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Abstract

Does the settling of foreigners cause a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment due to resource competition? Or does the interaction allow for more respectful relations? And what if one also considers settlement in neighbouring municipalities? Applying an instrumental variable approach to variables collected at the municipality level and also including neighbouring areas, this paper aims to shed light on these questions by considering the vote for the Lega party across Italian municipalities in the 2019 European parliamentary election as a proxy for anti-immigration sentiment. Our results point out a negative effect of direct interactions with foreigners on the Lega vote, while the proximity of immigrants in neighbouring municipalities could have the opposite effect.

1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2019, the new European Parliament was elected. The election went to the heads of far-right leaders across Europe, whose parties were the most voted-for in Austria, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and the UK. These results have been exalted as clear evidence that the respective parties represent the will of an absolute majority. In Italy, the right-wing and anti-immigration politician Matteo Salvini—at the time the interior minister and leader of the Italian Lega (League), a radical-right party—claimed that Italians had given him a mandate to change the EU's budgetary rules.

Compared to similar right-wing Western EU parties, the Italian Lega poses a real threat to EU progressive forces. In coalition with its traditional allies, the party runs all of Italy's northern regions, experiencing large gains both in left-wing strongholds (e.g., in Emilia-Romagna) and in the South. Such a change in its electoral base stems from a new political agenda. What characterises the party today is not only a growing hostility towards the policies and institutions of the European Union (EU) (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017) but also an anti-immigration rhetoric. Mr. Salvini depicts migrants as a major driver of social insecurity and as synonymous with delinquency (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017).

Such anti-immigration sentiment is not new in the EU. Since the 1990s, anti-establishment and anti-migrant parties have dramatically increased their electoral success throughout the EU (De Vos and Deurloo, 1998; Kessler and Freeman, 2005a), especially following the recent economic crisis (Nicoli, 2017). Although there is no consensus on the defining features of far-right parties (Fennema, 1997), all of them stress the immigration topic (Arregui and Creighton, 2018). Rydgren and Ruth (2013) suggest that the anti-immigration attitude itself might represent a common driver for the radical right-wing vote. In the EU parliament, these positions (i.e., nationalism, Euroscepticism, anti-immigration, and right-wing populism) are represented by the 'Identity and Democracy' parliament group, which Lega also belongs to and which accounts for 9.7% of seats in the 2019 EU Parliament.

Given this electoral success, it might be worth exploring the main drivers fuelling it. Previous studies have stressed the role of both individual-level and geographical drivers (see Cushing and Poot, 2004, for an in-depth literature review), while the economic literature has pointed out that these parties mostly leverage natives' fears of migration flows (Arzheimer, 2009; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2002; Norris, 2005; Rydgren, 2008). Although it is not possible to test any individual voting mechanisms here due to a lack of individual-level data, this article aims to analyse macro-level drivers of right-wing support in Italy, with a specific focus on the role played by foreigner settlement. With regard to this latter issue, several

hypotheses are proposed. The 'ethnic competition hypothesis' or 'theory of economic interest' (see Olzak, 1992) points out the consequences of direct competition over scarce resources between natives and foreigners. Conversely, the 'contact hypothesis' (Allport et al., 1954) suggests that a direct interaction between foreigners and natives may in fact weaken native fear of foreigners. Lastly, the 'halo effect' admits territorial spillover effects, suggesting that anti-immigration sentiment is highest in areas close to those where a high proportion of residents are immigrants, and not really within them (Kestilä and Söderlund, 2007; Bowyer, 2008; Rydgren and Ruth, 2013).

The present work aims to contribute to this debate, analysing Lega's results in the 2019 European elections with data available at the municipality level. The paper considers foreigners as a driver for pro-Lega voting behaviour, with the variables of interest instrumented to avoid possible reverse causality. To test both the ethnic competition and contact theories, while admitting a possible role of the halo effect, the analysis also considers foreigner settlement across neighbouring municipalities (following a methodology similar to that adopted by Rydgren and Ruth, 2013, in Sweden). To the best of our knowledge, among previous papers studying the various theories on this topic, none have carried out a direct comparison of different theories using a spatial analysis method. Certainly, such an application to the Italian case is rather new; so far, only a few economic studies have been

conducted on this topic in the country (see for instance Barone et al., 2016, and Devillanova, 2020).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides some background, discussing the main theories that explain the nexus between migration and electoral support for extreme-right parties. Section 3 discusses the data and the adopted methodology. Section 4 shows the results, while Section 5 discusses these under the light of their policy implications. Section 6 offers some concluding remarks.

2. BACKGROUND

The Lega party: from a regionalist party to a right-wing nationalist one - The electoral success of Lega in 2019 can be explained by a dramatic change in its political agenda. Since 2013, Lega has actually shifted away from its previous political identity. In the 1990s, it was a regionalist populist party with a typical ethno-regionalist manifesto (Mancosu and Ladini, 2020) and an electorate mostly concentrated in Italy's northern and industrialised regions (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017; De Winter and Tursan, 2003). Since the success of Beppe Grillo's party (the Five Star Movement, M5S) in 2013, the party has progressively turned into a right-wing national party similar to other extreme-right parties in the EU, such as the Front National in France (Mancosu and Ladini, 2020). With the new leadership of Mr. Salvini (which started in 2013), the party's rhetoric

progressively placed greater emphasis on hostility towards EU policies and institutions (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017; Musella, 2015) as well as towards migrants, depicted by Mr. Salvini as the major cause of social insecurity and as synonymous with delinquency (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017). Due to these changes, Lega began attracting supporters from across the political spectrum (especially the far-right side) and from every Italian region (Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017), not only the northern ones.

The geography of discontent and the competition over scarce resources: the extreme-right vote and foreigner settlement - The literature focusing on the link between foreigner settlement and the consensus for extreme-right parties is broad. The sociological and political literature proposes in-depth theories, mostly implemented through descriptive analysis and disregarding causal relationships. Conversely, economic theory often focuses on inverse causality issues, neglecting the debate on the different theories. Although in both the strands of research there is some consensus on the results, which are rather country-specific, a common finding is that both individual/social characteristics and contextual/geographical variables matter in explaining the willingness to vote for an extreme-right party.

The so-called 'geographers of discontent' (see the insightful work of Dijkstra et al., 2019) address both groups of factors in explaining the anti-establishment vote: these voters

are generally older and working class citizens, with low income and low educational attainment (Goodwin and Heath, 2016), and they mostly live in the 'places that do not matter', namely rural and remote areas that are facing de-industrialization, job loss, and a declining per-capita income (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Iammarino et al., 2018; Los et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). There, the competition over scarce resources (in kind and in cash) has become harsher and harsher, and the ballot box represents a way to rebel against both EU integration and migration flows (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

In weak territorial contexts, migrant inflows act as a catalyst to channel natives' fears, which are both economic (Guiso et al., 2017) and linked to a supposed dilution of local or national identity (Hobolt, 2016; Rodrik, 2018). For this reason, rural and low population density areas are particularly exposed to the rise of the populist vote (Gordon, 2018; Martin et al., 2018), with right-wing parties easily capitalizing on natives' fears of migration flows (Arzheimer, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2002; Lubbers and Scheepers, 2002; Norris, 2005; Rydgren, 2008). There, the xenophobic rhetoric is particularly appealing: migrants and ethnic minorities are perceived as undermining prosperity, job opportunities, and the availability of public services (Mamonova and Franquesa, 2019). According to this propaganda, immigrants (Rydgren, 2003; 2007) i) represent a threat to ethno-national identity; ii) fuel crime, and hence, social insecurity; iii) swell the unemployment rate, competing with natives on the

local labour market; and iv) abuse the generosity of the EU welfare state, once again in competition with the natives, who are made even poorer by the economic crisis.

In this regard, the 'ethnic competition hypothesis' or 'theory of economic interest' (Olzak, 1992) may explain—on an economic basis—the political success of extreme-right political parties. The willingness to vote for these parties is higher the larger is the share of foreigners living (and working) in a territory. This is observed by Arzheimer and Carter (2006) considering the number of asylum-seekers, by Kessler and Freeman (2005b), who find anti-immigrant sentiment to be a good predictor of the intention to vote for extreme-right parties, and by De Vos and Deurloo (1998), who analyse the 1994 elections in Amsterdam at the district level and conclude that the presence of Moroccans and Turks increases support for extreme-right parties. Using an IV approach on a panel, roughly similar conclusions are obtained by Mendez and Cutillas (2014) for Spain, by Otto and Steinhardt (2014) for Germany, and by Halla et al. (2017) for Austria. Considering Italy (namely, the 2001, 2006, and 2008 Italian national political elections), Barone et al. (2016) also find a positive effect of immigration flow on votes for the overall centre-right coalition (encompassing also non-extreme right parties). Focusing on the UK elections, Bowyer (2008) observes that in the 2002 and 2003 local elections in England the vote for the British National Party (BNP) was positively related to immigrant presence at the district level (although ethnic

diversity seems to reduce it). Levi et al. (2020) consider the share of votes for the UK Independence Party (in 2004–2014) and claim that migrant inflows have a positive effect but that it is a short-run effect, vanishing before the parliamentary term.

As in the case of the 'geography of discontent' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), the ethnic competition hypothesis is also mostly based on the idea of scarce resources over which natives and foreigners compete (Rydgren, 2007; Toshkov and Kortenska, 2015). This competition occurs both in the labour market and with regard to welfare, and it is tougher for those people who have been facing long-lasting socioeconomic marginalization (Rydgren and Ruth, 2013). For instance, in considering labour market competition, Golder (2003) compared 165 national elections in 19 countries, finding that immigration has a positive effect on populist parties irrespective of the unemployment level but that the unemployment rate matters when immigration is high. In addition, Kestilä and Söderlund (2007) conclude that socioeconomic conditions, the immigration rate, and the unemployment rate have an impact on votes for the Norwegian right-wing Progress Party. Conversely, Otto and Steinhardt (2014) claim that welfare state considerations are also important in shaping individual attitudes towards immigration, analysing the districts of Hamburg in the period of 1987 to 1998.

Alternative approaches: from contact theory to the halo effect - Despite the large number of studies confirming the hypotheses of ethnic competition theory, this approach has been questioned. Adopting a natural experiment, Steinmayr (2016) identifies the causal effect of arriving refugees in a neighbourhood on support for the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPOE). Analysing the 2015 national election in Austria, he finds that hosting refugees in the community decreases FPOE support. Colantone and Stanig (2018), who address the 'Leave' option in the Brexit referendum, observe that this is due to the spread of the 'losers' of economic globalization rather than by immigrant flows.

Under some circumstances, it seems that foreigner settlement is not the only driver of support for extreme-right (and xenophobic) parties. For instance, Lubbers and Scheepers' (2002) region-level analysis of electoral consent for the Front National in France suggests that people in regions with few immigrants may perceive the influx of immigrants into France in general as much a threat as people living in regions with higher levels of immigrants. Similarly, Stockemer (2016) concludes that the real driver of the vote for the extreme-right is the perception and not the real number of immigrants. Lastly, Coffé et al. (2007) address the electoral success of the Vlaams Blok in Belgium, claiming that the presence of foreigners from specific areas (i.e., Turkey and the Maghreb) leads to voting for extreme-right parties. According to socioeconomic theory, all of these studies find theoretical justification in the

so-called 'contact hypothesis': direct interactions between foreigners and the native population may in fact weaken natives' fears of immigrants, stimulating more respectful relations (Allport et al., 1954; Husbands, 2002), and hence, lower support for extreme-right parties. Some of these studies have applied this theory to the EU context (Brown and Lopez, 2001; Weldon, 2006).

However, under a territorial framework, a combination of the two aforementioned hypotheses is of interest. The 'halo effect' theory suggests that the vote for extreme-right parties is still fuelled by anti-immigration sentiment but that this latter is highest in areas that are close to ones hosting a large proportion of immigrants, and not really within them (Bowyer, 2008; Kestilä and Söderlund, 2007). Two reasons might be behind this hypothesis (Rydgren and Ruth, 2013): i) neighbourhoods bordering immigrant-dense areas are often lower-middle-class districts (i.e., places typically included into the 'geography of discontent'); ii) people living in immigrant-dense neighbourhoods are still middle-class, but they benefit from interactions with immigrants on a friendlier basis, according to the contact theory hypothesis of Allport et al. (1954). However, it is worth noting that this effect can be appreciated more at the district/neighbourhood level rather that at the municipality (i.e., city) level.

The territorial framework adopted for the analysis - In this study, the vote for the Lega party is analysed adopting a territorial perspective. Dealing with municipality-level data, the hypothesis of the geography of discontent approach is first considered. Besides foreigner settlement, the vote for extreme-right parties is driven by territorial features such as different resource availability across the urban and the rural space. It is not the case that anti-immigration sentiment occurs in rural and remote areas—where the presence of foreigners is actually lower than in urban areas, even as a share of total population—but where the competition over scarce resources is harsher.

In addition to the ethnic competition effect, both contact theory and halo theory effects are admitted. In this regard, the presence of foreigners both at the local level (i.e., on a municipality basis) and across neighbouring municipalities is included in the analysis, according to the traditional spatial econometric approach (Anselin, 1988). Nevertheless, contrasting with Rydgren and Ruth (2013) and De Vos and Deurloo (1998), this analysis does not refer to district-level data but rather to the more aggregated municipality-level data (hence, with different implications for the analysis).

Firstly, we consider the single-municipality level. At this territorial level, a larger presence of foreigners is expected to fuel competition over scarce resources (labour market and welfare services): in Italy, the municipality's local government provides each eligible

citizen (both natives and foreigners) with major services such as council houses, contributions for accommodation, kindergarten, and income transfers (Saraceno, 2013). However, at the same territorial level the contact hypothesis also operates, eventually leading to more positive attitudes of natives towards foreigners.

Secondly, we consider the neighbouring space since both the competition effect and the contact theory effect involve wider areas beyond each municipality's borders. Across the set of neighbouring municipalities, competition between natives and foreigners operates in the labour market but not with regard to welfare services. Similarly, even when considering neighbouring municipalities, contact theory remains valid (albeit weaker) due to several reasons: for example, people might attend their upper secondary school or their university courses in different (neighbouring) municipalities, while commuting patterns and relationship networks cover broader areas. While it may not factor in at the municipality level, in the neighbouring space the halo effect may also operate.

According to the aforementioned effects, different outcomes are observable when looking at the single-municipality level or neighbouring areas. At the municipality level, two opposite effects are expected to occur: on the one hand, competition over both labour market and welfare resources positively affects the vote for Lega (i.e., ethnic competition hypothesis); on the other, the effects proposed by contact theory negatively affect it.

Conversely, foreigners living in neighbouring municipalities are not in competition with the natives over welfare state resources—only over labour market resources. Thus, even when considering neighbouring areas, the ethnic competition hypothesis holds. In addition, the halo effect is expected to also positively impact the vote for Lega. Conversely, we expect that contact theory still operates, although with weaker effects than those observed when considering contact within the same municipality.

3. DATA AND METHODS

Data - In this work, we consider the vote for Lega in the 2019 EU election as a proxy of anti-immigrant far-right voting. With more than one third of the total votes, it was the most voted-for party in Italy[1] and the only one belonging to the 'Identity and Democracy' EU Parliament group. This analysis relies on observational data available at the municipality level and retrieved by the Italian Ministry of the Interior.

To analyse possible drivers explaining this vote, the analysis firstly considers the role played by foreigner settlement. To do this, the share of foreigners out of the total population at the municipality level (IMM) is considered, as this can influence voting behaviour. However, unlike previous studies in this field, the share of foreigners in neighbouring municipalities is considered as well. To assess this, the spatial lag of the share of foreigners

(IMM_LAG) is considered according to an n x n row-standardized spatial weights matrix (**W**),[2] defined according to a queen contiguity matrix.

As a further focus, this analysis considers some geographical features, and in particular the role played by inner areas, i.e., the most remote municipalities across Italy, which are located far away from urban centres providing essential services (Barca et al., 2004). Following the framework of the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas, the model includes a dummy variable (INNER) that distinguishes between inner (i.e., remote) and non-inner areas.

Additional covariates control for socioeconomic features that may influence the share of votes for Lega. Firstly, population at the municipality level is considered by taking its logarithm (Log_pop): indeed, election behaviours differ between urban areas and less-populated municipalities. Similarly, we consider the share of elderly people (aged 65 and over) over the total population (Pop_over_65). Quintiles of per capita income (Income) are proxied by taking the average gross taxable income (as provided by the Ministry of Finance). With regard to economic characteristics at the municipality level, we also consider the share of manufacturing employment in each municipality (Manuf_employment). Additionally, we consider two variables referring to the number of volunteers in not-for-profit associations per inhabitant (Not-for-profit) and the gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education courses

(Tertiary_educ). Lastly, given the existence of wide regional differences across Italy, each model includes NUTS-2 region fixed effects. For each variable, Table 1 shows the meaning, the specification, and the source of each variable included in the models.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Econometric strategy - The relevance of the determinants affecting the vote for Lega are first analysed through a simple OLS model implemented in the following way:

$$Y_{ir} = \alpha + \beta_1 IMM_{ir} + \beta_2 X_{ir} + \beta_4 REG_r + \gamma_r + \xi_{ir}$$

Here, Y_{ir} is the share of the vote for Lega in each municipality (i) in region (r), IMM_{ir} is the share of immigrants on the population resident in the municipality, and X_{ir} is the vector of control variables at the municipality level (Log_pop, Pov_over_65, Income, Manuf_employment, Manuf_employment squared, Not_for_profit, Tertiary_educ, Inner). γ_r and ξ_{ir} are error terms at the NUTS-2 region and municipality level. Due to the historical territorial heterogeneity of the consensus for the Lega party, NUTS-2 region fixed effects (REG) are controlled for.

Conducting the above regression, we analyse only the relation between the presence of immigrants and the consensus for Lega. As mentioned in the previous sections, in the present paper we adopt a spatial analysis model to distinguish effects deriving from the considerable knowledge of a different culture—for which the boundaries are wider than the municipal ones—from those deriving from problems related to the scarcity of resources. We therefore add to the previous OLS model the variable IMM_LAG_i, i.e., the share of foreigners on the total population in neighbouring municipalities.

$$Y_{ir} = \alpha + \beta_1 IMM_{ir} + \beta_2 IMM\_LAG_{ir} + \beta_3 X_{ir} + \beta_5 REG_r + \gamma_r + \xi_{ir}$$

Given the OLS model, it may occur that the error term is not unrelated to the regressors, hence making it impossible to attribute a causal interpretation to the coefficients. Here, endogeneity may affect the results because, on the one hand, the presence of immigrants may influence the preference for far-right parties, but on the other hand, a foreigner choosing where to settle may evaluate the anti-immigrant sentiment in that area and avoid municipalities where the consensus for far-right parties is high (Kraus and Schwager, 2004). When the model includes endogenous regressors, an instrumental variable approach may help.

At first, we test whether IMM and IMM_LAG are endogenous variables. We conduct a Durbin–Wu–Hausman test in which we analyse whether there is a significant difference between the OLS and the IV estimator (Davidson, 2000). Our preliminary test strongly rejects the hypothesis that IMM and IMM_LAG are exogenous variables[3] (Cameron and Trivedi, 2009). We overcome the endogeneity of the IMM variable by adopting the instrumental variable (IV) approach suggested by Card (2001). In his paper focused on the analysis of immigration's impact on the labour market, Card proposes an instrumental variable based on historical settlement patterns. As the previous literature suggests, when a person decides to immigrate, he/she prefers to settle in an area with a higher concentration of co-ethnics (see, for example, Beine et al., 2011; Filer, 1992; Mayda, 2010). The instrument simply considers, for each area of origin (c),[4] the historical settlement in municipality (i) weighted for the variation in immigrants from the same area of origin during the period under consideration, as follows:

$$\Delta \text{IMM}_{it} = \sum_c \left(\lambda_{ict0} \text{IMM}_{c\Delta\Delta\text{-}t0} \right)$$

where ΔIMM is the instrumental variable, λ_{it_0} is the share of immigrants of origin c in municipality i at year t_0, and $IMM_{C\Delta t-t0}$ is the proportion of inflow immigrants of origin c in the country from year t_0 to t.

In regard to the variable IMM_LAG_{it}, we calculate its instrumental variable ΔIMM_LAG_{it} as the share of foreigners in neighbouring municipalities, imputed starting with ΔIMM_{it}. Adopting this approach, the potential endogeneity is avoided both for the variable IMM and for IMM_LAG_{it}, since we consider settlement decisions as not influenced by anti-immigrant sentiment.[5] We set t_0 at year 2010 for two main reasons. The first is in regards to the condition of the Lega party in that year. As already stressed, before the change in the party's leadership in 2013, the name of the party was Lega Nord (literally, 'Northern League'). It was mainly fighting for the independence of the northern regions (disregarding the Southern electorate) and the party's anti-immigration rhetoric was considerably less important (Albertazzi et al., 2018; Brunazzo and Gilbert, 2017; Mancosu and Ladini, 2020).

The other (more important) reason that led us to choose that year is that the topic of immigration has acquired importance in the public debate and in the agendas of political parties since the 2011 'immigrants crisis' (Givens, 2020; Toshkov and Kortenska, 2015), when more than 62,000 immigrants arrived in the country, first from the Maghreb then from

Libya due to the civil wars that broke out in those areas (Ambrosini, 2020), awakening new racism sentiments in the country.

The number of observations - The specification of the number of observations under analysis here requires some additional details. The analysis is carried out at the municipality level. The use of municipality-level data allows us to not restrict the scope of the analysis, i.e., disregarding samples, and to rely on observational data. The drawbacks of this approach are also to be mentioned. Implicitly, this analysis assumes the homogeneity of voters within each municipality and, hence, does not directly account for individual characteristics.

Given this framework, we consider the 2019 administrative boundaries, according to which the number of municipalities in Italy is 7,960. However, given the latest reorganisation of Italian municipalities, which underwent additional merging even during 2019, we have excluded 75 municipalities for which there is no information on voting in May 2019. Additionally, 14 municipalities have been excluded as it was not possible to compute spatially lagged variables for these, since they do not have any neighbouring municipalities (islands, for example). Lastly, for the estimated IV models 87 municipalities have been dropped from the analysis. Those municipalities had no foreigners at time t_0, thus the IV

algorithm would return a value equal to 0 even though the share of foreigners has actually increased over time.[6]

Thus, the OLS models encompass 7,871 observations, while the IV models encompass 7,784. For the sake of completeness, the descriptive statistics—shown in the following section by variable—cover the total set of observations.

4. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics - In the 2019 EU elections, the vote for the Lega party was equal to 34.26 per cent on a national basis. On a municipality basis, the median value was equal to 40.22 per cent, despite significant variability across the country. See Table A.1 in Appendix A for the descriptive statistics for all variables.

Figure 1 shows the vote for the Lega party and the share of foreigners, as observed at both the municipality level and in neighbouring areas. A strong territorial pattern emerges: northern municipalities show a considerably larger share of both votes for Lega and foreigners.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Results of the models - Table 2 shows the results for the estimated models. It presents the estimates for the OLS model and for the 2SLS model, both in their basic versions (1 and 3) and in the versions including the spatial lag for the share of foreigners (IMM_LAG) (2 and 4). Disregarding the estimates for the OLS models, which are biased and inconsistent, in (3) it is worth noticing that the share of foreigners has a negative effect on the total share of votes for Lega at the municipality level. Conversely, the dummy variable INNER shows a positive and significant effect. In inner municipalities, this share is 1.86 percentage points greater than in non-inner municipalities. Analogously, the coefficient of Log_pop is negative: the more populous the municipality, the lower the share of votes for Lega. Other covariates have the expected coefficients. Considering a median income (i.e., the third quintile of the distribution) as the baseline, poorer municipalities (fourth and fifth quintiles) have a positive coefficient while wealthier municipalities (first and second quintiles) show negative coefficients. The effect of the share of manufacturing employment on the vote for Lega is quadratic. As expected, the number of not-for-profit volunteers per inhabitant is negatively associated with the vote for Lega, while contrary to expectations, the gross enrolment ratio in tertiary education is not significant. The aforementioned effects are obtained controlling for NUTS-2 region effects.

As an additional covariate, model (4) includes the spatial lag of foreigners (namely, the average share of foreign population living in neighbouring municipalities). In this case, other covariates do not change their effects, with the only exceptions of the quadratic share of manufacturing employment, which is no longer significant, the share of older population, which becomes negatively correlated with Lega consensus, and the fourth quintile of income distribution, which is no longer statistically different from the third quintile. However, the spatial lagged variable is not significant.

[Insert Table 2 here]

In Table A.2 in Appendix A, we provide a few robustness checks to verify the stability of our results. To enable an easier comparison, in the first two columns we re-present the principal analysis shown in Table 2 (models (3) and (4)). In analysis 2, we present the 2SLS models applied without considering the share of employment in manufacturing as this variable could be affected by endogeneity; in analysis 3, we interact each quintile of income with the dummy variable INNER. From an econometric point of view, through these controls we are able to understand whether the coefficients resulting from our principal analysis are influenced by correlated variables. Analysis 2 does not control for the share of manufacturing

employment. This represents an important check insofar as immigrants may decide to establish themselves in areas with a higher share of manufacturing or, on the other hand, low-skilled workers may feel threatened by a greater supply of labour. In analysis 3, we check that the correlation between taxable income and the share of the vote for Lega does not change in the inner/non-inner areas.[7] The results are quite robust to our controls in each analysis. Other robustness checks (i.e., on the instrumental variable, the outliers, and the covariates) have been conducted as well and are available upon request.

5. DISCUSSION

This analysis investigates the main drivers of the vote for the Lega party in Italy, shedding new light on the nexus between migration and electoral support.

Firstly, the use of municipality-level data allows us to refer to observational data, in order to control for socioeconomic covariates. In line with the findings from the 'geography of discontent' literature (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Los et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), the vote for the Lega party is larger the weaker is the socioeconomic fabric—namely, in less wealthy, rural, and inner municipalities. In particular, Italian inner areas seem to be particularly exposed to the rise in the anti-immigration vote. The way inner areas have been defined by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (see Barca et al., 2014) is aimed at stressing the existing territorial urban–rural imbalances together with their negative

consequences (OECD, 2018), and it is easy to see that imbalances mainly have to do with overall economic development. Weakening economies as well as depopulation (Barca et al., 2014) contribute to the process of ongoing socioeconomic marginalisation, which eventually fuels the 'discontent' process (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Our findings confirm these hypotheses, with the municipalities in the inner areas being much more prone to the Lega vote, even when jointly controlling for both the share of foreigners living there and specific NUTS-2-level region fixed effects. This result may suggest the role of competition over scarce resources in favouring the vote for Lega.

However, this explanation is far from being exhaustive. Both the contact effect and the halo effect operate: the former counterbalancing the ethnic competition hypothesis and the latter fostering it when also considering neighbouring areas.

Here, a negative effect played by the share of foreigners at the municipality level on the vote for a right-wing party is observed. This suggests that when controlling for other covariates, the positive effect of contact between natives and foreigners actually counterbalances the effect of competition over scarce resources. This finding—which is quite robust among alternative specifications of the model—is in line with those of Coffé et al. (2007), Steinmayr (2016), and Stockemer (2016).

In particular, Coffé et al. (2007) suggest that it is mainly the fear of foreigners and not the real presence of immigrants that drives voting for extreme-right parties. Their results also support the abovementioned theory of 'welfare chauvinism'. Although our findings contrast with this theory, we need to conduct further analyses to confirm these initial suggestions. Stockemer (2016) found that anti-immigrant parties are no more and no less successful at affecting public opinion in areas with a high percentage of foreign-born individuals as compared to regions with a low percentage of foreign-born individuals. Steinmayr (2016) offers support for the contact hypothesis in Austria, finding that hosting refugees decreases FPOE support by 4.42 percentage points.

With regards to Italy, our results contrast the analyses of Barone et al. (2016) and Devillanova (2020). However, this may be explained by a different empirical scheme. In comparison with the political parties considered by Barone et al. (2016), this work focuses on a political party—Lega —whose main political ideology has increasingly shifted towards an anti-immigration position. In his very insightful research, Devillanova (2020) focuses on five electoral outcomes in the city area of Milan. He conducts his analysis disaggregating the area into neighbourhoods, which have an average size of 2 square kilometres. This is too small of a level to distinguish between a direct and indirect effect. Moreover, we opted to

consider a single election that has the peculiarity of having been dramatically affected by immigration issues(namely, the 2019 EU one).[8]

However, the major novelty of this work is the introduction of the spatial lag of foreigner presence. This variable addresses the halo effect (Rydgren and Ruth, 2013), but it can also be used to verify the contact hypothesis effects that might originate across the neighbouring space. Compared with the results observed at the municipality level, the share of foreigners across the surrounding municipalities returns a fuzzier picture. The fact that this variable does not have any significant effect could suggest that the halo effect and the effect of competition over resources in a wider area (e.g., in the case of the labour market, which typically involves more neighbouring municipalities) compensate for the effects of contact (which are less intense) when considering areas wider than a single municipality.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper contributes to the analysis of factors explaining extreme-right voting in Italy at the municipality level. The ethnic competition hypothesis, the contact hypothesis, and the halo effect are jointly tested by means of an IV empirical strategy and controlling for socioeconomic and territorial covariates (e.g., the presence of inner and remote municipalities). As a major novelty, this paper considers the presence of foreigners also across neighbouring municipalities. The results strongly point out the role of direct contact

with foreigners in reducing the vote for Lega, thus overcoming the effect of competition over scarce resources. However, when the focus is widened to neighbouring municipalities this effect is weaker. In this latter case, both competition over resources in the labour market and a halo effect may play a role.

More generally, this paper suggests that the settlement of foreigners still affects the consensus for anti-immigration parties and that the places that are among the 'losers' in this economic phase of globalization are particularly prone to voting for extreme-right parties.

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TABLES

Table 1 – The regressors included in the analysis

Name	Meaning	Specification	Source (year)
Dependent variable			
Lega_vote	Votes for the Lega party in the 2019 European vote (%)	%	Ministry of the Interior (2019)
Foreigners			
IMM	Foreigners out of total population	%	ISTAT (2018)
IMM_lag	Foreigners out of total population in neighbouring municipalities (spatial lag)	%	ISTAT (2018)
Inner areas			
INNER	Dummy variable reflecting inner-area Italian municipalities, according to the SNAI classification (A-urban poles, B-intermunicipal poles, C-belt, D-intermediate, E-peripheral, F-ultraperipheral).	dummy: 0 (A, B, C municip.); 1 (D, E, F municip.)	Own elaboration on Barca et al. (2014)
Other socioeconomic covariates			
Log_pop	Log of total resident population	log	ISTAT (2018)
Pop_over_65	Population aged 65 and over on the total	%	ISTAT (2018)
Income	Average gross taxable income, by quintile	ordinal	Ministry of Economy and Finance (2017)
Manuf_employment	Employment in manufacturing in a municipality'	%	ISTAT (2016)
Not-for-profit	Number of volunteers in not-for-profit organisations per inhabitant	ratio	ISTAT (2011)
Tertiary_educ	Gross enrolment ratio (GER) in tertiary education courses: enrolled students as a share of population aged 19–23	ratio	ISTAT (2017)
NUTS-2 regions controls (REG)	Categorical variable of Italian NUTS-2 regions	21 factors	-

Table 2 - Model estimates for the OLS models and the 2SLS models

	OLS		2SLS	
	(1) **No spatial lags**	**(2)** **Spatial lags**	**(3)** **No spatial lags**	**(4)** **Spatial lags**
Constant	57.676***	57.068***	61.745***	73.032***
IMM	-0.041	-0.075	-0.672***	-0.559***
IMM_lag		0.090		-1.301
INNER	1.767***	1.786***	1.862***	1.623**
Log_pop	-0.774***	-0.758***	-0.430*	-0.460*
Pop_over_65	-0.107	-0.104	-0.159	-0.235*
Quintiles of income (base level: third quintile)				
Fifth quintile	1.581**	1.602**	1.943***	1.823**
Fourth quintile	1.156**	1.167**	1.026**	0.776
Second quintile	-2.727***	-2.740***	-2.742***	-2.575***
First quintile	-7.478***	-7.500***	-8.051***	-8.074***
Manuf_employment	-0.026	-0.027	-0.034	-0.026
Manuf_employment^2	0.001*	0.001*	0.001**	0.001
Not-for-profit	-9.406*	-9.314*	-10.803**	-12.854**
Tertiary_educ	-0.038	-0.038	-0.045	-0.048

NUTS-2 region controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	7,871	7,871	7,784	7, 784
R-squared	0.713	0.713	0.687	0.603

Notes: standard errors clustered at the NUTS-2 region level; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

APPENDIX A

Table A.1 - Descriptive statistics

	Variable	Min.	1st Qu.	Median	Mean	3rd Qu	Max.	Number of obs.
Dependent variable	Lega_vote	2.78	28.46	40.22	39.01	49.29	86.79	7886
Foreigners	Foreigners	0.00	3.35	5.96	6.66	9.22	38.20	7960
	Foreigners_spatial_lag	0.58	4.06	6.51	6.77	9.10	20.92	7871
Inner areas	Inner areas type							
	Non-inner	-	-	-	-	-	-	3867
	Inner	-	-	-	-	-	-	4092
Other socioeconomic covariates	Log_pop	3.37	6.93	7.81	7.84	8.74	14.87	7960
	Pop_over_65	8.15	21.12	24.13	24.70	27.59	66.23	7960
	Income:							
	Fifth quintile	6.60	11.91	12.77	12.61	13.51	14.16	1575
	Fourth quintile	14.16	14.89	15.55	15.55	16.23	16.84	1574
	Third quintile	16.84	17.34	17.86	17.86	18.38	18.84	1574
	Second quintile	18.84	19.32	19.83	19.82	20.73	20.83	1574
	First quintile	20.83	21.48	22.31	22.89	23.58	50.59	1574
	Manuf_employment	0.00	9.38	19.73	24.73	37.18	93.71	7949
	Not-for-profit	0.00	0.04	0.07	0.10	0.12	2.55	7904
	Tertiary_educ	0.00	38.20	48.13	49.61	59.65	390.91	7959

Table A.2 – Robustness check regarding the 2SLS models

	2SLS	2SLS with spatial lag	2SLS	2SLS with spatial lag	2SLS	2SLS with spatial lag
	Base analysis		Analysis 2 (no manuf. empl.)		Analysis 3 (interaction quintiles–inner areas)	
Constant	61.745***	73.032***	63.346***	76.003***	61.593***	72.907***
IMM	-0.672***	-0.559***	-0.678***	-0.584**	-0.664***	-0.548***
IMM_lag		-1.301		-1.399		-1.300
INNER	1.862***	1.623**	1.846***	1.579**	1.742**	1.343
Log_pop	-0.430*	-0.460*	-0.534***	-0.553***	-0.433*	-0.463*
Pop_over_65	-0.159	-0.235*	-0.178	-0.267*	-0.153	-0.229*
Quintiles of income (ref. level: third quintile)						
Fifth quintile	1.943***	1.823**	1.775**	1.657*	2.874***	2.855**
Fourth quintile	1.026**	0.776	0.891**	0.603	0.892	0.313
Second quintile	-2.742***	-2.575***	-2.585***	-2.381***	-3.028***	-2.893***
First quintile	-8.051***	-8.074***	-7.867***	-7.895***	-8.089***	-8.238***
Manuf_employment	-0.034	-0.026			-0.032	-0.024
Manuf_employment^2	0.001**	0.001			0.001**	0.001
Not-for-profit	-10.803**	-12.854**	-11.092**	-13.426**	-10.928**	-12.968**

Tertiary_educ	-0.045	-0.048	-0.047	-0.051	-0.045	-0.048
NUTS-2 region controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interaction inner areas–quintiles of income	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	7,784	7,784	7,784	7,784	7,784	7,784
R-squared	0.687	0.603	0.684	0.586	0.688	0.605

Notes: standard errors clustered at the NUTS-2 region level; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

NOTES

[1] Other far-right parties in Italy obtained lower percentages: only Fratelli d'Italia passed the 5% percent electoral threshold (with 6.4% of total votes).

[2] The generic element w_{ij} of **W** is defined as $w_{ij} = \frac{w_{ij}^*}{\sum_{j=1}^{7982} w_{ij}^*}$, where w_{ij}^* is equal to 1 when $i \neq j$ and $j \in N(i)$, while it equals 0 when $i = j$ or when $i \neq j$ and $j \notin N(i)$. Here, N(i) just represents the set of neighbours of the i-th region.

[3] More details are available upon request.

[4] We aggregate the countries of origin into continents: Africa, America, Asia and Australia, Europe (outside of Italy). The instrumental variable distinguishing among areas of origin is an important component since it allows a more accurate definition of the historical settlement patterns.

[5] The potential issue of multicollinearity is avoided since the correlation between the two instrumental variables is 4.10%.

[6] As a robustness check, we replaced the null values in 2010 with one. The results strongly confirm our findings.

[7] The detailed results of the interaction are available upon request.

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[8] https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/feature/what-can-we-expect-from-the-new-european-parliament-on-migrant-integration