

Stop Invasion! The Electoral Tipping Point In Anti-Immigrant Voting

The Anti-Immigrant Voting Puzzle

Why do anti-immigrant political parties have more success in areas that host fewer immigrants? Recent evidence from around the world suggests that often anti-immigrant political parties receive most of their electoral support from areas where low shares of immigrants live. For example, in the 2017 French Presidential elections, Emmanuel Macron received more electoral support in big cities, while Marine Le Pen, who pledged to stop immigration, scored better in the countryside, where normally fewer immigrants live. A similar evidence can be found in the rural areas of other countries (e.g. the success of Donald Trump in the U.S., the Brexit campaign in the UK, Vox in Spain), and it has been highlighted by the recent academic literature (e.g. the article by Dustmann et al., 2019, on the electoral consequences of refugee reception in Denmark).

The Italian Case

In our article (Bordignon, Gamalerio, Slerca, Turati, 2019), we provide new evidence from Italy which helps explain this puzzle. Our analysis uses data from 1500 municipalities from the richest and biggest Italian Region, Lombardia. The dataset contains information on the electoral results at the 2013 national elections of the main Italian anti-immigrant party (Lega Nord). The baseline results of our analysis can be summarized in three graphs. First, Figures 1 and 2 provide descriptive evidence of the anti-immigrant voting puzzle for Lombardia's municipalities: Lega Nord was more successful in rural areas where small share of immigrants live, while

Policymakers should take into account the tensions in the labor market when dealing with immigration and labor market policies.

its electoral support was lower in urban areas like Milano, Brescia, and Bergamo, which host higher shares of immigrants.

Second, Figure 3 shows the main result of our article. In this Figure, using search techniques applied in macroeconomics to find sudden changes in the relationship between two variables, we show that the relationship between the vote shares for Lega Nord and the share of immigrants at the municipal level follows a U-shaped curve. Also, Figure 3 shows that this relationship exhibits a tipping-like behavior when the share of immigrants passes the threshold of 3.35%. This evidence suggests that when the share of immigrants assumes low values, the electoral support for anti-immigrant parties increases suddenly and in a discontinuous way.

What Does Explain the Puzzle?

To explain this anti-immigrant voting puzzle, we use municipal-level data on income, employment status, level of education, age,

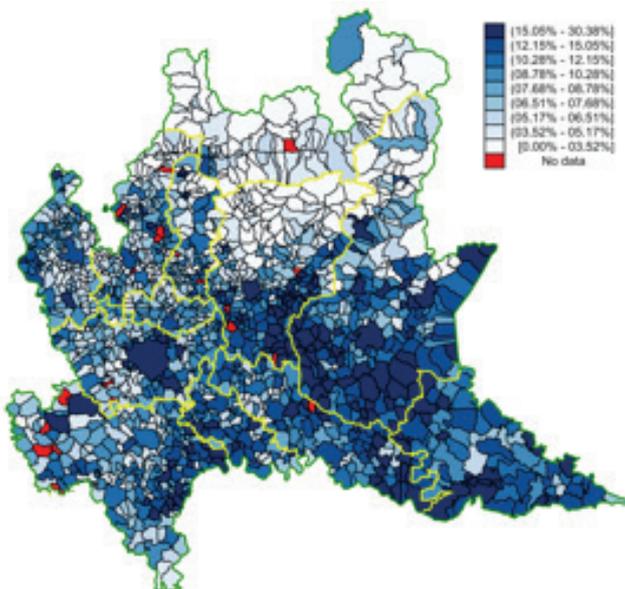


Figure 1: Share of immigrants by municipality
Source: Italian Statistical Office (ISTAT).

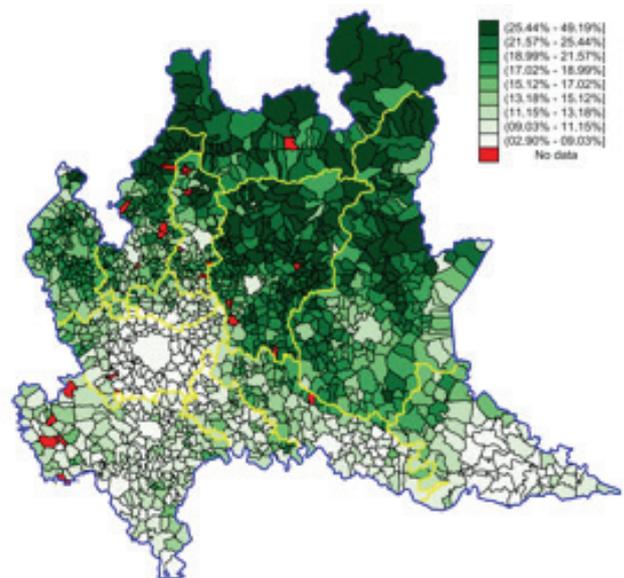


Figure 2: Votes share LEGA NORD at 2013 national elections
Source: Italian Home Office.

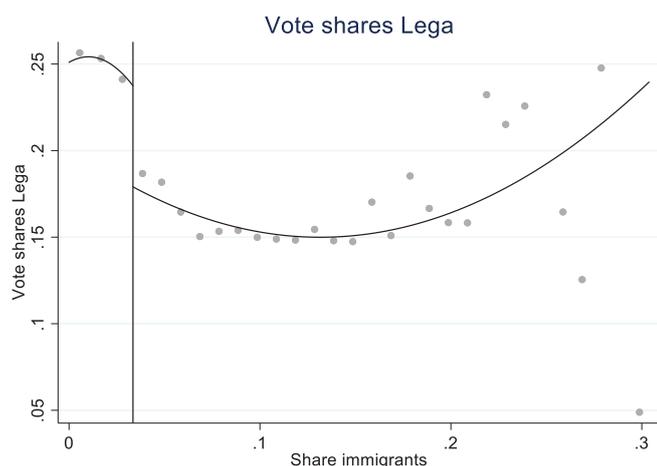


Figure 3 - Tipping point: votes share for LEGA and share of immigrants

and gender of the approximately 10 million individuals living in Lombardia, distinguishing between natives and immigrants. The data covers the information for the year 2012 and has been computed at the municipal level at Eupolis Lombardia during a consultancy project based on the ARCHIMEDE database. We use this data in a regression discontinuity design, which enables us to understand which socio-economic factors can explain the tipping-like behavior around the 3.35% threshold.

The results of this regression analysis are reported in Table 1. In column 1, we provide an estimate for the tipping-like behavior: the vote shares of Lega Nord decrease by approximately 6 % points when the share of immigrants moves beyond the 3.35% threshold. Column 2 of Table 1 provides evidence of the main mechanism behind the tipping-like behavior that we could find in the data: once we control for the difference between the average income of natives and the average income of immigrants, the estimate of the tipping-like behavior is highly reduced in magnitude, and it is not anymore statistically different from zero.

Our interpretation of this result is that the competition in the labor market between natives and immigrants helps to explain the sudden rise in the vote shares for Lega Nord just below the threshold. Where the difference in average incomes is small, natives and immigrants compete for the same jobs in the labor market, while where the difference is high, natives work in jobs with higher salaries and immigrants in jobs with lower salaries, and the two groups are complements in the labor market. Also, consistent with this story, Table 1 – Tipping point: vote shares Lega

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dependent variable	Vote shares Lega Nord		
Above tipping point	-0.060*** (0.023)	-0.029 (0.023)	-0.028 (0.018)
Difference income natives immigrants		-0.008*** (0.002)	-0.004** (0.002)
Observations	140	140	140
Control variables	No	No	Yes

we find that municipalities just above the threshold have a larger population and are more likely to be part of a large urban area specialized in the service sector which employs more individuals in higher skills jobs. This evidence is consistent with the skills upgrade story already studied in the literature (Cattaneo, Fiorio, and Peri, 2014), which suggests that when the share of immigrants increases, natives are more likely to move to higher skills occupations, while immigrants work in lower skills occupation.

Alternative stories suggested by the literature find less support in the data. We do not find that municipalities just below and above the threshold differ in terms of production of local public goods and compositional amenities (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010; Card, Dustmann, and Preston, 2012; Cavaille and Ferwerda, 2019), composition of the foreign population hosted (Edo et al., 2019), and socio-economic municipal characteristics. Finally, column 3 of Table 1 shows that our results are robust controlling for all the municipal characteristics observed in our dataset.

In conclusion, the results of our analysis suggest that policymakers should take into account the tensions in the labor market when dealing with both immigration and labor market policies. A policy lesson is that the development of formative courses and recruitment agencies that enable low skilled individuals to upgrade their skills and to deal with labor market competition may help mitigate the anti-immigrant attitudes in the native population.

References

Bordignon, M.; Gamalerio, M.; Slerca, E. and Turati, G. (2019): "Stop invasion! The electoral tipping point in anti-immigrant voting". IEB Working Paper 2019/11.

Card, D.; Dustmann, C. and Preston, I. (2012): "Immigration, wages, and composition amenities". *Journal of European Economic Associations*, Volume 10, Issue 1.

Cavaille, C. and Ferwerda, J. (2019): "How Distributional Conflict over In-Kind Benefits Generates Support for Anti-Immigrant Parties". R&R at the *American Journal of Political Science*.

Cattaneo, C.; Fiorio C. V. and Peri, G. (2015): "What Happens to the Careers of European Workers When Immigrants "Take Their Jobs"?" *Journal of Human Resources*, 50(3), 655-693.

Dustmann, C.; Vasiljeva, K. and Damm, A.P. (2019): "Refugee migration and electoral outcomes". *Review of Economic Studies*, 86(5), 2035-2091.

Edo, A.; Giesing, Y.; Oztunc, J. and Poutvaara, P. (2019): "Immigration and electoral support for the far-left and the far-right". *European Economic Review*, 115, 99-143.

Hainmueller, J. and Hiscox, M. J. (2010): "Attitudes toward Highly Skilled and Low-skilled immigration: Evidence from a Survey Experiment". *American Political Science Review*, 104, 61-84.

Matteo Gamalerio, Universitat de Barcelona, IEB researcher. m.gamalerio@ub.edu

Massimo Bordignon, Università Cattolica, Milano. massimo.bordignon@unicatt.it

Edoardo Slerca, Center for Federalism – Università della Svizzera Italiana. edoardo.slerca@usi.ch.

Gilberto Turati, Università Cattolica, Roma. gilberto.turati@unicatt.it.