

**Authors:**

GIANLUCA CERRUTI,

Department of Economics and Business, University of Genova, Italy

SIMONE ROBBIANO

Department of Science and Technological Innovation, University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy

## PRESENCE OF MIGRANTS AND VOTING BEHAVIOR IN EUROPE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

### ABSTRACT

In this study, we conduct a survey of the empirical literature that has investigated the relationship between the presence of migrants and voting behavior. Our focus is primarily on European countries, although we also present analyses related to some countries on the outskirts of Europe. The papers are grouped by individual country or group of countries, and predominantly employ counterfactual impact evaluation methods, which allow for the study of causal evidence rather than mere correlations. While the majority of the contributions are written by economists, there are also contributions from social psychologists and political scientists, providing an as comprehensive as possible view on the topic.

The findings of this literature reveal a heterogeneous and intricate relationship, influenced by several factors such as economic conditions, cultural dynamics, and social aspects. While numerous studies demonstrate the existence of certain patterns, one prominent example being the nexus between immigrant presence and political backlash, the complexity and variation across different countries underscore the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Voting Behavior; Immigration; Political backlash; Culture; Economics

**JEL Classification:** Z1; J15; D72

### RIASSUNTO

*Presenza di immigrati e comportamento elettorale in Europa: una panoramica della letteratura empirica*

In questo studio esaminiamo la letteratura empirica che ha indagato la relazione tra la presenza di immigrati e il comportamento elettorale. Il nostro focus è principalmente rivolto ai paesi europei, sebbene alcuni contributi analizzati siano relativi a paesi ai margini dell'Europa. Gli

articoli sono raggruppati per paese o per gruppo di paesi e, in larga parte, fanno uso di metodi controfattuali per la valutazione degli impatti, i quali consentono lo studio di evidenze causali anziché di semplici correlazioni. Sebbene la maggior parte dei contributi sia scritta da economisti, sono presenti anche contributi di psicologi sociali e scienziati politici, che permettono di avere una visione il più possibile completa sul tema.

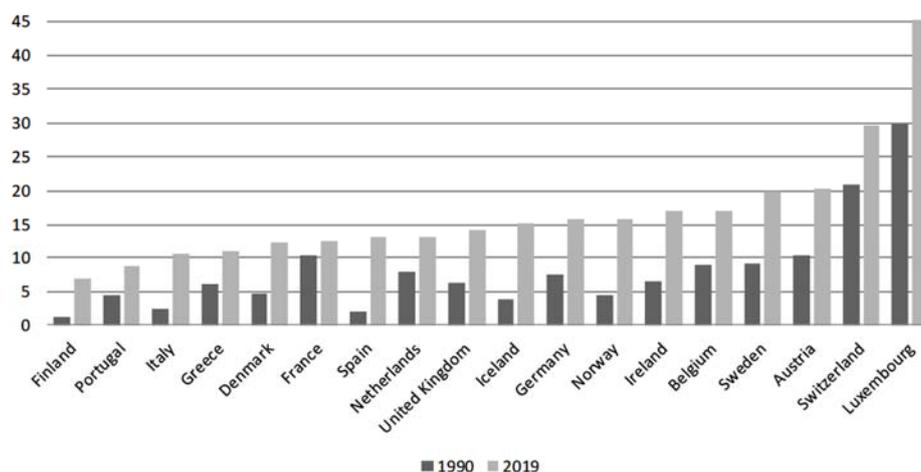
I risultati di questa letteratura rivelano una relazione eterogenea e complessa, influenzata da diversi fattori quali le condizioni economiche, le dinamiche culturali e gli aspetti sociali. Nonostante vari lavori evidenzino l'esistenza di alcuni pattern, uno su tutti l'impatto positivo della presenza degli immigrati sui voti ai partiti di estrema destra, la complessità e la variazione di tali relazioni tra i diversi paesi rimarcano la natura poliedrica di questo fenomeno.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, numerous researchers in the field of social sciences have investigated the influence of migrants' presence in a specific region on voting behavior and other electoral or related outcomes across Europe.

This trend stems from the significant increase in the proportion of foreign-born individuals over the past three decades (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 - *Percentage of Foreign-Born Individuals in a Panel of Selected European Countries, 1990-2019*



Sources: Data from the United Nations processed by Edo and Giesing (2020).

Be that as it may, “foreign-born” and “migrant” are two broad terms. The term “migrants” encompasses both refugees and illegal aliens residing in a specific country. In contrast, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are individuals who are “fleeing armed conflict or persecution” and face potentially life-threatening consequences if denied asylum. Consequently, focusing on refugees rather than migrants means considering only those who have been compelled to leave their homes due to dangerous circumstances.

Eurostat data<sup>1</sup> between 2012 and 2021 highlights that a significant number of European countries have experienced a large influx of asylum seekers, individuals who have applied for and are awaiting refugee status. Over 2.2 million people have applied for asylum in Germany, over 860,000 in France, approximately 590,000 in Italy, and over 200,000 in Sweden, Spain, Greece, Hungary, Austria, and the Netherlands<sup>2</sup>.

In light of these data it is not surprising that, in the last decade, immigration has been the dominating political issue in most European countries (Figure 2). This prominence can largely be attributed to the refugee crisis that began around 2011-2012 and escalated in subsequent years, coinciding with the financial crisis. As a result, numerous European governments have faced significant challenges and experienced political repercussions.

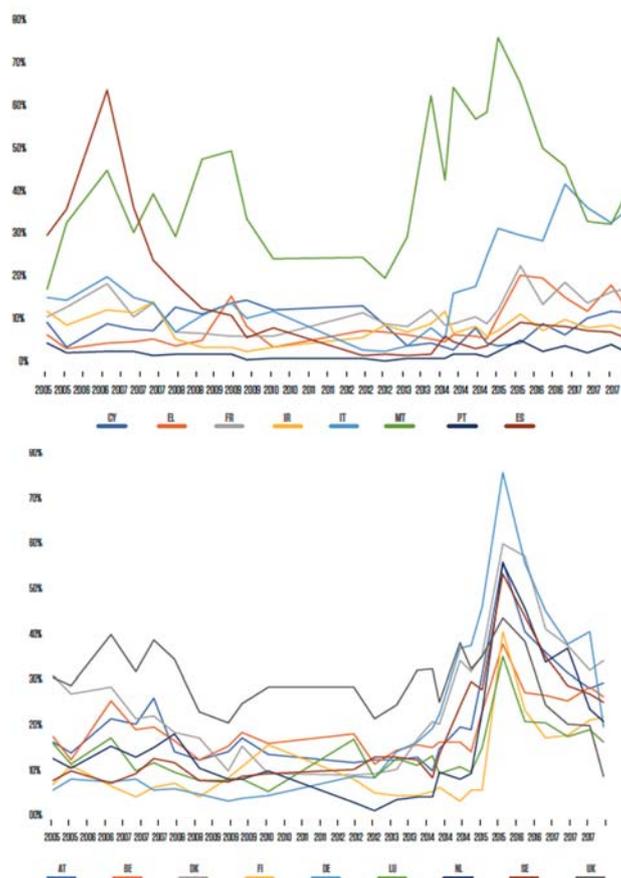
If we look at the electoral results obtained by far-right parties in parliamentary elections in many European countries in recent years, it is evident that they have gained votes compared to past decades (Figure 3).

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<sup>1</sup> For further details, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/migration-asylum/asylum/database>

<sup>2</sup> And around 185,000 in Belgium.

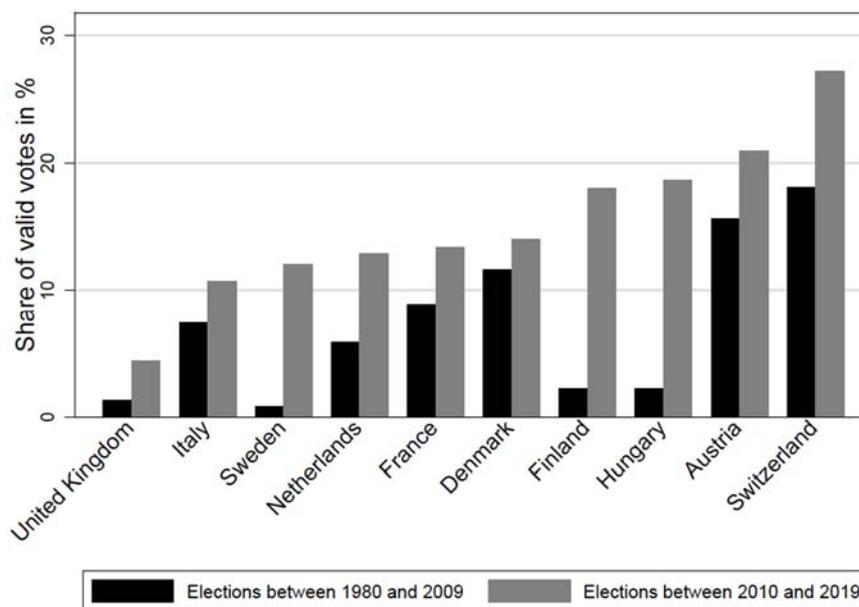
FIGURE 2 - Percentage responding “immigration” to the question: “What do you think are the two most important issues facing our country at the moment?”. Countries: Cyprus (CY), Greece (EL), France (FR), Ireland (IR), Italy (IT), Malta (MT), Portugal (PT), Spain (ES), Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Denmark (DE), Finland (FI), Germany (DE), Luxembourg (LU), Netherlands (NL), Sweden (SE), and United Kingdom (UK), May 2005 – March 2018.



Sources: Eurobarometer data processed by Dennison (2019).

Nevertheless, the increase in migratory flows, particularly from North Africa, is not the sole or definitive explanation. Various factors could, at least theoretically, account for the surge in votes for far-right parties. These include, but are not limited to, advancements in technology and concerns related to automation (Anelli *et al.*, 2019), factors tied to globalization and international trade (Rodrik, 2018), and uncertainties stemming from the economic and financial crisis (as highlighted by Algan *et al.*, 2017, in relation to heightened unemployment).

FIGURE 3 - Electoral results obtained by far-right parties in parliamentary elections for a selected group of countries. Selected right-wing parties are: Freedom Party of Austria, Danish People's Party, Finns Party, National Front in France, Movement for a better Hungary, Northern League in Italy, Freedom Party in Switzerland and the UK Independence Party.



*Sources:* Data from the European Election Database and official national websites, processed by Edo and Giesing (2020).

The focus of this paper is to explore, through an extensive review of the literature on the subject, whether migrations have played a role in the shift of the electorate towards the right.

In this work we analyze a mixed literature which takes into consideration both migrants and refugees, a literature which is very active on the topic, especially considering the causal impact of the presence of refugees on right-wing party voting and anti-government sentiment.

Indeed, it often requires the use of instrumental variable approaches or other counterfactual techniques (Angrist and Pischke, 2009; Imbens and Wooldridge, 2009) to overcome the endogeneity issue in the choice of immigrants' location and inspect its link to voting behavior. This choice is often non-random for several reasons:

- Immigrants are more likely to settle in areas with a higher concentration of their compatriots, which provides them with language support and increased job opportunities.
- Housing availability.
- Immigrants may prefer regions where the native population is less inclined to support far-right candidates.
- Geographical proximity to the border may lead to a higher concentration of immigrants in certain areas among specific native groups.

In this literature review, we reflect on various potential mechanisms of transmission (mediating factors) between the presence of immigrants and voting behavior, ranging from economic factors such as labor market competition, productivity, or the fiscal cost to natives, as well as cultural factors, social norms, perceived security, and many others.

All the same, our understanding of literature is that the evidence on migrants/refugees and voting is still mixed. Overall, recent research on the electoral consequences of the presence of refugees consists of case studies scattered in various countries at different times.

Indeed, on one hand, as highlighted by Alesina and Tabellini (2022), many papers suggest that immigrants often trigger a political backlash. A first group of papers, which we will research in more detail, find a positive impact of the presence of migrants/refugees on the number of votes obtained by anti-migrant, right-wing populist parties (Coffè *et al.*, 2007; Barone *et al.*, 2016; Harmon, 2018; Edo *et al.*, 2019; Dinas *et al.*, 2019, among others). On the other hand, another set of studies yields different (opposite or no) results (Kellerman and Winter, 2022; Gehrsitz and Ungerer, 2022; Pettrachin *et al.*, 2023, among others).

Regardless of how, the twofold nature of the literature can be attributed to the pivotal role played by a range of factors that exhibit variation across countries (and often within as well).

Some key factors, although not exhaustive, include the skill levels of both the native population and immigrants (Edo *et al.*, 2019; Campo *et al.*, 2021, among others), whether immigrants are from Western or non-Western countries (Brunner and Kuhn, 2018; Edo *et al.*, 2019; Edo and Giesing, 2020; Roupakias and Chletsos, 2020, among others), the magnitude of immigration (Vertier *et al.*, 2023), the size of the host city (Barone *et al.*, 2016; Rudolph and Wagner, 2022), whether the duration of contact is short (Dinas *et al.*, 2019; Hangartner *et al.*, 2019, among others) or long (Green *et al.*, 2016; Steinmayr, 2021, among others) as well as the quality and characteristics of the reception system (Genovese *et al.*, 2017; Giunti and Mendola, 2021; Gamalerio *et al.*, 2023).

These last features are crucial for the conditions of Allport's contact theory to be at work (Allport *et al.*, 1954). These conditions include equal status between the two groups (natives and immigrants in this case), common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities. Conditions that are difficult to satisfy simultaneously.

On top of that, other characteristics of a country, such as the plurality of its political system, the perception and the salience of the immigration issue in public debate, play a role (Dinas and Spanje, 2011; Bellucci *et al.*, 2019; Alesina and Tabellini, 2022, among others). Indeed, as the salience of a specific issue increases, the emotional system is activated, leading to even stronger and more polarized opinions on the matter, which become determinants in political choices. In this process, which can distort the perception and effects of immigrants, the media plays an important role.

The next paragraph explores this heterogeneity by considering several papers that employ different methods and reach different conclusions across various European countries. Starting with the most populous countries, namely Italy, France, Germany, and Spain, the paper also analyzes contributions related to Portugal, Greece, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, and Denmark), Eastern European countries (Hungary), and two countries on the outskirts of Europe: the UK and Turkey. Eventually, the subsequent paragraph concludes by summarizing the key findings of the literature and offering insights into the recommended policies to be adopted.

## 2. SURVEY OF THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

### Italy

In the past 10 years, Italy has been up against significant challenges related to the refugee crisis. The country has experienced a large influx of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea in search of safety and better opportunities. This has put a strain on Italy's resources and infrastructure, leading to various social, economic, and political implications.

Barone *et al.* (2016) conduct a study focusing on the Italian context, which is particularly interesting due to the aforementioned significant influx of migrants in recent years. Their objective is to research how immigration impacts the political preferences of native citizens. To achieve this, they analyze municipal data from the years 2001, 2006, and 2008 and employ an instrumental variable strategy following Card's shift-share approach (Card, 2001), as modified by Cortés and Pan (2015), using the share of immigrants in 1991 (by municipality) as instrument.

The study findings reveal that an increase in the proportion of immigrants in a municipality corresponds to a higher percentage of votes for the center-right political coalition. The researchers further explore the relationship between immigration and electoral gains by considering not only national elections but also mayoral elections. They notice that the effects observed are similar in magnitude, suggesting that immigration's influence on electoral outcomes extends beyond national politics.

Additionally, the study uncovers significant variations in the effects across municipalities of different sizes. The impact of immigration is more noticeable in medium-sized municipalities, while no significant effects are observed in smaller or larger municipalities.

What is more, the research demonstrates that immigration has a twofold effect on the electoral process. On the one hand, it leads to a decrease in electoral participation, indicating that some native citizens may be discouraged or disengaged due to the presence of immigrants. On the other hand, it results in an increase in protest votes, such as blank or invalid ballots, indicating dissatisfaction related to immigration.

In the end, the authors delve into the mechanisms through which immigration influences voting patterns, specifically for the center-right coalition. They identify cultural diversity, labor market competition, and competition for public services as factors that affect voter preferences (voters'

side). Furthermore, the study highlights that political competition plays a significant role in shaping the strategies of political parties (parties' side) concerning immigration-related issues.

Gamalerio *et al.* (2023) conduct a study on the Italian case, using data from the SPRAR system (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), to analyze the social and political impact of reception centers managed by local governments, asserting that the characteristics of these centers resemble the conditions described by Allport *et al.*, (1954)<sup>3</sup>. Estimates obtained using instrumental variable (IV) methods indicate that cities that open a refugee reception center experience a change in the number of votes for right-wing parties in national elections, with approximately 7 percentage points fewer votes between 2013 and 2018 compared to municipalities that do not open such centers. Over and above that, the opening of these centers seems to have a positive impact on compositional amenities as well as on population growth at the municipal level.

The authors demonstrate that hosting refugees and asylum seekers through a reception system managed by local governments, which promotes interaction between natives and immigrants, harms the electoral performance of right-wing and anti-immigrant parties. Consequently, involving local governments in the geographical redistribution of refugees and integration through the local relocation system leads to a reduction in anti-immigrant prejudices<sup>4</sup>.

In addition to analyzing votes between 2013 and 2018, the study also probes the effects on votes attributed to other parties and voter turnout using both ordinary least squares (OLS) and an instrumental variable approach. The presence of pre-existing accommodation facilities for disabled, elderly, and drug-addicted individuals is utilized as instrument. The findings indicate that the presence of SPRAR centers benefits moderate political forces and reduces voter turnout.

These results contradict the evidence regarding the privately managed reception system, which seems to increase the votes for right-wing and anti-immigrant parties.

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<sup>3</sup> In a nutshell, such conditions are crucial as they enable the interaction between natives and immigrants to reduce native prejudice towards immigrants.

<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, there appears to be a positive effect in terms of reducing prejudices in cities near SPRAR centers, even if they do not directly host them.

In this regard, Campo *et al.* (2021) exploit the fact that the dispersal policy implemented in Italy constitutes a quasi-experimental setting. As a matter of fact, in recent years Italy has implemented a policy of redistributing new arrivals to temporary reception centers (CAS) to address the significant influx of asylum seekers and the lack of ordinary reception capacity by local authorities. CAS are centers managed by private enterprises funded by the central government and supervised by prefectures, which have housed the majority of asylum seekers in recent years and have effectively been used as primary reception centers, overtaking their exceptional nature. According to the dispersal policy, the number of immigrants allocated to each province is determined based on the resident population, while the distribution of centers within the province occurs almost randomly through public procurement procedures.

Using first-hand data on refugee resettlements and reception centers from 2014 to 2019, obtained from administrative data, combined with parliamentary election results (at the municipality level) and economic as well as demographic characteristics of municipalities (Istat data), the researchers find a positive effect of the percentage of asylum seekers on support for far-right parties (albeit small in magnitude) when considering only CAS. This political discontent appears to be heterogeneous across municipalities of different demographic sizes, and seems to be attenuated or even vanish in municipalities characterized by high percentages of skilled individuals with university degrees and stronger in municipalities with a high percentage of regular immigrants. Furthermore, it is powerful in municipalities where right-wing candidates have visited and delivered hate speeches before the elections. The findings do not seem to be driven by economic hardship, as the anti-immigration backlash is considerably reduced in municipalities with a higher unemployment rate.

To that end, Campo *et al.* (2021) argue that the observed anti-immigration discontent indicates that a refugee reception model based on private and temporary centers without adequate integration services and without the involvement of local institutions in their management and adequate informational campaigns can generate dissatisfaction and have a non-negligible political cost.

Additionally, further analyses conducted by the researchers also find that the allocation of a reception center in a particular area does not result in economic loss, depopulation of natives, or an increase in public expenditures at the municipal level.

Bratti *et al.* (2020) provide new empirical evidence on a less-explored aspect, namely the geographic spillover effects of refugee reception centers on voting behavior in Italy. They leverage a comprehensive dataset on the location of these centers to construct a measure of geographical proximity to the municipalities hosting refugees. In contrast to existing literature, their analysis investigates how proximity to municipalities with reception centers influences electoral outcomes in neighboring municipalities.

The analysis, focusing on the 2016 constitutional referendum and the 2013 and 2018 national elections, demonstrates that voters in municipalities closer to refugee reception centers tend to show higher support for populist parties, particularly the Five Star Movement, while exhibiting lower support for the center-left. Likewise, when exploring heterogeneity effects, the researchers find that the geographic spillover effects are more pronounced in smaller and economically disadvantaged municipalities. This finding aligns with the perception that the potential impacts of refugee reception centers are more negative in smaller communities and among low-income individuals, possibly due to perceived competition for welfare resources.

Conjointly, the study reveals that the proximity effects are stronger in municipalities with less alignment towards the center-left, as evident from past general election outcomes. Additionally, the researchers investigate the potential relationship between proximity and media access, including newspaper sales *per capita* and new media. Notably, they discover that the effects related to proximity, such as increased voter turnout and reduced support for the left-wing government (and vice versa, increased populist voting), are diminished in municipalities with access to broadband Internet connections.

This observation suggests that geographic distance from refugee reception centers becomes less influential in shaping individuals' opinions towards refugees when voters have access to a wider range of information sources.

In summary, Bratti *et al.* (2020) contribute valuable insights into the spillover effects of refugee reception centers on voting behavior. Their findings shed light on the role of geographic proximity and socioeconomic factors in shaping attitudes towards refugees, highlighting the importance of considering local contexts and media access when analyzing the political consequences of such centers.

Continuing our examination of the Italian case, Gamalerio and Negri (2018) highlight how the literature has predominantly focused on voter behavior (demand side), overlooking immigration policies and the behavior of politicians dealing with immigration issues (supply side). Nonetheless, it is reasonable to expect that the local government manipulates immigration policies to gain votes or avoid losing popularity.

To investigate the supply side, the researchers employ a comprehensive database of votes and various other characteristics of Italian municipalities from 2005 to 2017, along with the localization of SPRAR centers. Since municipalities that decide to open a SPRAR center receive substantial funding from the central government, approximately 8% of the *per capita* municipal budget, opening a reception center can be considered a genuine investment for a municipality and can bring benefits to the local economy.

The analysis reveals that the probability of a municipality requesting the opening of a SPRAR reception center is 26% lower for municipalities in the last year of their term (just before new elections) compared to municipalities in other years of their term. In practice, when elections are further away in time, the incumbent mayor follows their own preferences and decides to open a center for refugees if he/she believes it is the right thing to do. Still and all, when elections are imminent, the decision is influenced by the need to attract votes, and even a pro-immigration mayor may choose not to open an SPRAR center in order to gain the support of those who oppose immigration.

Genovese *et al.* (2017) analyze the effects of different reception systems on the attitudes of native populations towards immigrants. The Italian case is particularly relevant as Italy employs both small-scale reception centers and larger facilities to manage immigration within the national territory.

The researchers highlight that centralizing immigration management through reception centers generates negative sentiments towards immigrants. Conversely, a more decentralized and flexible reception system can foster more positive attitudes towards immigrants.

When immigrants are placed in segregated centers located close to native communities, the lack of contact with migrants can exacerbate the sense of alienation among natives. Conversely, if immigrants are integrated with natives in small-scale reception centers, it is more likely that contact will be established, and natives will feel less threatened by the presence of migrants.

In fact, their findings demonstrate that the presence of immigrants in small-scale centers can facilitate more harmonious interactions and foster more positive opinions towards migrants. Nonetheless, it is crucial that the context in which natives live is economically and culturally capable to absorb immigrants.

This system, albeit costlier, could yield dividends in terms of trust in the institutions managing the migration crisis.

Cerqua and Zampollo (2023) study Italian municipal elections from 2000 to 2018 and employ a nonparametric robust-corrected RDD estimator (Calonico *et al.*, 2019) with covariate adjustment to assess the causal impact of anti-immigrant parties on immigrants' location choices. They find that the election of a mayor supported by an anti-immigrant coalition affects immigrants' location choices only when considering recent years, specifically those following a significant influx of refugees, during which immigration has become a central topic in the political debate. This result is not driven by pro-native policies of the mayor but rather by an "inhospitality effect" that has grown stronger in recent years due to heightened political propaganda. Thus, these findings highlight how immigrant flows are influenced by the local political environment only when immigration is central to the political discourse. As a result, propaganda, even if it does not lead to the implementation of specific anti-immigrant policies, has the power to influence immigrants' behavior. Furthermore, additional analyses reveal that this reduction in immigrant inflows driven by lower location choices of migrants in municipalities where the right-wing anti-immigrant coalition emerged persists steadily even four years after the elections.

Bracco *et al.* (2018) also inquire whether anti-immigrant parties have somehow influenced the housing choices of foreigners, with a specific focus on Northern Italy during the period from 2002 to 2014. Using a Regression Discontinuity framework that targets mayors who were elected by a narrow margin, they find that a municipality with a mayor belonging to or supported by the Lega Nord, an anti-immigrant party, discourages foreigners from moving to and settling in that particular municipality.

If many papers aim to explore real immigration statistics, Bellucci *et al.* (2019) address the significant gap between perception and reality regarding immigration in Italy (Alesina and Tabellini, 2022; Alesina *et al.*, 2023). They investigate the effects of perceived immigration

threat on voting behavior in Italian municipal elections from 2010 to 2018, focusing on municipalities that held elections twice within this period. Specifically, they ponder how local elections in Italy were influenced by sea arrivals of refugees in the days and weeks leading up to the elections, a topic often discussed in the media that undoubtedly influences voters' perceptions.

To do so, they construct an index that captures the magnitude of arrivals on the coasts, which varies over time and across municipalities depending on the nationality of the refugees. They employ first differences estimates to account for municipality fixed effects and control for time-varying factors that may interact with migration flows and electoral outcomes, such as the presence of refugee centers and asylum seekers, among others.

The researchers find that, rather than the presence of migrants, the perceived threat and anxiety stemming from a hypothetical influx of refugees significantly contributed to the decline in voter turnout and the rise of protest votes, namely for extreme right-wing and populist parties, experienced in Italy from 2010 to 2018. According to the authors, it is not the current share of immigrants that fosters political disengagement and increased support for populists or extreme right-wing parties. Instead, it is the perceptions of migrants influenced by anti-immigration campaigns prevalent in formal and informal media that play a key role in shaping voting behavior<sup>5</sup>. The authors argue that the increased salience and anxiety regarding immigration, coupled with limited personal contact with immigrants, drive the observed shift in voting behavior in recent years.

All in all, the media portrayal of the migrant crisis as a permanent issue, even when it is not, only reinforces negative perceptions and amplifies voters' dissatisfaction with mainstream parties.

## **France**

Over the past decade, France has also experienced a significant increase in the number of refugees arriving in the country in search of protection and better living conditions. This pressing matter has ignited extensive public discourse, leading to the rise of anti-immigrant

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<sup>5</sup> This effect is more pronounced among voters who are less likely to read newspapers but more exposed to high-speed internet connections.

factions, predominantly from the far-right spectrum. Such parties have garnered substantial backing by capitalizing on mounting apprehensions surrounding immigration and national security.

Vertier *et al.* (2023), starting from the assumption that the arrival of a large number of immigrants has fueled anti-migrant sentiments and, consequently, the vote for right-wing anti-immigrant parties, delve into an aspect that has been largely unexplored in the literature: the potential role of the size of the migration flow. Specifically, they inquire the potential political consequences of a moderate influx of migrants into a territory.

To conduct this analysis, the researchers leverage the closure of the “Calais Jungle”, a settlement of approximately 6,400 inhabitants, by the French government in 2015-2016. The involved migrants were subsequently relocated to other areas of the country through over 300 reception and orientation centers called “Centres d’Accueil et d’Orientation” (CAOs). These migrants stayed in the CAOs, on average, less than 3 months, with the relocation costs covered by the government. During their stay, the migrants were unable to work, thus avoiding any negative economic impact or labor market competition with the native population. These characteristics allow for the examination of the direct effect of contact between migrants and natives, excluding potential indirect effects.

Specifically, the researchers used the municipal-level voting percentages to right-wing parties at the presidential elections between 2012 and 2017 as an indicator in their study, considering them as proxies for anti-migrant sentiments. The results reveal that the growth of votes for the right-wing anti-immigrant party, Front National, during the presidential elections in the studied period, was 4% to 12% lower in municipalities hosting a CAO. These findings remain robust when applying instrumental variable (IV) estimation<sup>6</sup>.

Additionally, spill-over effects are observed in neighboring municipalities, and the trend reverses when analyzing CAOs of much larger sizes, leading to an increase in votes for Front National.

The researchers interpret these results as indicating that a limited number of migrants, who do not compete with natives in the labor market, have fostered greater acceptance of migrants. This

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<sup>6</sup> More specifically, they use the presence of buildings capable of accommodating large groups of people constructed before the dismantling of the Calais Jungle (at the municipal level) as instrument.

interpretation is further supported by the increased votes for the Front de Gauche party, which has a more open stance towards migrants and a similar political platform to the Front National.

In a nutshell, the results concerning small-sized CAOs are consistent with the contact theory (Allport *et al.*, 1954), while the opposite findings regarding large-sized CAOs align with the realistic group conflict theories (as described by Blumer, 1958; Taylor, 1998; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999; Lahav, 2004).

Edo *et al.* (2019) estimate the impact of immigration on voting for extreme left and extreme right parties in France, using panel data from French presidential elections between 1988 and 2017. Employing an instrumental variable approach with settlement patterns from 1968 as instrument and dividing immigrants into different groups (such as those from Latin countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal, and those from the Maghreb region including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia), they find that immigration increases support for extreme right candidates, namely Jean Marie Le Pen from 1988 to 2007 and Marine Le Pen from 2012 to 2017.

Heterogeneity analyses indicate that this result is driven by low-educated immigrants from non-Western countries, highlighting how a migration policy focused on high-educated immigration would experience less political backlash.

In this context, it has been observed that migrants from North Africa and Turkey are more susceptible to xenophobia from native French individuals compared to other foreign groups (Martin, 2000) and Shvets (2004) highlights how immigrants from North Africa and Turkey are deemed less acceptable by native French individuals, particularly when compared to immigrants from European countries or former French colonies. Among other factors, one possible explanation could be linked to religious differences (Peignard, 2001). It is reasonable to assume that this gap in perceptions among different groups of foreigners also has varying impacts on political party votes.

Anyways, Edo *et al.* (2019) lean towards a cultural explanation given the educational attainment of immigrants; nevertheless, they also find a weak negative effect of immigration on support for extreme left candidates, which can be explained by economic factors, such as reduced support for redistribution<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Further analyses reveal also that immigrants prefer to reside in regions with lower support for far-right candidates.

Also Edo and Giesing (2020) utilize data from the French presidential elections spanning the period 1988-2017 and demonstrate that the positive impact of immigration on votes for far-right parties is driven by low-skilled immigration from non-European countries, while high-skilled immigration from non-European countries has a negative impact on votes for far-right parties. These findings highlight the significant role that the economic and social integration of immigrants plays in shaping anti-immigrant sentiment. Consequently, promoting integration efforts could potentially reduce negative attitudes towards immigrants and preserve national cohesion.

## Germany

Even Germany has not been immune to the effects of the refugee crisis and has experienced an increase in arrivals in the years following 2014. A multitude of researchers have conducted studies on the relationship between refugee influx and votes for far-right parties, analyzing various cases and yielding disparate outcomes.

Petrachin *et al.* (2023) analyze the impact of exposure to asylum seeker migration during the refugee crisis on the voting behavior for the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) at the 2019 European elections in Berlin. During that year, AfD obtained 11% of the votes, becoming the fourth most voted party in Germany. Unlike other studies, they focus exclusively on the city of Berlin, implementing a granular analysis at the neighborhood level. In doing so, they adopt an innovative methodology that relies on geolocation techniques and high-resolution spatial statistics (Drouhot *et al.*, 2023).

Using spatial regression models, the authors demonstrate a negative correlation between exposure to asylum seeker migration and the percentage of votes for AfD, a result that appears consistent with contact theory (Allport *et al.*, 1954). Heterogeneity analyses highlight that the relationship is less pronounced in wealthier neighborhoods and stronger in poorer ones. As a further matter, the association seems to depend on the perceived intensity of contact, as it is weaker in neighborhoods with larger reception centers. Additionally, the belongingness to East and West Berlin plays a role, indicating a socio-cultural history effect on the relationship between exposure to migrants and far-right votes<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> That is, the relationship is stronger in western districts.

Also Kellermann and Winter (2022) study the relationship between immigration and votes for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party at the 2017 German parliamentary elections, exploiting the election results and the economic, socio-demographic, and geographic characteristics of 401 administrative districts. Since only individuals with German passports can vote in Germany, the evaluated factor is the anti-immigrant sentiment in terms of votes cast by German natives and naturalized German citizens.

The authors separately inspect the impact of overall immigration and asylum seekers as a subgroup of migrants. They also take into account the distance and the fact that the presence of immigrants or economic conditions in a particular district can also influence voting behavior in neighboring areas. In consequence, they employ an inter-district dependence approach using a spatial autoregressive model.

Their main finding is that an increase in the percentage of resident foreigners is associated with a reduction in the percentage of votes for AfD, and this result remains robust across various estimation variations, such as considering the potential endogenous distribution using instrumental variable analysis (IV). The instrumental variables used include the Jewish residents in 1933, that is before the persecutions of the Nazi regime, and historic immigration patterns from the 1990s. Centers with a higher proportion of Jewish population at that time were more industrialized and served as the primary destination for migrant workers after World War II. Their prevalence serves as a proxy for industrialization and urbanization, factors that shaped immigration in subsequent periods. Additionally, another instrument is the presence of immigrants in 1995 at the district level to capture the current immigration presence.

Heterogeneity analysis highlights that the negative impact of immigration on AfD votes is stronger in the former East German Democratic Republic, where AfD has a stronghold and where immigration has historically been lower<sup>9</sup>.

Anyway, Kellermann and Winter (2022) believe that, rather than being an expression of xenophobic attitudes, voting for AfD is linked to electoral protest against the government and the management of the recent influx of refugees.

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<sup>9</sup> In line with this finding, Hornuf *et al.* (2023) show that xenophobic sentiments among citizens of the former East Germany are lower if they have access to Western TV, which features more frequent representation of foreign individuals and content.

Their result supports the contact theory and suggests that frequent interactions between native Germans and immigrants reduce prejudices and foster a more welcoming attitude. Be that as it may, it is important to note that this outcome is primarily influenced by non-asylum seekers and immigrants from European countries, which share greater cultural similarities with native Germans and hence promote interaction and integration more easily.

Gehrsitz and Ungerer (2022) use administrative data on refugee allocation to study the influx of more than one million refugees into Germany between 2014 and 2015. By utilizing an automatic housing allocation mechanism for refugees, they investigate the short-term impact of migration on voting behavior and other outcome variables. Their findings indicate that refugees have not displaced native workers, and they observe a moderate impact on crime. Furthermore, despite researchers initially assuming that an increase in refugees would result in a higher vote share for right-wing parties at the macro level, their findings at the micro level suggest that exposure to a growing number of asylum seekers has not contributed to this phenomenon. Veritably, it has even resulted in a slight decrease in support for far-right parties.

Indeed, their analysis conducted at the local level in North Rhine-Westphalia suggests that larger inflows of asylum seekers dampen support for anti-immigrant parties.

Yet, Gehrsitz and Ungerer (2022) emphasize that caution should be exercised in interpreting the results, as the analysis is confined to a limited subset of German counties<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, in Germany once again, Tomberg *et al.* (2021), using county-level panel data, detect that economic conditions, specifically the unemployment rate and the level of disposable income, influence voter responses to the presence of asylum seekers, with a significant divergence between right-wing and left-wing parties.

When economic conditions are positive and prosperous, the massive presence of asylum seekers increases the votes for both extreme right and extreme left parties. Conversely, if economic conditions deteriorate (higher unemployment or lower *per capita* disposable income), the positive impact of asylum seekers on the right-wing party's vote share remains but weakens for the left-wing party, eventually becoming negative. This divergence highlights that an influx of

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<sup>10</sup> Additionally, it is noteworthy that the far-right AfD party did not exist in the prior state elections under consideration, and, furthermore, between 2013 and 2016, the party underwent several shifts in its political orientation, initially focusing on staunch opposition to the euro and subsequently shifting its emphasis to the issue of immigration.

asylum seekers, when associated with economic challenges, may shift a political system towards the right, and thus the heterogeneity resulting from local economic conditions plays a significant role in the allocation of asylum seekers.

### **Spain and Portugal**

Mendez and Cutillas (2014) investigate the relationship between immigrant presence and political preferences in Spain, a country that experienced the arrival of over 6 million immigrants between 1998 and 2008. This influx represented the highest among European countries during that period, leading to the immigrants' share of the Spanish population increasing from just under 3% to over 13%. By leveraging significant variation in immigrant inflows across Spanish provinces and employing an instrumental variable approach (IV) following Card (2001), their study reveals that Latin American migrants have increased both the participation rate and support for the major left-wing party (Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE) among native Spaniards. On the other hand, African migrants have increased native support for the largest conservative and anti-immigrant party (People's Party, PP), without affecting the participation rate. Even so, both effects are found to be modest. These findings suggest that economic "competition" should be accorded less importance in this context, with greater attention given to cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic factors, elements that underlie the concept of national identity (Smith, 2013).

To the best of our knowledge, no research has been conducted in Portugal regarding the impact of immigration on votes for right-wing parties. Furthermore, as reported by Quintas da Silva (2018), the generalized increase in votes for far-right and populist parties experienced in almost all of Europe has not occurred in Portugal, where they have not gained the popularity and growth seen elsewhere. There are several reasons for this. First, Portugal has relatively low immigration rates and a limited degree of Euroscepticism: the Portuguese population strongly identifies politically and socially with the European Union. Additionally, the presence of left-wing parties such as BE (Bloco de Esquerda) and PCP (Partido Comunista Português) has provided an outlet for Portuguese voters to express their protest vote based on socio-economic issues rather than security or identity concerns<sup>11</sup>. Lastly, the leaders of Portuguese far-right parties have not

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<sup>11</sup> It is likely that this fact has created a lack of political space for far-right parties in Portugal.

demonstrated the same level of communication skills on social media as leaders like Marine Le Pen in France, limiting their ability to reach and mobilize a broader audience.

## Greece

Unlike other European countries, in Greece xenophobic and racist parties have become increasingly popular since the late 1990s. In contrast to the prevailing situation after the restoration of democracy in 1974, within a few years Greece transitioned from being a nation with more emigration than immigration to a nation with net immigration following the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Roupakias and Chletsos, 2020). Additionally, the economic stability that began in the 1970s ended with the fiscal crisis of 2009.

Hangartner *et al.* (2019) exploit a natural experiment in the Aegean Sea, where Greek islands are close to the Turkish coast. In 2016, there was a drastic influx of refugees on the shores of certain islands, while it did not occur on other nearby islands. Drawing on a survey of over 2,000 residents on the Greek islands and employing an instrumental variable (IV) approach, with distance from Turkey as an instrument for exposure to the refugee crisis, the researchers pinpoint that direct exposure to the arrival of refugees induces a sizable and lasting increase in hostility among residents towards refugees.

Furthermore, in line with other studies, it is highlighted that exposure to a large number of asylum seekers leads natives to become more hostile not only towards refugees but also towards Muslims, economic migrants, and even Muslims who have been living in Greece for centuries. This hostility is also reflected in diminished support for asylum policies and more restrictive immigration policies. Since the refugees on these islands passed through very quickly, their analyses seem to indicate that mere exposure is sufficient to generate a lasting increase in hostility towards immigrants.

Unlike other cases analyzed so far, there was no actual contact in this situation, as the refugees often stayed on the island for less than 24 hours, and explanations based on labor market competition or cultural factors cannot be applied<sup>12</sup>. Over and above that, the fact that the survey

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<sup>12</sup> Still and all, this does not negate the fact that the temporary influx of migrants has had a strong impact on the native population.

was conducted over a year after the refugee crisis suggests that these feelings and exclusionary reactions are not short-term and contemporaneous with the events but endure over time.

Roupakias and Chletsos (2020) analyze the impact of immigration on Greek politics during the period from 2004 to 2012. They utilize panel data from 51 Greek regional units and employ an instrumental variable (IV) setup using a shift-share-imputed instrument based on immigrant allocation in 1991. Their findings consistently support the notion that immigration is positively associated with the percentage of votes for far-right parties, and this effect appears to be more pronounced during the Greek fiscal crisis. These findings remain robust even when considering additional control variables, sample restrictions, and employing different estimation methods.

Regardless of how, no evidence is found to suggest that native individuals are migrating from cities with higher concentrations of immigrants to cities with fewer immigrants. In addition, the researchers discover that the shift towards far-right parties occurs as a result of a decline in support for left-wing parties; there is a tangible cost associated with this shift. Furthermore, they assert that labor market concerns play a significant role in shaping the attitudes of native individuals towards immigration. In the end, in line with previous studies, they find that anti-migration sentiments are driven by non-OECD migrants.

Dinas *et al.* (2019) also utilize a natural experiment in the Greek islands located on the border of Turkey to prospect the impact of refugee arrivals. They point out compelling evidence of an increase in support for the far-right Golden Dawn party in the islands that were most exposed to the arrival of refugees, compared to those with lower exposure but similar institutional and socioeconomic characteristics.

Similarly, Vasilakis (2018) investigates the influence of refugee presence on voting patterns for the Golden Dawn party in the Greek islands and confirms the findings of Dinas *et al.* (2019). These results hold strong across various estimation methods and placebo regressions, further reinforcing their validity.

## **Austria**

Rudolph and Wagner (2022) review the 2015 migration crisis in Western Europe, with a specific focus on Austria, a country that experienced the arrival of nearly 90,000 asylum seekers that

year. Austria ranked third in terms of *per capita* immigration rates in 2015, and many of the asylum seekers were accommodated in small and rural towns that had not previously experienced significant large-scale immigration.

The key question addressed by researchers is whether a large influx of asylum seekers in the local community shapes public opinion towards the foreign population and, as a consequence, influences native residents' political choices and voting behavior. To answer this question, they utilize original surveys and municipal-level data, taking advantage of exogenous elements related to the allocation of asylum seekers at the municipal level, specifically the partially exogenous placement resulting from the scarcity of available housing. By examining the assignment of asylum seekers to a locality, they mitigate endogeneity concerns between contact and attitudes.

Their findings reveal that, on average, hostility towards asylum seekers increased in areas that hosted them, and generally, attitudes towards foreigners (particularly Muslims and immigrants) were less favorable in municipalities characterized by a high presence of asylum seekers. Additionally, the intention to vote for the main Austrian anti-immigration party, the Freedom Party (FPÖ), is higher in these same municipalities.

As suggested by Rudolph and Wagner (2022), the presence of asylum seekers does not necessarily imply greater contact with native residents; veritably, interactions are often passive and fleeting. These results align with the group conflict theory, which suggests that internal groups develop hostility towards threatening external groups when the external groups increase more rapidly (Meuleman *et al.*, 2009)<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly to findings discussed by Hangartner *et al.* (2019) in the Greek context, there are spillover effects at play, indicating that negative attitudes towards asylum seekers also worsen attitudes towards other immigrants and Muslims.

It is important to note that the data, although representative of the Austrian population during those years, are more concentrated in small and rural towns, where the anti-immigration party experienced greater growth compared to the rest of the country.

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<sup>13</sup> In particular, in the case of immigrants (Hopkins, 2010; Newman and Velez, 2014).

Halla *et al.* (2017) delve into the Austrian context as well, and investigate the influence of migrant presence on voting patterns for the Freedom Party (FPÖ), an anti-migrant party. Their findings reveal that a significant proportion of votes for the far-right party can be attributed to variations in immigrant inflow across communities.

Steinmayr (2021), similarly to Halla *et al.* (2017) and Rudolph and Wagner (2022), focuses on the Austrian case but arrives at contrasting conclusions.

Specifically, Steinmayr (2021) investigates the case of Upper Austria, a transit region for refugees, where many municipalities have hosted asylum seekers who have applied for asylum in Austria. The setting allows for the study of the electoral effect of two different types of micro-exposure to refugees: brief and short-term exposure in the so-called border municipalities, and long-term exposure in municipalities that have hosted asylum seekers.

Regarding the presence of migrants and, consequently, the locations where asylum seekers have been hosted for a relatively long period (thus likely resulting in greater contact with natives), he discerns a decrease of nearly 4 percentage points in the vote share for far-right parties in the general elections of September 2015. Similar results are observed when considering regional elections. This is in line with Allport's theory (Allport *et al.*, 1954) and aligns with research in social psychology, suggesting that reduced anxiety and increased empathy resulting from contact are primary means of reducing prejudice.

Conversely, the study also finds that exposure to passing refugees, with only brief duration at the border with Germany, has increased votes for far-right parties by approximately 1,5 percentage points. This effect is similar to what Dinas *et al.* (2019) and Hangartner *et al.* (2019) found in Greece. On that account, it appears that exposure in circumstances that do not allow for favorable contact can increase support for parties with strong anti-refugee sentiments.

The authors of this paper argue that since the positive effect of long-term contact is still low and the negative effect of brief contact is also low, it is likely that micro-exposure (both short and long-term) did not play a primary role. Instead, they suggest that macro exposure, in terms of the salience of the refugee issue in public discourse through traditional and social media, has had a more significant impact.

## Switzerland

Moving on to another country located in Central Europe, which is also neighboring Austria, Green *et al.* (2016) study the Swiss case. Specifically, Green *et al.* (2016) delve into the relationship between the presence of immigrants and voting for the radical right, both in terms of voting propensity (survey data) and through the analysis of actual voting results at the district level. They discover that high concentrations of stigmatized immigrants, specifically those from Yugoslavia and Albania, have increased the perception of threat, which in turn has increased the propensity to vote for the Swiss People's Party, the main party of the radical right. Conversely, individuals who have had positive and daily contact experiences with immigrants from former Yugoslavia and Albania have seen a reduction in their propensity to vote for the Swiss People's Party.

Brunner and Kuhn (2018) also study the impact of immigration on native attitudes towards immigration by combining community-level results from popular initiatives and referendum between 1970 and 2010 in Switzerland. In particular, unlike other studies, they focus on the Swiss system of direct democracy rather than attitudinal survey data on topics such as reducing the number of immigrants and ratifying bilateral agreements with the EU for the free movement of people. They find that it is not so much the share of immigrants *per se*, but rather the presence of immigrants with a different cultural background that impacts the voting behavior of Swiss citizens. Indeed, the percentage of immigrants with different cultural characteristics is a significant and sizable determinant of votes for anti-immigrant parties, while the percentage of immigrants with similar cultural characteristics appears to be a positive and important determinant of the percentage of votes against immigration (largely from right-wing parties)<sup>14</sup>.

## Netherlands and Belgium

If, as we have seen, some researchers have found that mass immigration increases the success and votes for anti-immigrant parties, others have found that it is not the case. In their paper, Dinas and Spanje (2011) utilize individual-level data from the Netherlands concerning voting preferences to put forth explanations for these inconsistent results, particularly focusing on the role of crime. To investigate this, they analyze voting patterns for the Dutch anti-immigration

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<sup>14</sup> In summary, the authors believe that there are also mechanisms of economic protection and labor market considerations, but they stress the importance of culture in shaping attitudes and voting behavior.

party, LPF (List Pim Fortuyn). Their findings reveal that the impact of immigration rates on individual voting behavior is only evident among individuals with a strong aversion to crime. Consequently, higher local crime rates lead to a greater number of votes for anti-immigrant parties solely among voters who harbor deep antipathy toward immigration. From their analysis, it becomes apparent that immigration and crime rates do not universally sway citizens toward supporting anti-immigrant parties, but rather affect only those who perceive a direct correlation between the two issues.

As a matter of fact, voters who associate immigration with crime are influenced by crime levels and immigration within their immediate surroundings. Hence, the policy implication is that future analyses aiming to elucidate anti-immigration voting patterns should incorporate crime rates and stances on crime policy. According to the researchers, it is precisely through the nexus between foreigners and crime that parties like LPF and other anti-immigration factions attract votes and garner support from voters.

In line with findings by Shvets (2004) and Edo *et al.* (2019) in France, Coffé *et al.* (2007) study Belgium, specifically Flanders, and find that the presence of Turkish and Maghreb citizens favors the success of the extreme right party “Vlaams Blok”, while the presence of immigrants from other ethnic groups has no effect.

Shifting our focus to the countries of Northern Europe, including Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, it becomes evident that they were also implicated in the refugee crisis of 2014-2015. These refugee flows sparked political and social debates regarding reception policies and had significant social, economic, and political implications for these countries.

### **Sweden, Finland and Denmark**

In Sweden, between the 2014 parliamentary elections, held just a few months before the outbreak of the migration crisis, and the 2018 elections, the right-wing party Sweden Democrats increased its vote share from 12.9% to 17.5%. Mehic (2022), utilizing both OLS and IV approaches<sup>15</sup>, investigates the influence of specific regional characteristics on right-wing populist voting in response to the 2015 refugee influx and its persistence over time. The study

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<sup>15</sup> The IV approach hinges on data from a nationwide refugee placement program in Sweden, where refugees with a residence permit are allocated to the country's 290 municipalities in a quasi-random manner.

finds that voting outcomes strongly depend on pre-existing municipal characteristics: areas with already strong anti-immigration sentiments, including those stemming from the early 1990s refugee crisis following the collapse of Yugoslavia, and regions with high crime rates exhibit a positive relationship between immigration rates and anti-immigration voting, that is vote to the Sweden Democrats<sup>16</sup>.

Effectively, this study suggest that latent anti-immigration sentiments play a significant role in explaining the current voting trends. Similarly, Dal Bo' *et al.* (2023) focus on the right-wing party Sweden Democrats and analyze individual-level data describing the politicians and voters of this successful radical right-wing populist party. Drawing on social psychology studies, they identify groups that may be particularly receptive to the Sweden Democrats' anti-establishment and anti-immigration platform. The study reveals that politicians from this party effectively represent the social and economic outsiders within the population, while politicians from other parties inadequately represent these groups. In fact, Sweden Democrats' politicians better represent marginalized individuals in the labor market whose relative positions have deteriorated and who have lost faith in the political establishment<sup>17</sup>.

Lonsky (2021) considers the Finnish case to assess whether the increase in immigration has had an impact on the vote for the far-right Finnish party. Using an IV approach and a shift-share instrument based on previous settlement patterns of immigration, the study finds that as the number of immigrants in a municipality increases, votes for the Finns Party decrease while voter turnout increases. Furthermore, it highlights that this effect is not due to pre-existing municipal trends and that the lost votes from right-wing parties have been captured by two pro-immigration parties: the Green League and the Swedish People's Party of Finland. Accordingly, this paper highlights how, under certain circumstances, immigration can actually lead to a reduction in votes for right-wing parties.

Fifteen years ago, Gerdes and Wadensjö (2008) investigated the impact of a large influx of immigrants on political parties in Denmark, assuming that it is often the immigration of non-Western individuals that becomes a political issue, rather than that of Western immigrants. To

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<sup>16</sup> Heterogeneity analyses reveal that the increase in nationalist voting related to immigration is lower in depopulation areas and higher where immigrants are predominantly young males, aligning with the stereotype of immigrants involved in theft.

<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, they lag behind politicians from other Swedish parties in terms of education, expertise in the public sector, as well as soft skills like morality and motivation to serve the public.

do so, they used election results in 275 municipalities from 1989 to 2001, covering four local elections and four parliamentary elections. Various surveys highlight that many natives hold negative views regarding the current situation pertaining to immigrants, particularly concerning issues related to the labor market, the public sector, and the economy in general. Indeed, immigrants often have unskilled jobs similar to those of unskilled natives and are consequently potential substitutes in the labor market.

Their results on political outcomes show that the percentage increase in immigrants is associated with support for anti-immigration parties in local elections. In whatever way, a pro-immigration party gains left-wing votes, and they do not find clear indications of a general decline in support for the welfare state due to immigration, as found by others.

Dustmann *et al.* (2019), also studying the specific case of Denmark, exploit a policy that assigns refugees to municipalities on a quasi-random basis to assess the causal effect of refugee migration on voting outcomes. They find that in all municipalities, except the big cities, a higher share of migrants allocated between electoral cycles leads to an increase in the share of votes for right-wing anti-migrant parties.

Harmon (2018), focusing on migration and electoral outcomes during the last 20 years of the 20th century, studies the Danish case too. In order to address the endogeneity problem, he employs an instrumental variable strategy. As foreigners' ability to buy a house in Denmark is limited by law, he utilizes the number of rented accommodations as an instrument for the probability of a place being chosen by an immigrant to live. Like Gerdes and Wadensjö (2008) and Dustmann *et al.* (2019), the researcher finds a positive impact of ethnic diversity associated with the increased presence of migrants on votes in right-wing anti-migrant parties.

## **Hungary**

In Central and Eastern European countries, Hungary stands out as an interesting case. Hungary has been actively involved in the refugee crisis and is located along the so-called Balkan route, which serves as a major pathway for migrants seeking to reach Western Europe. As part of this route, Hungary has faced significant flows of refugees and migrants, posing considerable challenges in border control management and the reception of asylum seekers. In truth, in 2015 alone, approximately 400,000 refugees were registered in Hungary.

Hungary is one of the most xenophobic countries in Europe, characterized by strong anti-immigrant attitudes, and it has two extreme right-wing parties with an anti-immigrant stance. Gessler *et al.* (2021) investigate whether short-term exposure to refugees during the 2015 crisis is a good predictor of voting behavior and, more broadly, anti-refugee sentiment in Hungary. Their study differs somewhat from others, as the refugees passed through the country irregularly, and interactions were very transient, with many Hungarian settlements being exposed to refugees only on a single occasion.

They find that territories through which the refugees traveled exhibited higher votes against refugees in a national referendum held in 2016, an effect that diminishes significantly with increasing distance from those flows. This national referendum on refugee quotas proposed by the European Union provides a more direct measure of anti-refugee sentiment compared to previous studies that use extreme right-wing party outcomes as a proxy.

Furthermore, using a difference-in-differences model, they find that the opposition extreme right-wing party (Jobbik) gained votes, while the right-wing governing party (Fidesz) lost votes in subsequent parliamentary elections (a small but significant reduction in votes). This suggests that the incumbent party was somewhat punished by skeptical voters towards immigration, regardless of political affiliation<sup>18</sup>.

When it comes to the countries situated at the borders of Europe, without presuming to be exhaustive, we consider only a few studies conducted respectively in Turkey, which lies at the southeastern border of Europe, and in Great Britain, a country that was formerly a member of the European Union and, geographically, is separated from the European continent only by the North Sea.

## **Turkey**

Altındağ and Kaushal (2021) study the impact of the influx of over 3.5 million Syrian refugees on individual political preferences in Turkey from 2012 to 2016. The Syrian Civil War has been one of the largest movements of people since World War II, resulting in an unprecedented number

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<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the fact that short-term exposure inflames and increases anti-immigrant voting attitudes indicates the need to invest in crisis management.

of Syrian refugees entering Turkey. To conduct their analysis, they utilize a difference-in-difference research design and compare regions with high and low refugee intensity before and after the onset of the Syrian civil war. To address the endogeneity issue related to the refugees' location choice, they employ an instrumental variable (IV) approach using historical data on the presence of Arabic speakers in different Turkish provinces and the distance between Turkish and Syrian residential areas, both serving as proxies for refugee flows during the study period. Their findings suggest that the influx of refugees has only a modest effect on the political preferences of Turkish voters and a negligible impact on actual voting results. The researchers contend that Turkish voters do not hold Erdogan, the leader of the AKP (the governing party), accountable for the significant influx of refugees. Another explanation could be the absence of restrictive migration policies proposed by opposition parties, which would potentially influence voters to change their affiliations.

Fisunoğlu and Sert (2019) also investigate the Turkish case using a difference-in-difference identification strategy. They compare electoral outcomes in cities hosting a few refugees with cities that have a large refugee population. Their findings align with those of Altındağ and Kaushal (2021), as they observe a non-statistically significant effect of refugee presence on voting outcomes.

## **United Kingdom**

Moving on to the United Kingdom, a particularly compelling question is the one that Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) sought to answer: whether immigration was a key driver of the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

They utilize aggregated and individual data from the British Election Study to explore how immigration has shaped public support for Brexit. Their findings highlight that an increase in the percentage of local immigration has exerted a strong influence on the referendum outcome, thus contributing to the victory of the “Leave” campaign. That is, the support for “Leave” was stronger in communities with higher rates of ethnic change in the years leading up to the 2016 vote.

Furthermore, Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) also demonstrate that individuals who felt negatively affected by immigration and its consequences were more likely to vote to leave the EU. The perception of changes related to immigration and the belief in Britain's ability, once outside the

European Union, to control these changes, served as strong drivers of Brexit. These results underscore that it is not only a matter of hostility towards immigrants in general but also a generalized desire to regain control over immigration, which was a central theme in the British political debate.

Taken together, these findings highlight how the decision of the “Leave” campaign to heavily focus on the immigration issue during the latter part of the referendum campaign helped drive public support for leaving Europe<sup>19</sup>.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In the last decade, many European nations have witnessed a significant influx of asylum seekers, primarily from North African countries. This trend has posed significant challenges and has made immigration the dominating political issue. Concurrently, far-right political parties have gained electoral support across several countries.

In this study, we have undertaken a comprehensive examination of the empirical literature that explores the connection between the presence of refugees/migrants and voting behavior. Our examination has primarily relied on papers authored by economists, while also incorporating insights from other social scientists, including political scientists and social psychologists. While our primary emphasis has been on European countries, we have incorporated analyses pertaining to a selection of countries situated on the periphery of Europe.

Given the non-random nature of immigrants’ location choices, as previously mentioned, the majority of papers included in this literature review utilize Counterfactual Impact Evaluation (CIE) methods (Angrist and Pischke, 2009; Imbens and Wooldridge, 2009). These methods enable the examination of causality, going beyond mere correlation, in the analysis of the investigated issues.

What emerges from this literature is that, as emphasized by Alesina and Tabellini (2022), a substantial body of research suggests that immigrants often trigger a political backlash. Hence, a first cluster of studies demonstrates a positive relationship between the presence of

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<sup>19</sup> Anti-immigration messages held strong emotional value among concerned voters who saw the impact of immigration in their local communities.

migrants/refugees and increased support for anti-immigrant, right-wing populist parties. Noteworthy studies in this area include Barone *et al.* (2016) in Italy, Edo *et al.* (2019) in France, Coffè *et al.* (2007) in Belgium, Vasilakis (2018), Hangartner *et al.* (2019), Dinas *et al.* (2019) and Roupakias and Chletsos (2020) in Greece, Rudolph and Wagner (2022) in Austria, Green *et al.* (2016) in Switzerland, and Gerdes and Wadensjö (2008), Harmon (2018), and Dustmann, Vasiljeva and Damm (2019) in Denmark.

Conversely, a second cluster of studies finds a negative relationship between the presence of migrants/refugees and votes for anti-immigrant, right-wing populist parties. Notable contributions to this body of literature include Kellerman and Winter (2022), Gehrsitz and Ungerer (2022) and Pettrachin *et al.* (2023) in Germany, and Lonsky (2021) in Finland, among others.

As discussed, there are various potential channels through which the presence of immigrants can influence voting intentions, encompassing economic factors such as productivity, labor market competition, and fiscal issues, as well as cultural and many other factors (Alesina and Tabellini, 2022).

In spite of that, the dual nature of the literature can be attributed to the crucial role played by the specific characteristics of each case. It is evident that immigration is not a homogeneous phenomenon, just as there is not a singular potential response to it. Additionally, each state has its own unique characteristics.

In this regard, some of the studies included in this review highlight the fundamental importance of the reception system's type. Indeed, on one hand, a reception system managed by local governments that allows interactions between natives and immigrants is associated with a reduction in votes for right-wing parties (Genovese *et al.*, 2017; Gamalerio *et al.*, 2023).

Conversely, a reception system based on privately-owned reception centers, lacking provisions for integration between natives and immigrants, is correlated with an increase in votes for right-wing parties (Giunti and Mendola, 2021).

In the same vein, Vertier *et al.* (2023) emphasize how smaller reception centers align more with the conditions outlined in Allport's contact theory (Allport *et al.*, 1954). These smaller centers contribute to enhancing the relationship between immigrants and residents, thereby reducing

resentment and support for far-right parties. In contrast, larger reception centers align more with the realistic group conflict theory (Blumer, 1958), leading to a lack of integration and an upsurge in votes for far-right parties.

Furthermore, several studies also highlight how the impacts on natives' voting behavior differ when considering different categories of immigrants. It has been observed that voting intentions are more influenced by low-educated non-Western immigrants, while Western or high-educated non-Western immigrants are more accepted by the native population (Martin, 2000; Shvets, 2004; Coffé *et al.*, 2007; Brunner and Kuhn, 2018; Edo *et al.*, 2019; Edo and Giesing, 2020; Roupakias and Chletsos, 2020).

What is more, the characteristics of the nation and the host city are influential, encompassing not only economic factors but also social and demographic factors. For instance, Campo *et al.* (2021) emphasize how regions with a higher proportion of residents holding a university degree exhibit a greater inclination towards integration, resulting in a less pronounced impact of immigration on voting behavior.

The literature also highlights the role of exposure duration to the migration phenomenon. Brief encounters, such as passing interactions with refugees without direct contact between natives and immigrants, increases support for parties with strong anti-refugee sentiments. These effects have been shown to persist over time and extend to other immigrant groups (Vasilakis, 2018; Hangartner *et al.*, 2019; Dinas *et al.*, 2019; Steinmayr, 2021; Gessler *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, prolonged exposure to immigration and coexistence leads to a reduction in votes for far-right parties (Green *et al.*, 2016; Steinmayr, 2021, among others). These findings are consistent with Allport's contact theory (Allport *et al.*, 1954) and align with social psychology studies, suggesting that reduced anxiety and increased empathy resulting from contact are primary mechanisms for reducing prejudice.

Ultimately, several papers analyzed in this paper have also highlighted how the magnitude of immigration (Vertier *et al.*, 2023), as well as the size of the host city (Barone *et al.*, 2016; Rudolph and Wagner, 2022), along with factors such as the salience of immigration in the public debate, political system plurality, media quality, crime aversion and misperception (Dinas and Spanje, 2011; Bellucci *et al.*, 2019; Steinmayr, 2021; Kellermann and Winter, 2022; Alesina and Tabellini, 2022) influence the investigated issue.

In conclusion, we can assert that the issue of immigration is highly complex, and attempting to oversimplify it would be inaccurate due to its inherent heterogeneity.

Recognizing and embracing this complexity is crucial for approaching the phenomenon rigorously and mitigating potential political backlash. Allocating resources to crisis management and opting for the most efficient reception system, even if it entails higher costs, emerge as imperative measures for policymakers seeking to promote integration with native populations and bolster their confidence in institutions.

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