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Economic competition between native workers and migrants has a clear link with support for the radical right among French voters



Marine Le Pen has targeted the French local elections on 15 and 22 March as a way to build momentum ahead of the next French presidential election in 2022. Drawing on a new study, [Diane Bolet](#) writes on the role of economic competition between native workers and immigrants in determining support for Le Pen's National Rally (formerly the Front National).

Most [research](#) on the radical right concludes that immigration and economic hardship are major predictors of radical right performance. This research states that the structural changes of de-industrialisation and globalisation have weakened the economic situation and status of low-income voters who are (or are perceived to be) in direct competition with immigrants for jobs or wages. They eventually respond to this threat by supporting anti-immigrant and anti-globalisation radical right parties.

While this labour market competition theory has been commonly reprised by scholars, journalists and policymakers, the evidence for it remains mixed. On the one hand, a large group of [individual-level survey studies](#) has consistently rejected the economic argument that native workers who share similar skills with immigrants are more inclined to support anti-immigrant radical right parties. On the other hand, [contextual studies](#) have found inconsistent evidence linking ethnic groups' economic competition with radical right support. However, both sets of studies have significant limitations inherent to their respective observational scales: the former are more likely to detect a cultural effect by basing their studies on self-reported radical right respondents, whereas the latter rely on aggregated geographical units and variables that mask the potential competition between groups.

In a [new study](#), I argue that the influence of labour market competition on radical right voting can only be identified at a local level where native workers are directly affected by the arrival of immigrants who have similar skillsets. The influence of immigrants on local job competition and pressure on local wages is more likely to be reflected in individuals' immediate surroundings and masked in an aggregated context. I analyse the economic impact of immigration on radical right voting in French municipalities, which have an average of 1,200 inhabitants.

Using an original longitudinal dataset of fine-grained municipal electoral, demographic and economic data from France over the 2002–2017 period, I found a strong and positive local labour market effect on Front National support for all types of competition, whether between natives and immigrants of low, medium or high-skill levels at the municipality level. Labour-market concerns only drive anti-immigration voting behaviour when actual economic competition between natives and immigrants of similar skills is present. This hypothesis provides an explanation as to why individuals of diverse socio-economic backgrounds, such as the middle class, are voting for the radical right.



Marine Le Pen, Credit: © European Union 2016 – European Parliament (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

One telling illustration of this finding can be seen in a comparison between Neuwiller and Villing in France. These two rural municipalities of less than 1,000 inhabitants are from neighbouring departments in the north-east of France, and both register a majority of low-skilled natives. They both share low unemployment rates and a high immigrant stock (immigrants comprise above 30 per cent of the local population in each municipality).

Yet in Villing, the Front National registered a 40 per cent share of the vote in the first round of the 2017 elections, in comparison to a 16.1 per cent share for the party in Neuwiller. The skill levels of the immigrant labour force provide a valid justification for different radical right electoral results. While medium and high-skilled workers together comprise 40 per cent of the immigrant labour force in Villing, they comprise only 4 per cent of the immigrant labour force in Neuwiller. This shows that it is not immigration per se but rather the immigrants' position within the labour market that affects the radical right's electoral support in an area.

I also find that the labour market effect is amplified under local conditions of material deprivation, measured by the local unemployment rate. This explains the radical right strongholds like Hénin-Beaumont or Liévin in Pas-de-Calais, which have experienced difficult economic transitions after the shutdown of coal-mining industries and subsequent attraction of white-collar workers during the reconversion of these cities into service-based areas. The local residents in these areas are predominantly low and medium-skilled workers. In the context of high local unemployment, competition for jobs with immigrants has escalated, and this has translated into strong electoral support for the Front National, with Marine Le Pen receiving over 60 per cent of the vote in these towns in the 2017 presidential election.

Moreover, higher radical right support is observed in municipalities with a higher share of any one of the following groups: low-skilled natives; medium-skilled immigrants; or high-skilled immigrants. While the larger support for the Front National among low-skilled natives can be justified on the grounds that these native workers have insecure and unprotected jobs that are most likely to be taken up by immigrants, the support of medium or high-skilled immigrants can be surprising at first sight.

However, due to language barriers, lack of connections, and qualifications that are insufficiently specific to the host country market, immigrants are more likely than other socio-demographic groups to have higher qualifications than those required by their jobs and thus tend to compete with lower-skilled natives. For instance, countries tend to have distinctive legal traditions and restrictive regulations on who can practice law, which pose barriers to the entry of immigrant lawyers into a host country's market for legal services. Immigrants with higher qualifications are compelled to accept lower-skilled jobs, and are thus perceived as a competitive threat to low-skilled natives. The economic effect of immigration on radical right voting is therefore likely to vary according to natives' job security and immigrants' labour market access.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of the relationship between immigration and radical right voting. They reinforce the importance of labour market competition as one source of anti-immigrant radical right voting behaviour which should not be dismissed. As much as perceived cultural and status threats affect radical right voting, actual labour market competition at a level more proximate to individuals matters too.

The findings also have important implications for policymakers in light of the politics of immigrant integration. Without discounting the cultural dimension, local labour market competition and resource scarcity are the breeding grounds for radical right parties to crystallise ethnic competition in their narratives to garner support.

For more information, see the author's accompanying paper in the [European Journal of Political Research](#)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

About the author



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