explain far-right political success. Several newspapers and political commentators<sup>2</sup> have floated the idea that immigration might be adversely impacting the willingness of native populations to accept new arrivals. This argument draws on literature suggesting that immigration can evoke conflictual responses by the native population and that immigration preferences might deteriorate in the process (see Downs, 1957; Dustmann and Preston, 2007; Facchini and Mayda, 2009; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001, Quillian, 1995).

Yet, Kustov, Laaker, and Reller (2019) note that opinions on immigration in the US and Europe across a wide variety of panel datasets have been remarkably stable throughout the relevant time period. Thus, explaining the improved performance of anti-immigration parties in the face of increased immigration by positing a change in opinion does not seem supported by the requisite data.

However, while Mader and Schoen (2019) also find that opinions on migration remained stable in Germany, they note that the salience of this political issue spiked as a result of the 2015 refugee crisis - which was used by the AfD to “own” this issue by filling a policy position that was previously unrepresented in the German party system. So, those opposed to immigration were moved to cast their vote almost exclusively based on this dimension of their political opinions. One could then conclude that immigration - especially dramatic increases in numbers resulting in media spectacle - favours far-right parties by focusing minds on a specific issue that these parties are able to represent more credibly than others.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘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/>

Thus, since immigration preferences appear stable and exhibit far less dynamic change to circumstance than has often been assumed, the political success of anti-immigration parties may strongly depend on how central this issue is to voters. Hence, recent immigration to Europe may have not changed minds, but focused minds. Presumably, when other issues increase in importance, immigration preferences become less relevant for vote choice and the fortunes of anti-immigration parties decline.

This paper examines Italy, a relatively understudied case - to further elucidate the question of how immigration and the political success of anti-immigration parties are connected. Although the recent success of the Lega has been remarkable compared to its historical performance in national elections, it is not the only anti-immigration party in Italy. Openly anti-immigration parties have been part of the Italian political scene for a couple of decades and the Lega itself is not a newcomer to the Italian party system.

Hence, Italy provides an interesting case study as its political system has featured explicitly anti-immigration parties for much longer than Germany for example. Also, the success of these parties has been subject to tremendous variation over time. This variation allows us to investigate what factors explain the rise and fall of these parties. Using three waves of the ITANES election survey, exploiting the exogenous shocks of events like the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis, we investigate whether people's preferences over immigration have changed - or whether increased issue-salience has activated already-held preferences politically. In line with the second view, we expect that when immigration is a low-salience issue anti-immigration voters may be less likely to vote for an anti-immigrant party than when immigration is a high-salience issue. When immigration is salient we expect higher vote shares for anti-immigrant parties.

Analysing the ITANES data, we find that there is a substantial percentage of respondents (roughly 40%) that consistently express preferences maximally opposed to immigration in the

Italian population. In fact, being maximally opposed to immigration is the modal response category in this survey for all sample years. Yet, the total vote count of anti-immigration parties cumulatively is around 16% in 2006, 4% in 2013, and 19% in 2017. Simultaneously, expressed immigration preferences do not change much over this time frame.

Examining individual measures of issue salience, google trends data, as well as newspaper mentions of the terms “immigration”, there is reason to believe that the issue-salience of immigration varied quite substantially in these years. Furthermore, we show using regression analysis that extreme immigration preferences are more likely to predict voting for anti-immigration parties when this issue is mentioned as most important in Italian politics - highly suggestive of the importance of issue-salience.

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 indicate that the rise of the far-right in Italy is heavily dependent on the political attention paid to 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**

### ***Anti-Immigrant Parties in Italy***

Although the electoral success of the Lega in the 2018 national election is remarkable, right-wing anti-immigration parties are not a new phenomenon in Italy. Alleanza Nazionale (AN),

and Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy - FdI), are additional examples of anti-immigrant, nativist parties. Though there have been other far-right anti-immigrant parties in Italy in the past 15 years (such as Casapound, Fiamma Tricolore, Forza Nuova) we will focus on those that have gotten representation in Parliament: Alleanza Nazionale, Lega, and Fratelli d'Italia. There is debate in the literature on whether Alleanza Nazionale should be included as an anti-immigration party or just as a nationalist-conservative one (Lubbers et al. 2002; van Spanjie 2011). Lubbers et al. (2002) consider anti-immigration parties those that score higher than 8.5 on a ten-point anti-immigration scale. This categorization might be considered somewhat arbitrary. We justify our inclusion of AN as an anti-immigration party based on interviews from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). We classify as anti-immigration parties those that score above the mean plus one standard deviation in the ten-point anti-immigration scale for the country under observation; hence this is a relative measure specific to a particular year and country. According to this criteria, as shown in Appendix A, there were three anti-immigration parties in Italy in 2006, 2013 and 2018: the Lega, AN, and FdI. What these three parties have in common is their 'discourse of Italian people first' (Ter Wal, 2000), which is central to their ideologies.

Alleanza Nazionale evolved in 1995 from the Movimento Sociale Italiano, a neofascist party that was created after the end of the fascist regime. Running on a conservative-nativist platform the party managed to win on average 15% of the vote share in each election between 1994 and 2009, when the party was eventually merged into the People of Freedom (a centre-right group). Then in 2012 Giorgia Meloni and other former members of the AN founded Brothers of Italy, similarly grounded on "Italians first" rhetoric, and pledges to preserve the traditional family against foreign influences. While in its first national election in 2013 FdI only got 2% of the vote, it went up to 4.4% in 2018 and it now polls at around 14%.

The Lega Nord, established in 1991 and rebranded as Lega in 2018, has been openly anti-immigration and nativist from its inception. 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)<sup>3</sup>. 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 (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). While the Lega Nord drew support from the northern regions of the country - due to its regionalist dimension - the AN first and FdI later drew support from the centre and south (Geddes, 2008).

Until the early 2000s, 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 itself, 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)<sup>4</sup>. Migration thus started to make its appearance on the political agendas of the major political parties. In those years (2001-2006), the Lega Nord and AN were part of the majority centre-right coalition in power, led by Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister. Once in power, the government coalition used hard-line anti-immigration rhetoric and a

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<sup>3</sup> '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>

<sup>4</sup> 'Stocks of foreign population' available at: [stats.oecd.org](https://stats.oecd.org)

key immigration measure was introduced in 2002: the law Bossi-Fini. While Berlusconi's Forza Italia was the dominant party within the coalition, it was not a key player in the development of the immigration legislation. The leaders of these proposals were Bossi (leader of the Lega Nord) and Fini (leader of AN). However, a fourth party in the coalition, the Christian UDC, successfully managed, with some help from Forza Italia, to negotiate and moderate the content of the legislation (Geddes, 2008). Although immigration was completely absent from Berlusconi's 2001 electoral program<sup>5</sup>, 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'<sup>6</sup>.

While the Lega Nord underwent a process of profound ideological transformation between 2012 and 2013, Italy suffered economically from 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

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<sup>5</sup>'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>

<sup>6</sup> 'CdL (2006) 'Programma Elettorale', manifesto 2006' available at: <http://www.decesare.info/programmacd12006:pdf>



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 finalized its 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. In a similar way, Brothers of Italy was founded in reaction to the Eurozone crisis and to the continued economic hardships that Italy was experiencing: Brothers of Italy rejected the EU as it was, it put Italians first, was openly anti-immigration, and pledged for the preservation of the traditional family. However, in 2013 immigration was not at the centre of the political discussion, with austerity, unemployment and the economy taking centre stage (Di Virgilio et al 2015). This left the door open for populist and Eurosceptic political actors to take the scene, accusing the EU's policies to impede the Italian economic recovery. While the elections ended without a clear winner, the Five Star Movement, a new populist party created by the comedian Beppe Grillo, managed to get about 25% of the national vote, capturing for the most part the votes of a large number of discontented voters (Passarelli and Tuorto 2014).

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 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 2016<sup>7</sup>. By 2018, the number of migrants since 2001 had actually quadrupled from 1,379,749 to 5,144,440<sup>8</sup>. The political response by Salvini's Lega 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 lost 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, with Brothers of Italy slowly rising from 2 to 4% of the national vote and remaining in the minority with Berlusconi's Forza Italia.

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<sup>7</sup> 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>

<sup>8</sup> 'Stocks of foreign population' available at: [stats.oecd.org](https://stats.oecd.org)

At a time in which immigration was highly salient, in the early 2000s, the extreme tendencies of the Lega Nord and AN were balanced out by the more centrist, Catholic coalition member of the Berlusconi government, the UDC. In 2013 there was no such need since immigration was not salient and both the Lega Nord and Brothers of Italy performed rather poorly. Things changed in 2018 when, after the refugee crisis, immigration was highly salient and the Lega, transforming itself into a national party, achieved an unprecedented result in the national election, this time giving it a privileged bargaining position compared to Berlusconi's Forza Italia (who got 14% of the votes). The Lega currently polls at 30% and Brothers of Italy at 14%: if Italy voted today these might be enough votes to govern without entering into coalitions with more moderate parties. A consolidation of this political space by the Lega and Brothers of Italy may loosen the brakes on the more extreme tendencies of these anti-immigration parties, with potential consequences for the agendas these parties would be able to implement.

Immigration appears a crucial issue in explaining the recent far-right resurgence in Italy. The following section explores the requisite literature in seeking to explain how immigration and far-right party vote are connected.

### ***Preferences for Immigration and Determinants of Far-Right Voting***

Several studies have investigated the relationship between changes in immigration and the fortunes 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). 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. Many studies 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. 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.

However, these assertions are currently called into question by research that finds public opinion on immigration to be remarkably stable - even throughout major events like the European Sovereign Debt crisis or the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ (Kustov, Laaker, and Reller, 2019 ; Mader and Schoen, 2019).

### *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. This resonates with the observation that several far-right parties that stress the negative influence of immigration and outside influence are successful in areas that do not feature significant numbers of immigrants. Poland, Hungary, and East Germany are a case in point.

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, 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).

In our effort to understand the rise and fall of anti-immigration parties in Italy, given the above discussions, we investigate whether preferences for immigration changed during the time period under analysis, as would be consistent with conflict theories, or whether the salience of immigration changed, potentially activating dormant anti-immigration preferences. Finally, we examine whether at the individual level, when immigration is a high-salience issue, anti-

immigration voters are more likely to vote for an anti-immigrant party than when immigration is a low-salience issue.

## **Data and Methods**

For our empirical analysis 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 apply post-stratification weights in all models and provide alternative model specifications in the appendix where we control for socio-demographic characteristics. Depending on our variable of interest, our sample consists of a total of between 808 and 2,488 respondents each year. In Appendix A we provide extensive evidence on our decision to focus on 2006, 2013 and 2018, which is mostly driven by data availability in each wave. Furthermore, we discuss how we calculated post-stratification and political weights, and provide descriptive statistics tables.

In our empirical analysis, first we track how preferences for immigration change over time. Our first dependent variable of interest measures preferences for immigration and it is a discrete variable ranging from 1 (immigration opportunities should be restricted) to 7 (immigration opportunities should be facilitated). We reverse the coding of this variable and scale it from 0 (open to immigration) to 1 (opposed to immigration) for ease of interpretation and comparison with other variables in the model. To track changes in immigration preferences we run a linear model with robust standard errors 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<sup>9</sup>, 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) to investigate potential heterogeneous effects.

Second, we want to track how the salience of immigration changed over time and whether this affected voting decisions. To do this, our first 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<sup>10</sup>. We use a logistic model to track changes in the salience of immigration over time, where salience is our dependent variable and time is the independent variable. In Appendix C we also provide results from a logistic model with interactions with the same socio-demographic variables as above to investigate heterogeneous effects. Furthermore, in order to track salience we also use alternative measurements. Since the highest mentioned issue for Italy to deal with in all three waves is unemployment, we compare the relative frequency of the search term 'immigration', to the frequency of the term 'unemployment' using google trends and one of two most popular newspapers in Italy, La Repubblica<sup>11</sup>. This gives us a rough comparison of the relative importance of immigration compared to economic factors for the population in the time period under analysis. Finally, to demonstrate the importance of issue salience in activating anti-immigration preferences, using the three ITANES waves, we run a regression model, where we investigate if the interaction between immigration preferences and salience is a relevant

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<sup>9</sup> We recode political ideology from 0 (left) to 1 (right) because in two years it was measured from 1 to 10 and one year from 0 to 10.

<sup>10</sup> This variable was recoded by ITANES.

<sup>11</sup> Data available at ADN, l'associazione Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa  
[http://www.adsnotizie.it/\\_dati\\_DMS.asp](http://www.adsnotizie.it/_dati_DMS.asp)

determinant of voting behaviour for anti-immigration parties. To do this, the dependent variable is the party voted in the last election (1 if the party is an anti-immigration party and 0 otherwise)<sup>12</sup>. We run a logistic model with year fixed effects, to take into account variation over time. As shown in the descriptive statistics in Appendix A certain political parties are overrepresented in our sample, either due to selection effects in the post-electoral survey or among those that refused to answer the question. In Appendix B we provide additional model specifications where we add political weights based on the true election results. The substantive significance of our results does not change. The covariates we consider are preferences for immigration, salience of immigration, age, gender, region group, education, unemployment, salience of unemployment, city size, and political ideology (0 left to 1 right).

Appendix A provides tables for the descriptive statistics, in-depth information on the surveys, on how the weights are constructed, and on the party system in Italy. Appendix B provides regression tables for all of the main models. In Appendix C we provide regression tables and plots of heterogeneous effects to test whether the effects are significantly different for any specific group. Finally, Appendix D contains an alternative specification of the voting behaviour logistic model, with the Lega as the only anti-immigration party.

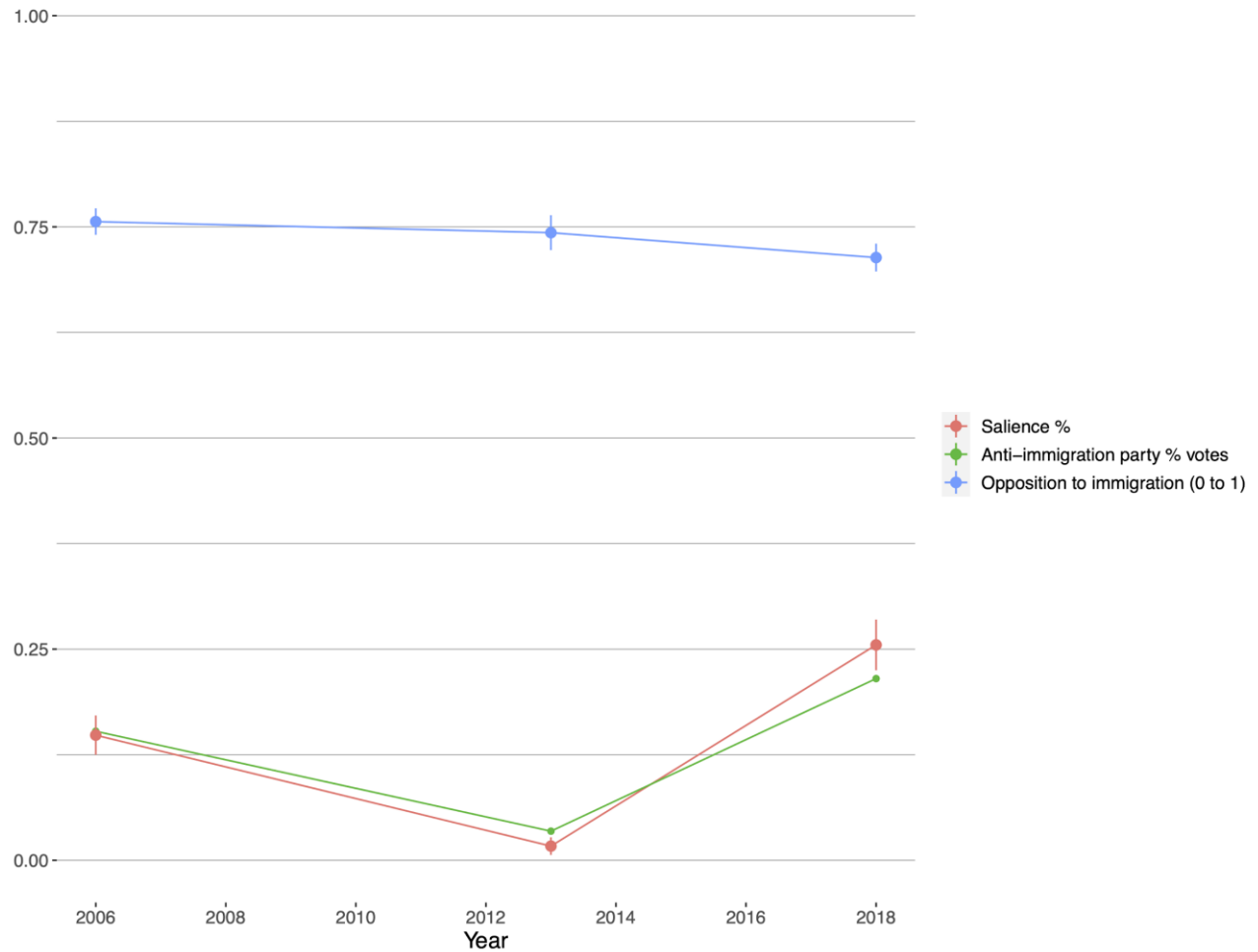
## **Findings**

### ***Preferences for immigration and issue salience***

First, we test whether preferences for immigration and the salience of immigration changed over time using the ITANES waves.

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<sup>12</sup> More information on political parties is available in the Appendix. Due to lack of consensus about classifying AN as anti-immigration party, we also re-run the models in Appendix D with the Lega only as our anti-immigrant party and results do not change.

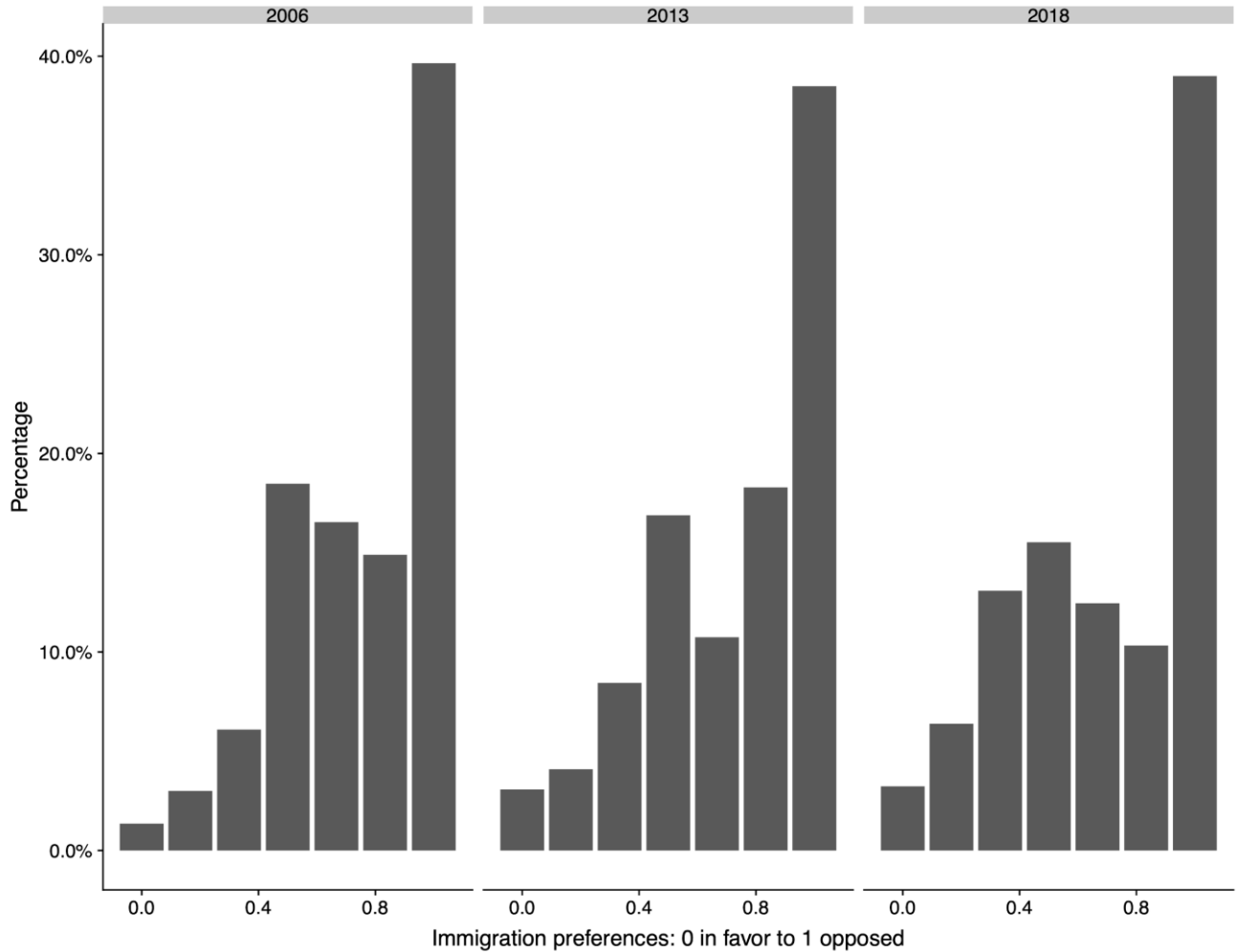


**Figure 1: The blue line shows average preferences for immigration over time with 0 being in favour of immigration and 1 opposed with 95% confidence interval. The red line shows the probability that a respondent mentions immigration as Italy’s number one or number two problem with 95% confidence interval. The green line shows the vote share for anti-immigration parties by year.**

Figure 1 illustrates our findings<sup>13</sup>. Figure 1 suggests that preferences for immigration did not change in 2013, after the Eurozone crisis hit (-0.013,  $p > 0.05$ ), while they actually became slightly more open in 2018 compared to 2006 (-0.043,  $p < 0.01$ ). It is worth noting that 1 (strongest

<sup>13</sup> Table B1 in the Appendix shows the results from OLS and logistic models for preferences for immigration and salience.

possible opposition to immigration) is the modal response category in all years under observation. As shown in figure 2, roughly 40% of respondents are maximally opposed to immigration in all three waves.



**Figure 2: Bar plot of preferences for immigration by year**

Yet, referring back to Figure 1, there is substantial variation in the electoral outcomes of far-right parties over the same time period. The average opinion towards immigration does not change dramatically, yet it becomes slightly more open in 2018.

Given that the 2015 increase in immigration represented an unprecedented phenomenon that was coinciding with relatively weak economic prospects from the Eurozone crisis, this case should be most conducive to the kind of opinion change hypothesized by conflict theories of

immigration. However, our findings do not provide such evidence. Conversely, it is striking how closely the salience of immigration tracks voting behaviour for anti-immigration parties (shown in Figure 1). Anti-immigration parties in our samples received respectively 15.3%, 3.5%, and 21.5% of the vote in 2006, 2013 and 2018. Similarly, 15%, 2%, and 25.5% of respondents respectively in 2006, 2013, and 2018 declared that immigration was Italy's first or second most important problem. Upon first examination, this seems to suggest that salience activates preferences for immigration among those with most extreme views, rather than preferences for immigration changing over time and responding to different events.

#### *Changes in preferences and issue salience across groups*

We also investigate whether there may be heterogeneous effects over time, with preferences for immigration or issue salience varying across groups. In Appendix C we provide a regression table (C1) and plots (figures C1 to C12) of heterogeneous effects and show that effects are not substantively different for any specific group, including age, gender, education, region of residence, and size of the city, except for political ideology.

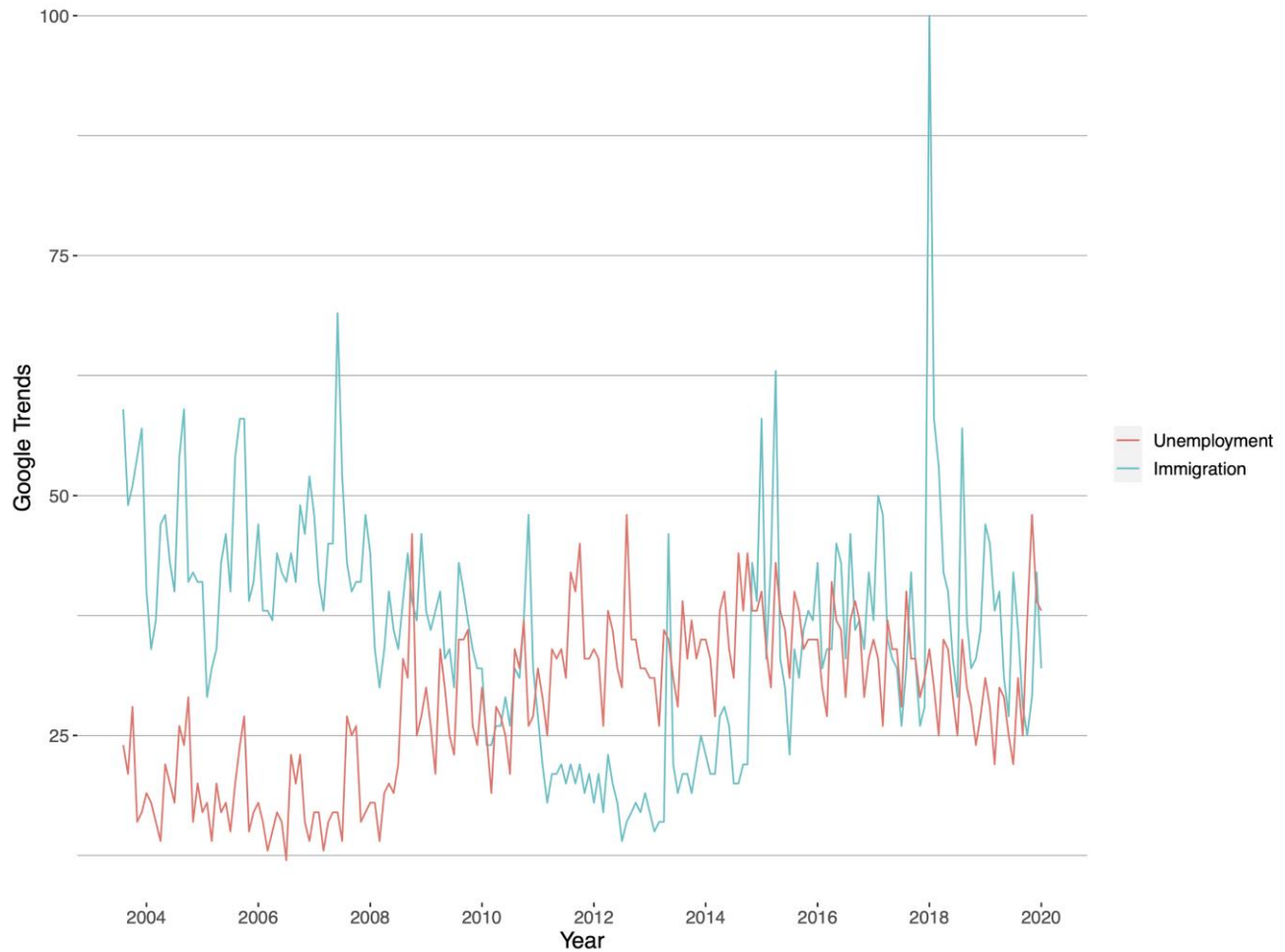
Looking at the predicted values of preferences for immigration by political ideology in figure C5 reveals some interesting findings: The fall in opposition towards immigration is entirely driven by left-wing voters. Right-wing voters actually became slightly more opposed but there is a ceiling effect - they cannot express a preference above 1 in this case. This problematizes the unconditional conclusion that immigration preferences have not worsened. The recorded stability may just be an artifact of the measurement, which does not allow the individual to express a more extreme view.

Figure C11, which shows the predicted values of salience of immigration by political ideology tells a very similar story. The increase in the salience of immigration is almost entirely

driven by right-wing voters, as over 50% of them thought immigration was Italy's number one or number two problem in 2018, compared to less than 5% in 2013. These findings indicate that the salience of immigration varies over time, especially along partisan lines. Preferences for immigration, although relatively stable on aggregate, seem to show some variation as well along partisan lines, however, the existence of a ceiling effect does not permit us to conclude so.

#### *Examining salience through Google trends and newspapers*

We also analyse changes in the salience of immigration using alternative measures of salience. One such measure is Google searches for the term "immigration", relative to "unemployment", which being the most mentioned issue in all waves, gives us a proxy for economic factors. Google Trends provides data on the relative popularity of searches for keywords over time. Various scholars have used Google search trends as a measure of the information that individuals look up online (Askatas and Zimmermann, 2009; Winkler, 2019). Furthermore, some studies show that Google search trends converge with other measures of issue salience, suggesting that it can be used as a measure of public interest over time (Mellon, 2013; Ripberger, 2011)



**Figure 3: Google searches for unemployment and immigration over time in Italy**

Figure 3 shows the relative popularity of ‘immigration’ and ‘unemployment’ Google searches in Italy between 2004 and 2020<sup>14</sup>. These show the popularity of searches for the words in question in relation to the highest point on the chart for the specified time. A value of 100 indicates the peak popularity for the words searched, with 50 indicating that searches for the word were half as popular on that day than they were on the peak day. It emerges quite clearly how the public interest for immigration was above unemployment before 2011 and after 2015, with unemployment being more salient in the midst and aftermath of the Eurozone crisis.

<sup>14</sup> The words in Italian are respectively: *immigrazione* and *disoccupazione*.

Finally, the newspaper La Repubblica, the second most common newspaper in Italy, also offers an easy search option on their website where it is possible to search for a word of interest and see how many articles contain it within their entire archive of articles<sup>15</sup>. We do so for 2006, 2013, and 2018 and compare the relative importance of immigration and unemployment. We look for the number of articles in the year previous to an election so specifically between April 30 2005 and April 30 2006, and the same dates for 2012 and 2013, and 2017 and 2018<sup>16</sup>. In 2006 immigration was mentioned 1578 times and unemployment 952 times. In 2013 unemployment was mentioned 2780 times, while immigration was mentioned 1568. Finally, in 2018 unemployment was mentioned 1697 times and immigration 3165 times. This once again confirms that public interest in immigration was highest in 2006 and 2018 compared to 2013.

*Immigration preferences and salience as determinants of anti-immigration vote*

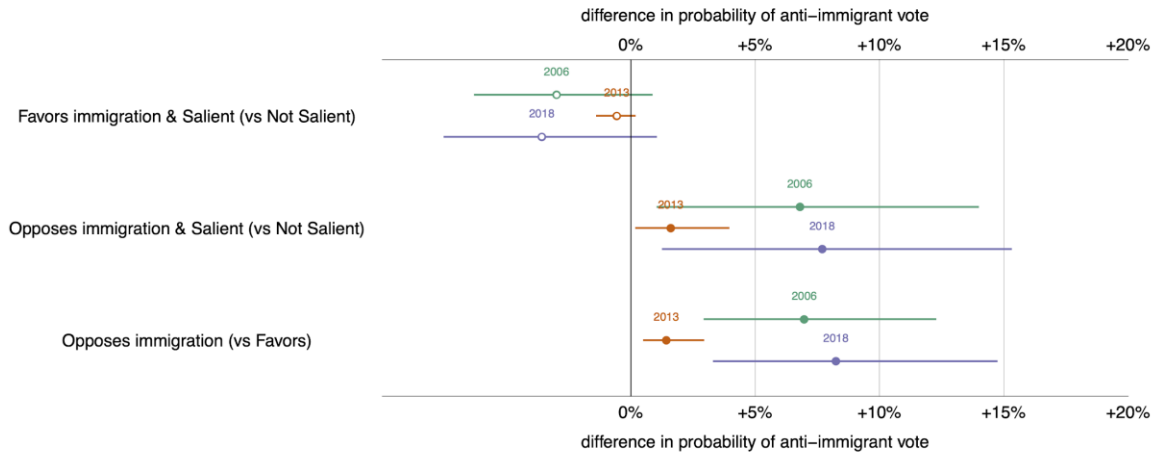
Finally, we investigate whether, at the individual level, when immigration is a high-salience issue, anti-immigration voters are more likely to vote for an anti-immigrant party than when immigration is a low-salience issue. We use year fixed effects to take into account variation over time (remember that overall immigration was not a key issue in 2013, while it was in 2006 and 2018).

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<sup>15</sup> Available here: <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/ricerca/repubblica>

<sup>16</sup> The elections were on April 9 and 10 in 2006, February 24 and 25 in 2013, and March 4 in 2018.





**Figure 4: First differences showing the change in probability of voting for anti-immigration party given a shift from 1 to (2), all else equal. Bars indicate the 95% confidence interval.**

**Models estimated with post-stratification weights.**

Table B2 in the Appendix shows the regression results from different model specifications (with post-stratification weights only, with post-stratification weights and political weights, and with no weights). The substantive significance of the findings does not change. More specifically, Figure 4 illustrates how the findings support our hypothesis that salience increases the probability of voting for anti-immigration parties for people with more extreme views on immigration. We show how for people who favour immigration (mean immigration preferences minus one standard deviation) the effect of salience is not significant (it is not distinguishable from zero). However, for people who oppose immigration (mean immigration preferences plus one standard deviation) the effect of salience is significant: an individual who is opposed to immigration and who believes that immigration is Italy’s main problem (while keeping all other socio-demographic characteristics constant) is more likely to vote for an-anti immigration party than the same opposed individual who does not believe immigration is salient. This effect is much larger in 2006 and 2018

when immigration was a key issue at the national level, while it is smaller in 2013, when in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis other concerns took the forefront of the political agendas.

### *Discussion*

The findings above seem to suggest that even though people's preferences for immigration do not change substantively over time, even in the face of events such as the Eurozone or the refugee crises, the salience they attribute to immigration varies significantly, especially for individuals at the extreme right, explaining the relatively swift rise and fall of anti-immigration parties. The context provided in the section on the rise of anti-immigrant parties helps shed some light on why immigration's salience varied as it did over time and how this translated into different voting behaviour. In 2006 immigration had doubled in a five-year time span and the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale, which had a very strong anti-immigration stance, were part of the centre-right governing coalition, and had just passed a very restrictive immigration law, although the more moderate partners in the coalition had watered it down. The rising importance of immigration was apparent in the center-right 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, while almost 80% believed unemployment was the key issue to be solved (up from 39% in 2006). At that time the Lega Nord and Brothers of Italy respectively received less than 4% and 2% 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 and the slow ascendance of Brothers of Italy, which the current polls predict could reach almost 14% of the votes in the next election.

## 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, measured by a survey question on the most important issue facing the country, Google trend searches, and newspaper searches, 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. The Italian case, having featured anti-immigration parties for a longer time-span than other countries, provides a good test bed for studying the rise and fall of such parties, taking into account exogenous shocks over time. Furthermore, most studies lack survey data that contains both questions on immigration preferences and questions on salience, preventing researchers from investigating their interaction at the individual level. The availability of this data in the ITANES surveys allows us to test the role of salience at the individual level as well, and we find that among people who oppose

immigration the most the effect of salience is compounding: an individual who is opposed to immigration and who believes that immigration is Italy's main problem is more likely to vote for an anti-immigration party than the same opposed individual who does not believe immigration is salient. The size of this effect closely follows the aggregate public interest in immigration, and it is much larger in 2006 and 2018 when immigration was a key issue at the national level, while it is smaller in 2013, when in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis other concerns were more relevant.

However, we note that the question of opinion change should be investigated further. While issue-salience appears to matter greatly, the Italian case raises some questions regarding the conclusion that opinions are stable throughout the observed time period. The available public opinion data might not accurately display radicalization in opinion for those who express opposition to immigration, due to a ceiling effect in the response measure. While 40% of Italians report to be maximally opposed to immigration - they cannot move to oppose immigration any more because of the design of the survey used. However, if their opinions did radicalize as a result of increased immigration - they might additionally mention immigration when prompted for what the most important issue is Italy currently faces. Therefore, this individual-level salience measure might pick up a radicalization in opinion not picked up when assuming that stated opinions on immigration sufficiently describe those preferences. A more complete account of immigration preferences, one that accounts for this potential floor or ceiling effect of relevant survey response questions should be prioritized by the literature going forward.

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