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Deeds or words? The local influence of anti-immigrant parties on foreigners' flows

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A B S T R A C T

We investigate the influence of anti-immigrant parties on foreigners' location choices. Considering Italian municipal elections from 2000 to 2018, we create a comprehensive database that includes a classification of the anti-/pro-immigration axis of leading political parties based on specialists' assessments. Adopting a bias-corrected regression discontinuity design, we find that the election of a mayor supported by an anti-immigrant coalition significantly affects immigrants' location choices only when considering the most recent years. This finding is not driven by the enactment of policies against immigrants but by an 'inhospitality effect', which has become stronger over time due to the exacerbation of political propaganda. Therefore, foreigners' flows are influenced by the local political environment only when immigration is central to the political debate.

Despite the evidence that immigrants provide a clear economic benefit to destination countries (Portes, 2019; Tabellini, 2020), many parties — mainly from the right-wing part of the political spectrum — have recently gained support by launching a political backlash against immigration. Their leaders accuse immigrants of all kinds of negative events, from the surge of native-born unemployment to cultural change and criminal activities. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, some parties such as Austria's Freedom Party (*FPÖ*) and Italy's League (*Lega*) even maintained that immigrants were to blame (Economist, 2021; https://www.economist.com/international/2021/03/01/how-far-right-extremism-is-becoming-a-global-threat).

Many scholars have studied the electorate's reaction to the presence of immigrants in a given area. Gerdes and Wadensjö (2010), Mendez and Cutillas (2014), Otto and Steinhardt (2014), and Barone et al. (2016) find a positive relationship between the size of the immigrant population and support for anti-immigration political parties in Denmark, Spain, Germany and Italy. Several other papers followed with similar conclusions for the UK (Becker and Fetzer, 2017), Austria (Halla et al., 2017), Greece (Vasilakis, 2018; Dinas et al., 2019), the US (Mayda et al., 2022) and France (Edo et al., 2019). However, the presence of immigrants could also reduce votes cast for anti-immigrant parties, in line with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis (see Dustmann et al., 2019; Steinmayr, 2021). Much less research has been devoted to investigating the complementary research question on the influence of anti-immigrant parties on foreigners' location choices. Indeed, these parties may influence immigrant flows by implementing local policies that favour the native-born population (e.g. by reducing the budget for social expenditure) and/or may create a hostile social climate towards immigrants (see Tomberg et al., 2021). A notable exception is Bracco et al. (2018), who adopted a parametric regression discontinuity

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design (RDD) to show that the election of a mayor supported by the League[1] discouraged foreigners from moving into the municipality in Northern Italy. In our study, we answer the more comprehensive question regarding the effect of all anti-immigrant political parties and coalitions on foreign resident population inflows and outflows at the municipality level. Considering municipal elections from 2000 to 2018, we create a database that includes a classification of the anti-/pro-immigration axis of leading political parties in Italy based on specialists' opinions and estimations. In particular, we mainly consider the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* (*CHES*), where experts are asked every few years to assign scores to the ideological position of many national parties in Europe. This is a key innovation of our paper, as it warrants against potential distortions due to an arbitrary choice of a single anti-immigration party, and makes it possible to analyse the whole Italian territory. Moreover, during the period under analysis, several factors put immigration at the centre of the political debate, such as the Great Recession, growing migratory flows and the refugee crisis. These events have contributed to the electoral success of anti-immigrant parties, possibly affecting the behaviour of elected mayors and the response of immigrants. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate whether the local influence of anti-immigrant political parties on foreigners' flows has changed over time. The estimation process is based on the non-parametric robust bias-corrected RDD estimator with covariate adjustment (Calonico et al., 2019). The adoption of this recently developed estimator allows us to estimate the causal impact of anti-immigrant parties on legal foreigners' behaviour with a higher degree of internal validity than previous literature.

Our findings demonstrate that the election of a mayor supported by an anti-immigration coalition substantially impacts immigrants' location decisions only if we consider the most recent years. Indeed, only for municipal elections from 2014 onwards do we find a sizable and statistically significant reduction in immigrants' inflows, especially those from other Italian municipalities. This result does not seem to be due to the implementation of local policies that directly favour the native-born population, but rather to foreigners' perception of a less hospitable environment engendered by a more prominent political instrumentalisation of the 'foreign issue', leading to the development of a generally inhospitable climate in municipalities led by an anti-immigrant coalition. Unlike previous literature, these findings suggest that foreigners' location choices are influenced by the local political environment only when immigration is polarised and central to the political debate.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 1 presents the Italian electoral setting, the role of immigrants, and the evolution of migratory flows and anti-immigration propaganda in Italy. In Section 2 we present the data, discuss some descriptive statistics and describe the empirical framework, paying particular attention to the validity of our identification strategy. In Section 3 we show our empirical results and investigate the potential mechanisms behind them. Section 4 concludes with some directions for future research.

1. Background

1.1. The Italian electoral setting

As of 2020, the 7,904 Italian municipalities (*comuni*) represent the smallest administrative division. Local governments, formed by the mayor (*Sindaco*), executive office and legislative body (i.e. municipal council), manage relevant public services that have a direct impact on citizens' wellbeing, such as general administration, organisation of 'public interest' services and implementation of social services.[2] The electorate cares deeply about local elections, as demonstrated by a generally high voter turnout (71% of eligible voters turned out in the 2018 municipal elections). The mayor is directly elected under plurality rule, with a single round for municipalities below 15,000 inhabitants and a runoff system for municipalities with more than 15,000 inhabitants. In greater detail, in small municipalities each party (or coalition) presents a single candidate for mayor and a list of nominees for the municipal council. The candidate who receives the largest number of votes becomes mayor. Conversely, each candidate can be supported by more than one list in municipalities with at least 15,000 inhabitants. If a candidate gets more than 50% of the votes in the first round, he/she is elected. Otherwise, the two most voted candidates run against each other in a second round. Municipal elections are held every five years, and the mayor cannot serve for more than two consecutive terms.[3, 4]

We make use of the *CHES* classification to determine which parties are anti-immigrant in Italy. This classification is based on the opinion of several political scientists, and takes into account changes in party positions on the anti-/pro-immigration axis as it is updated every few years (we assign the nearest-in-time score to each party). In this way, we take into account the chameleon-like characteristics of the Italian political scene (see Ignazi, 2018). The CHES classification provides a zero-to-ten party score, where

[1] The League, founded in 1989 as the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), changed its name in 2017. In the rest of the paper, we will call this party with the most recent name the League.

[2] The main services and duties of municipal governments include: general administrative and financial organisation, public interest's services organisation (e.g. public transport), civil protection and disaster relief function, urban planning, local registry offices, electoral and statistical services, social services planning and implementation, school building design, waste collection system, local police administration, and land registry.

[3] Three in municipalities of up to 3,000 inhabitants.

[4] Typically, a local government's term of office lasts for five years. In some cases it may end prematurely, leading to new elections held on the first available date. There might be several reasons for a shorter duration of the local government, such as political contrasts in the majority or criminal infiltration in the administration, governed by the text of local authorities (For comprehensive information on the electoral system, see Legislative Decree 267 of 18 August 2000; https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legislativo:2000-08-18;267!vig=). Considering the years from 2010 to 2019, 11.4% of elections were followed by a subsequent dissolution of the city council. In most cases, the cause of dissolution was an internal conflict within the coalition.

zero indicates an extremely pro-immigration party, and ten an extremely anti-immigrant party. In the robustness section, we will use alternative sources and definitions to determine which parties should be considered anti-immigrant. Online Appendix A provides a complete overview of the parties' classification adopted in this study.

1.2. Evolution of migratory flows and the role of immigration on the political arena

The Italian social fabric is increasingly multi-ethnic, with 5 million immigrants legally residing in Italy in 2018, corresponding to 8.4% of the total population. The foreign component has slowed Italy's 'demographic winter' and acquired a central role in the Italian economy: in 2018, 2.5 million immigrants were employed (more than 10% of the total workforce), and 1 in 10 companies was headed by an immigrant (Unioncamere). Despite the vast majority of migrants fill low-skilled jobs not sought after by Italians, especially in agriculture, construction, and collective and personal services, foreign employees produced 9.5% of GDP in 2018, with very little impact on public spending (Fondazione Leone Moressa, 2020). On average, the foreign population, being younger than the native one, contributes more in taxes and social contributions than they receive in terms of public pension and long-term care expenditures. Their economic contribution is tangible also at the local level. Acknowledging the imperfect substitutability between migrants and native workers (see, among others, Fusaro and López-Bazo, 2021), immigrants increase local productivity (Brunello et al., 2020) and foster trade between local firms and their country of origin (Artal-Tur et al., 2012).

Looking at the evolution of immigration in Italy, Figure B1 in online Appendix B shows that the number of immigrants quadrupled between 2001 and 2018. However, this positive trend flattened out during the last decade: the arrival of the Great Recession brought a worsening of working conditions (also in terms of increased precariousness of work) and the consequent decrease in work as a motivation for entering Italy. In addition, the crisis years led to a significant drop in public investment in social policies.

Several political leaders have gained consensus by focusing on the 'other' in the political narrative, personified by foreigners. Migrants are generally portrayed as a threat to the native population regarding security, job opportunities and welfare (e.g. access to social housing, day-care centres, and subsidised school canteens). Since the late 1990s, this narrative has been adopted by prominent right-wing political parties, such as National Alliance (*Alleanza Nazionale*) and Come on Italy (*Forza Italia*). In more recent years, this political strategy has contributed to the electoral success of the League and Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*). Figures A1, A2, and A3 in online Appendix A provide evidence of the increasing exacerbation of these parties' positions towards immigration and ethnic minorities in the most recent years. Over the last two decades, immigration has attracted attention from both sides of the traditional left–right political spectrum, becoming a salient and polarising topic in the latest Italian campaigns (see Table A7 in online Appendix A). The outbreak of the so-called refugee crisis in 2014, which has affected Europe and Italy in particular (see Hutter and Kriesi, 2022), has deeply shaken Italian society, opening up conflicts of various kinds (Colucci, 2018). Party competition and polarisation significantly increased during the acute phase of the refugee crisis (Di Mauro and Verzichelli, 2019), fuelled by the rhetorical propaganda of sovereigntist/nationalist parties and public overestimation of the phenomenon (see Ambrosini, 2019). News media also played a role in amplifying divisions between political elites on immigration (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri, 2019), with high levels of partisanship in the most shared online news covering immigration (Giglietto et al., 2018). The increased politicisation of 'irregular' or illegal arrivals into Italy has turned migration from a relatively 'quiet' policy issue to a highly salient one in the eyes of the general public (Dennison and Geddes, 2022).

2. Data and method

2.1. Data

We collected data on almost all municipal elections in Italy from the historical electoral archive of the Ministry of the Interior.[5] For each election from 2000 to 2018, we have access to several covariates, including the number of votes received by every party or coalition and the total amount of votes received by each mayoral candidate. Exploiting the CHES 0-to-10 scale used for the classification of each party, we construct a dummy variable reflecting parties' anti-immigration position. In particular, in the main analysis, we consider as anti-immigration those political parties having a score of between 8 and 10. Due to the arbitrariness of this procedure, we create various specifications of this dummy variable, incorporating different ranges of parties' scores, and we adopt them for several robustness tests.[6] Anti-immigration parties are mostly right-wing populist parties. In 2014, for instance, the League had a score of 9.50, while Brothers of Italy scored 8.75. The use of a classification based on specialists' assessments is more general than singling out a specific anti-immigration party, and it warrants against the potential distortions due to an arbitrary choice of a single anti-

[5] There are 5 Italian Regions with special status (Aosta Valley, Trentino-South Tyrol, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Sicily, Sardinia) that have particular forms and conditions of autonomy. This also applies to the management of electoral data, except for Sardinia. For this reason, the historical electoral archive of the Ministry of the Interior includes no municipal elections information about Aosta Valley, Trentino-South Tyrol, Friuli-Venezia Giulia and partial coverage of local elections in Sicily (up to 2004). However, we collected election data also for Friuli-Venezia Giulia from the regional archive.

[6] An important role in the Italian local elections is played by the so-called Local lists (*Liste Civiche*). These lists do not have a precise political orientation but can be defined as *ad hoc* parties that pursue and represent local goals and wishes. Many candidates, mainly in small cities or villages, are supported by a *Lista Civica*. In our parties' classification, we consider candidates supported only by Local lists as migration neutral due to the impossibility to classify them properly.

immigration party (e.g. we drop the (few) elections in which two anti-immigration coalitions face each other).

If several parties support a mayoral candidate, he/she may be endorsed by parties with a different political orientation on immigration. For this reason, we must specify that the causal effect investigated, without further specification, might include local governments that do not necessarily identify themselves entirely with a particular political hue, but rather are sponsored by a party with a particular orientation. To overcome this issue, in Section 3.1, we run regressions that take into account the share of anti-immigration parties' votes out of the total number of votes of the coalition supporting a candidate as well as the party to whom the mayoral candidate belongs. In this way, it is possible to know the political weight of anti-immigration parties for every local government. In light of our research question, we consider only elections in which the candidate supported by an anti-immigration coalition won or came second. We also exclude those few elections in which the winning and runner-up candidates were both supported by a coalition having at least one party with a score ≥7. Out of the 25,269 elections present in our database, 2,669 elections meet the above criteria (1,652 municipalities).[7] Figure B2 in online Appendix B displays the geographic distribution of the municipalities present in our database and analysed in the main analysis. As expected, most municipalities are located in Northern Italy. The analysis will however also include many municipalities from Central and Southern Italy, especially those located in Lazio, Tuscany and Puglia.

We have collected and processed a wide range of information from different sources. First, to measure resident foreigners' inflows and outflows for each municipality, we draw on information about foreigners' registrations and cancellations from the population register, using data from 2002 to 2020 from the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat). Following Bracco et al. (2018), to evaluate the effect of anti-immigration local governments on foreigners' inflows and outflows, we construct the following three dependent variables, which provide the net flows (a), the outflows (b) and the inflows (c) of legal immigrants as a percentage of the resident population in the pre-election year:

$$(a)\quad \frac{\textit{Newly registered foreigners}_{i,t} - \textit{Foreigners cancelled from the population register}_{i,t}}{\textit{Resident population}_{i,T-1}} * 100$$

$$(b)\quad \frac{\textit{Foreigners cancelled from the population register}_{i,t}}{\textit{Resident population}_{i,T-1}} * 100$$

$$(c)\quad \frac{\textit{Newly registered foreigners}_{i,t}}{\textit{Resident population}_{i,T-1}} * 100$$

where T is the year of elections in the *i*th municipality, and t = T; T+1; T+2; T+3; T+4. This definition of the dependent variables requires setting up the database at a municipality-year level. This means that the causal effect of interest to us is the average annual effect of electing a mayor supported by an anti-immigration coalition on immigration flows across the electoral cycle.[8]

An RDD takes advantage of the fact that the probability of becoming mayor changes discontinuously at a certain cut-off point of the assignment variable. We follow standard practice (see, for instance, Lee, 2008) and use the anti-immigration candidate's margin of victory/loss as the assignment variable. The margin of victory/loss is computed as the difference in the vote share of the anti-immigration and the non-anti-immigration candidates relative to the number of votes cast to the two leading coalitions. This choice allows having a single definition of the margin of victory for municipalities electing their mayor in the first round when two or more candidates are present, or in the second round, when only two candidates are present (see Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2012; Casarico et al., 2022).[9] The anti-immigration coalition wins the election when the variable 'anti-immigration party vote share margin of victory' crosses the 0 threshold, otherwise it loses the election.[10]

In the empirical analysis, we include several pre-electoral covariates. First, we look at the population, as municipality size might affect migration flows. We also add a rural-urban dummy (see Maxwell, 2019, on the importance of the urban-rural divide over immigration) and the percentage of legal immigrants. Controlling for the latter variable is important as past immigrant settlements are good predictors of future migration flows (Bartel, 1989). Lastly, to account for municipalities' economic situation and labour market conditions (see Cerqua et al., 2022), we include the average income per capita and the workplace employment rate. Online Appendix B provides a more accurate description of how we build the final sample. Table B1 includes a detailed description of all the variables and their sources, and Table B2 gives the descriptive statistics separately for all 25,269 elections in our database and the 2,669 elections

[7] The League is by far the most prominent anti-immigration party in our sample. It ran in 82.5% of the elections considered (2,202 out of 2,669 elections).

[8] The most recent version of the *rdrobust* package for Stata accounts for the presence of mass points (repeated observations in the forcing variable). This leads to a more efficient variance estimator.

[9] For municipalities above 15,000 residents, we use the first round margin of victory if one of the candidates receives more than 50% of the votes, and therefore there is no ballot. Otherwise, we use the second round margin of victory. For municipalities below 15,000 residents, we use the margin of victory in the single round of elections.

[10] Although this is a standard practice in the literature, it might not be optimal for elections with more than two contestants. For this reason, in Section 3.2*, we will test the robustness of this choice by using an alternative computation of the forcing variable, a broader definition of 'close election' including also the contestants who ranked third, a simulation-based approach (see Kotakorpi et al., 2017), and the addition of control variables to take into account the degree of electoral competition, a dummy for the second round and a dummy for municipalities with more than 15,000 residents.

considered in the main analysis.

2.2. Empirical strategy

Through electoral selection, political parties/coalitions may select mayoral candidates on the basis of the specific electoral setting and the quality of local politicians. This generally means that elected mayors are more skilled than other candidates. Failing to control for these differences can lead to biased estimates of the causal effect of interest to us. To overcome this problem and the potential for reversal causality, we use an RDD that focuses on elections decided by a narrow margin of victory. The RDD has an intuitive appeal in analysing local elections, as candidates who win and lose close elections are expected to be comparable on average. This comparability assumes that parties and candidates do not have complete control over the share of the vote they receive. Thus, their victory can be considered almost random in close elections: the bare winners and losers of a local election are likely to be generally comparable in all their observable and unobservable characteristics. Therefore, by comparing immigrants' location decisions in the post-election period, we can identify the causal effect β of winning anti-immigration coalitions on immigrants' location choices (Y_i), using the following specification:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta D_i + f(x_i) + \gamma Z_i + \varepsilon_i, \ \forall x_i \in (-h, \ +h)$$

where D_i represents the treatment dummy (equal to 1 if the anti-immigration candidate wins the elections), x_i is the forcing variable, i.e. the anti-immigration party vote share margin of victory (see the description in Section 2.1), Z_i the control covariates, h the bandwidth and ε_i the error term.

We apply the RDD to a panel of Italian municipal elections from 2000 to 2018. The parameter of interest is β, the local average treatment effect (LATE) that reflects the impact of anti-immigration parties on immigrants' location choices in close elections. In such a setting, identification, estimation and inference activities are performed by comparing immigrants' location decisions in municipalities with a candidate supported by one or more anti-immigration parties that win by a close margin (treatment group), taking the municipalities where the same kind of candidate loses by a close margin as the comparison group.

This study employs the non-parametric robust bias-corrected estimator with covariate adjustment proposed by Calonico et al. (2019). Hyytinen et al. (2018) show that bias-corrected RDD estimates that apply robust inference approximate experimental estimates in the context of close elections. Moreover, this approach does not rely on parametric assumptions, and it offers a good compromise between flexibility and simplicity in the approximation of the unknown regression function (Cattaneo et al., 2020a). The bandwidth h for each non-parametric local linear regression is selected using the mean squared error (MSE)-optimal bandwidth selector,[11] and is conducted via triangular kernel weights. This implies that only observations within the bandwidth receive a positive weight in the estimation, with a larger weight applied to closer elections. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Z_i covariates in the RDD analysis adds substantial efficiency gains relative to the unadjusted RDD estimator, leading to shorter confidence intervals for the RDD treatment effect (Cattaneo et al., 2020a). In particular, we control for the pre-election values of the variables described in Section 2.1, i.e. resident population, income per capita, workplace employment rate, percentage of legal immigrants and a dummy urban area. We also include year and regional fixed effects, which account for unobserved heterogeneity across territories and over time. Even if we are in an RDD setting, the addition of year and regional fixed effects is relevant, as our analysis spans over a relatively long period, covering territories with different political and migration histories. Moreover, fixed effects make it possible to take into account the potential heterogeneity of electoral selection across geographic areas and over time. All the regressions will be estimated with errors clustered at the municipality level.

The breadth of our database provides enough power to test our research hypotheses, with over 800 elections in which the anti-immigration coalition lost or won by $\pm$ 5 percentage points.

2.3. Descriptive evidence and validity of RDD assumptions

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis based on whether or not the anti-immigration coalition won the contested municipal election. As shown in columns (1) and (2), municipalities with a winning candidate supported by an anti-immigration coalition tend to be smaller, and more likely to be urban and located in Northern Italy. Moreover, the losing non-anti-immigration candidate is less likely to be male. Conversely, they are very similar to municipalities in which the anti-immigration coalition lost, as regards income per capita, workplace employment rate, the percentage of legal immigrants, percentage of elderly population and average house price per square metre.

The RDD provides a natural framework to check whether some confounding factors are driving some spurious correlations. It is sufficient to run RDD regressions with regional and year fixed effects but no covariates, using as dependent variables those factors that the researcher suspects might be driving the results. If no effect is detected, then that variable cannot be a confounder in the RDD exercise. In column (3) we examine whether the observed baseline covariates are locally balanced on either side of the cut-off in the spirit of the RDD framework. These tests validate the assumption that the assignment of the treatment near the cut-off is approximately

[11] By using a data-driven bandwidth selection, we obtain different bandwidths for each analysis. In the robustness section, we show that our main findings are generally robust to bandwidth selection methods, kernel weight function choices, the local polynomial order, and the exclusion of covariates.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and pre-treatment differences.

Variable	Average values in the whole sample			Differences at the threshold
	Non- anti-immigration coalition	Anti-immigration coalition		
	(1)	(2)		(3)
Population	27,387.14	24,358.98	*Coeff. (SE)*	−1,708.70 (6,586.60)
			Bandwidth	0.144
			N $^{-/+}$	601/507
Income per capita in €	18,900.85	18,924.00	*Coeff. (SE)*	−297.89 (370.20)
			Bandwidth	0.153
			N $^{-/+}$	630/530
Workplace employment rate	48.68%	49.53%	*Coeff. (SE)*	2.84 (2.32)
			Bandwidth	0.197
			N $^{-/+}$	773/652
Percentage of legal immigrants	7.29%	7.48%	*Coeff. (SE)*	−0.51 (0.49)
			Bandwidth	0.192
			N $^{-/+}$	758/633
Percentage of urban municipalities	79.97%	82.62%	*Coeff. (SE)*	−0.92 (5.26)
			Bandwidth	0.178
			N $^{-/+}$	716/596
Percentage of Northern municipalities	79.51%	83.49%	*Coeff. (SE)*	−1.95 (4.82)
			Bandwidth	0.200
			N $^{-/+}$	779/661
Average house price per square metre in €	1,436.11	1,387.61	*Coeff. (SE)*	31.92 (70.64)
			Bandwidth	0.148
			N $^{-/+}$	559/487
Percentage of elderly population	20.20%	19.62%	*Coeff. (SE)*	0.63 (0.40)
			Bandwidth	0.220
			N $^{-/+}$	829/718
Turnout	71.88%	71.84%	*Coeff. (SE)*	−0.96 (1.16)
			Bandwidth	0.191
			N $^{-/+}$	758/633
Percentage of male anti-immigration candidates	86.14%	86.91%	*Coeff. (SE)*	−2.43 (5.50)
			Bandwidth	0.190
			N $^{-/+}$	658/563
Percentage of male non-anti-immigration candidates	83.78%	80.75%	*Coeff. (SE)*	3.71 (5.49)
			Bandwidth	0.169
			N $^{-/+}$	595/508
N	1,518	1,151		

Notes: Column (3) reports non-parametric robust bias-corrected estimates (Calonico et al., 2019). The bandwidths for each non-parametric local linear regression are selected using the optimal data-driven method as per Calonico et al. (2019). N^{-} and N^{+} denote the number of cases within the bandwidth below and above the threshold, respectively. All estimates (except for the percentage of Northern municipalities) include the following control variables: regional dummies and yearly dummies. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

randomised, as we find no evidence of statistically significant pre-treatment differences around the cut-off point between winning and non-winning anti-immigration coalitions.

In an electoral context, the RDD framework relies on the fact that candidates cannot manipulate the electoral outcome. Indeed, if mayoral candidates can systematically steer the voting behaviour around the cut-point, then 'treatment' is no longer as-if random and, consequently, the estimated effects could be biased. Although many studies have already demonstrated the lack of significant manipulation in Italian municipal elections (Bracco et al., 2015; Gamalerio, 2020), we investigate the smoothness of the forcing variable around the threshold when at least one anti-immigration party is part of the winning or the runner-up coalitions. If mayoral candidates do not have precise control over the forcing variable around the cut-off point, the density distribution of the forcing variable should not exhibit any sharp change around that point. Figure C1 in online Appendix C plots the density of elections using the robust test of Cattaneo et al. (2020b). The evidence in Figure C1 is reassuring, as there is no sign of discontinuity at the threshold. Moreover, the p-value (0.67) indicates that, as expected, there is no statistical evidence of sorting, i.e. mayoral candidates are unable to manipulate the electoral outcome.

3. Results

We start this section by discussing the main results of the graphical and empirical analyses. We then report the results of several robustness analyses and the estimates of a few additional analyses. Lastly, we investigate the mechanisms that explain the impact of anti-immigration majorities on foreigners' flows.

3.1. Main estimates

As usual in the RDD context, we start with a graphical display of the estimates. Figure 1 shows the effect of the winning anti-immigration coalition on legal immigrants' location decisions.[12] Each grey hollow diamond is the average value of dependent variables binned at 0.005 margin of vote intervals. Candidates on the left side of the plots are those supported by an anti-immigration coalition that lost the election, while those on the right side won. The discontinuity at the cut-point (0) is the estimated effect of having a mayor supported by an anti-immigration coalition on net immigrant flows (Panel A), immigrant outflows (Panel B) and immigrant inflows (Panel C). These figures suggest that the victory of an anti-immigration coalition is associated with a small decrease in net immigrant flows, driven mainly by a reduction in inflows. However, although each outcome variable displays smaller values in the case of a winning anti-immigration coalition, no graph shows a clear jump at the threshold. Therefore, we need to employ the rigorous RDD approach presented in Section 2.2 to assess the statistical significance of these gaps.

Consequently, we corroborate the graphical analysis by running the non-parametric robust bias-corrected RDD estimator with covariate adjustment. The estimation results are reported in Table 2. Columns (1)–(3) show the impact on net immigrant flows, immigrant outflows and immigrant inflows, respectively. Panel A reports the baseline specification, where we cover the whole time period and the whole Italian territory. The estimates show a reduction in net immigrant flows in municipalities with a ruling anti-immigration coalition, driven by a decrease in inflows, which is partially compensated by fewer outflows. However, as in the graphical analysis, the magnitude of the impact is small. And despite the large sample size, all estimates are not statistically different from 0.

We then split the analysis into three sub-periods (Panels B, C and D). As explained in Section 1, the polarisation and centrality of immigration have changed over time, possibly affecting the behaviour of elected mayors and the response of immigrants. Two important events have engendered these changes: the Great Recession and the refugee crisis. Accordingly, we consider the following three subperiods: 2000–2008, 2009–2013, and 2014–2018. Interestingly, we find that all the estimates are close to 0 for the periods 2000–2008 and 2009–2013, while effects are more sizable for the period 2014–2018. In addition, the estimate of −0.164 percentage points concerning immigrant inflows is statistically significant at the 5% level. This is a relevant reduction, as it corresponds to 0.193 of the standard deviation of the dependent variable. This result suggests that the negative relations between anti-immigration mayors and immigrants have grown stronger over time. Given the relevance of this finding, we will provide an in-depth analysis of its robustness and the mechanisms behind it in the sections below.[13]

3.2. Robustness and sensitivity checks

In this subsection, we describe the results of a series of robustness and sensitivity checks. All estimates are given in Table 3. This table contains six blocks of results in a vertical dimension, numbered (I)-(VI). The first three columns give the estimates on net immigrant flows, immigrant outflows and immigrant inflows for the whole time period, while the last three columns present the estimates for the same dependent variables but limited to elections held from 2014 to 2018.

One concern with our empirical analysis regards the way we define an anti-immigration coalition. Therefore, in block (I), we give the estimates when using six alternative definitions of anti-immigration coalition. We begin by restricting the sample to those elections in which the anti-immigration party/parties received at least 50% of the votes of the coalition it/they belong(s) to, or in which the mayoral candidate is directly affiliated to an anti-immigrant party. Furthermore, in light of the strong link between anti-immigration parties and far-right parties, we use 'far right' as an alternative definition to identify anti-immigration coalitions. In particular, we consider as far right a party with a score on the left-right axis of between 8 and 10 in the CHES classification (see Table A6 in online Appendix A).[14] In addition, similarly to Moriconi et al. (2022), we use the *Manifesto Project* as an alternative source to classify political parties (see Volkens et al., 2020). The *Manifesto project* makes it possible to gauge party preferences regarding specific policies by analysing the content and space devoted to certain topics within electoral manifestos. We consider as against immigrants those parties that enforce or encourage cultural integration and homogeneity in society (see Table A4 in online Appendix A). Lastly, we use two alternative criteria for defining an anti-immigration party: a party having a CHES score on the anti-/pro-immigration axis of between 7 and 10 (looser definition) or between 9 and 10 (stricter definition). Overall, these estimates confirm our findings. Concerning the period 2000–2018, all estimates on immigrant inflows are negative. The magnitude grows when considering mayoral candidates directly belonging to an anti-immigration party, while it gets smaller when considering the looser definition of an anti-immigration party. However, in none of these tests do the estimates turn statistically significant. Looking at the 2014–2018 period, we observe a decrease in immigrant inflows, which is statistically significant at the 10% or 5% levels in all instances. The magnitude and statistical significance of this effect grows when considering only elections in which the anti-immigration party received at least 50% of the coalition's votes or when considering the stricter definition of anti-immigration party.

Although our definition of the margin of victory/loss follows previous literature (e.g. Gagliarducci and Paserman, 2012; Casarico

[12] Thanks to recent developments in the *rdplot* package for Stata, the plots reported in Fig. 1 control for the variables and fixed effects described in Section 2*.

[13] Visual evidence on the 2014–2018 analysis is given in Figure C2 in online Appendix C.

[14] In this robustness check we also consider as anti-immigration the neo-fascist parties New Force (*Forza Nuova*) and *CasaPound*, which are not considered in the CHES classification. "*New Force and CasaPound justify their opposition to immigration with their idea of an organic nation/society/community, referring either to a biological idea of race or to a homogeneous cultural/ideological identity*" (Campani, 2016, pag. 43).

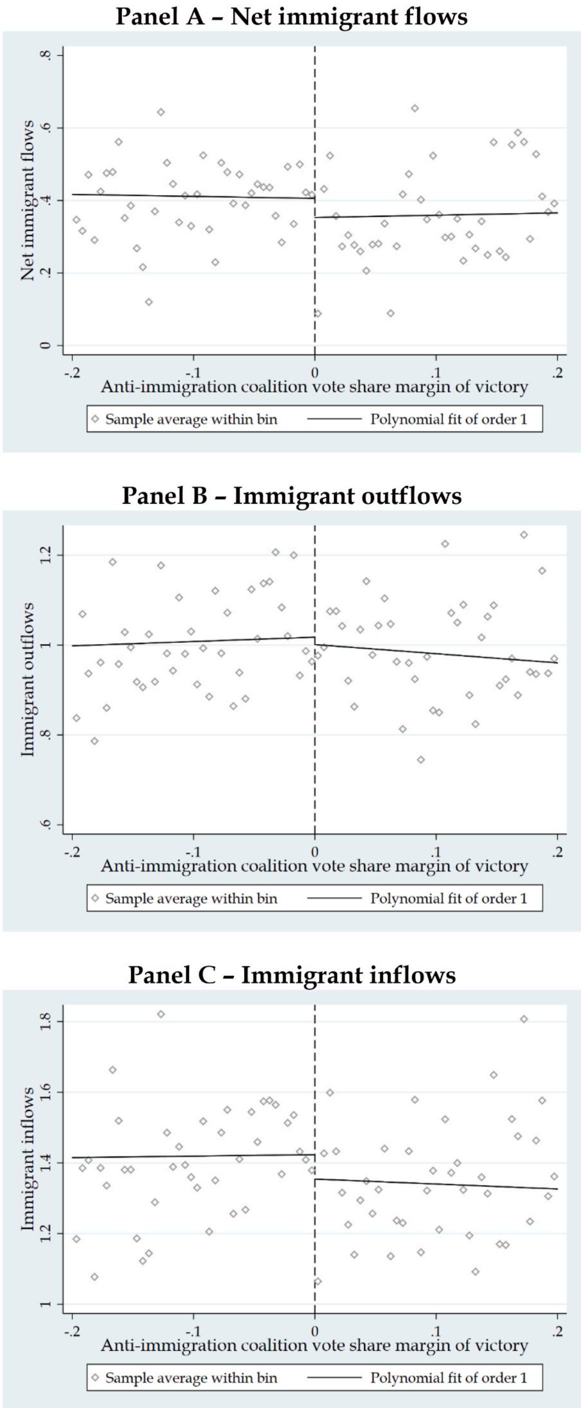

Fig. 1. Immigrants' location choices around the threshold: RDD plots.
Notes: Each figure is constructed using the Stata command *rdplot* with 40 bins on each side of the cut-off (bin = 0.005) and a local linear fit estimated using a triangular kernel. The control variables included are population, income per capita, workplace employment rate, the share of legal immigrants, dummy urban area, regional dummies, and election-year dummies.

et al., 2022), it might not be the optimal choice for elections with more than two contestants. For this reason, in block (II), we test the robustness of this choice in four ways. First, we use an alternative computation of the forcing variable, i.e. we compute the margin of victory/loss as the difference in the vote share of the most-voted anti-immigration and non-anti-immigration candidates, relative to the number of votes cast to all candidates (instead of the number of votes cast to the two leading coalitions). We then consider a broader

Table 2
Main estimates.

	Net immigrant flows	Immigrant outflows	Immigrant inflows
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A – Elections held from 2000 to 2018			
Coeff.	−0.060	−0.016	−0.072
SE	0.039	0.032	0.052
N^{-}/N^{+}	4,084/3,543	3,868/3,327	3,947/3,398
Panel B – Elections held from 2000 to 2008			
Coeff.	−0.040	0.002	−0.031
SE	0.089	0.063	0.128
N^{-}/N^{+}	999/897	965/837	985/847
Panel C – Elections held from 2009 to 2013			
Coeff.	−0.005	−0.013	−0.017
SE	0.061	0.035	0.064
N^{-}/N^{+}	1,779/1,377	2,143/1,702	1,856/1,451
Panel D – Elections held from 2014 to 2018			
Coeff.	−0.099	−0.039	−0.164**
SE	0.062	0.069	0.074
N^{-}/N^{+}	592/536	694/684	614/572

Notes: All non-parametric estimates are robust bias-corrected. The bandwidths for each non-parametric local linear regression are selected using the optimal data-driven method as per Calonico et al. (2019). N^{-} and N^{+} denote the number of municipality-year cases within the bandwidth below and above the threshold, respectively. The control variables included are population, income per capita, workplace employment rate, the percentage of legal immigrants, dummy urban area, regional dummies, and election-year dummies. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

definition of 'close election' by including the contestant who ranked third. This approach extends the number of "electoral races" considered for all elections with at least three contestants, which did not end up at the second round. We add to the 2,669 electoral races considered in the main analysis, the 1,316 pairs of contenders that meet one of the following criteria: i) the first-ranked anti--immigration candidate vs the third-ranked non-*anti*-immigration candidate; ii) the first-ranked non-anti-immigration candidate vs the third-ranked anti-immigration candidate. By considering a larger number of electoral races, this robustness check mitigates potential concerns on the sample size of the analysis concerning the 2014–2018 period. Third, we employ the simulation-based approach proposed by Kotakorpi et al. (2017) for defining close elections. This procedure measures all candidates' share of elections in 1,000 alternative elections by resampling 15% of the votes from the actual distribution of votes (for more details, see Kotakorpi et al., 2017; Palguta and Pertold, 2021). Lastly, we add three extra control variables to take into account the degree of electoral competition (measured as the sum of the share of votes of the candidates who did not rank in the first two positions), a dummy for the second round and a dummy for municipalities with more than 15,000 residents. The estimates in block (II) confirm our main findings. Moreover, when we include electoral races considering the third-ranked candidate in the sample, we get an even larger impact (and smaller standard errors) of anti-immigration mayors on immigrants' location choices in recent years.

Block (III) reports three sensitivity checks on the RDD specification. We check whether our results depend on the bandwidth selection by using as optimal-bandwidth selector the coverage error rate (CER) instead of the MSE. We then check the sensitivity of our estimates to the kernel function by using the Epanechnikov kernel instead of the triangular kernel. Lastly, we check whether our results appear to be sensitive to the order of the local polynomial by repeating the analysis with the local quadratic regression. All estimates turn out to be very close to those reported in the baseline specifications, even though the ones obtained with the local squared regression are smaller in magnitude, and turn out to be statistically insignificant when analysing immigrant inflows for the 2014–2018 period. However, as none of the RDD graphs shown in Figure 1 and Figure C2 displays a non-linear relationship between the forcing variable and the dependent variables, using a higher-order polynomial leads to overfitting of the data and, therefore, to unreliable estimates (Cattaneo et al., 2020a).

In an RDD context, it is customary to present the estimates without control variables.[15] At the same time, controlling for relevant pre-treatment covariates can affect the extent of the estimates. Thus, in block (IV), we provide the no-covariate estimates and the estimates when adding two extra control variables: the percentage of the elderly population and the average house price per square metre. The latter variable takes into account the fact that immigrants tend to locate in areas with low real estate costs (Dimou et al., 2020). While additional covariates do not modify the estimates, removing all control covariates increases standard errors, making the estimates for the 2014–2018 period not statistically significant. However, the point estimates are even more sizable in absolute terms than those reported in Table 2.

In block (V), we carry out two falsification tests using different values of the forcing variable to construct two arbitrary

[15] In an RDD, control variables should play a secondary role, and potential discontinuities should emerge even in the no-covariate RDD specification.

Table 3
Robustness and sensitivity checks.

Type of sensitivity/robustness check	Elections held from 2000 to 2018			Elections held from 2014 to 2018		
	Net immigrant flows	Immigrant outflows	Immigrant inflows	Net immigrant flows	Immigrant outflows	Immigrant inflows
(I) Alternative definition of anti-immigrant coalition						
- Anti-immigrant parties with at least 50% of votes	−0.051 (0.065)	0.011 (0.042)	−0.046 (0.075)	−0.152 (0.095)	−0.140 (0.115)	−0.287** (0.127)
- Candidate from an anti-immigrant party	−0.038 (0.058)	−0.037 (0.042)	−0.086 (0.070)	−0.040 (0.072)	−0.115 (0.089)	−0.183* (0.100)
- Far-right party	−0.020 (0.056)	−0.008 (0.039)	−0.028 (0.072)	−0.104 (0.070)	−0.030 (0.077)	−0.162* (0.084)
- Manifesto definition of anti-immigrant coalition	−0.008 (0.041)	−0.004 (0.028)	−0.011 (0.052)	−0.071 (0.056)	−0.068 (0.066)	−0.126* (0.070)
- Anti-immigration score between 7 and 10	−0.029 (0.043)	−0.004 (0.030)	−0.033 (0.054)	−0.065 (0.058)	−0.038 (0.066)	−0.121* (0.071)
- Anti-immigration score between 9 and 10	−0.055 (0.044)	−0.015 (0.037)	−0.063 (0.054)	−0.102 (0.069)	−0.039 (0.076)	−0.166** (0.085)
(II) Alternative definition of close election						
- Alternative definition of forcing variable	−0.056 (0.039)	−0.026 (0.033)	−0.076 (0.056)	−0.088 (0.062)	−0.084 (0.073)	−0.180** (0.073)
- Considering also third-ranked candidates	−0.064 (0.039)	−0.017 (0.030)	−0.079* (0.048)	−0.126** (0.056)	−0.055 (0.068)	−0.193***(0.068)
- Simulation-based approach	−0.039 (0.050)	−0.043 (0.041)	−0.088 (0.059)	−0.092 (0.067)	−0.060 (0.079)	−0.171** (0.84)
- Adding elections' features as covariates	−0.069 (0.041)	0.003 (0.032)	−0.066 (0.053)	−0.111* (0.058)	−0.021 (0.062)	−0.151** (0.074)
(III) RDD features						
- Alternative bandwidth selector (CER)	−0.043 (0.043)	−0.024 (0.034)	−0.066 (0.057)	−0.084 (0.062)	−0.065 (0.073)	−0.169** (0.074)
- Alternative kernel (Epanechnikov)	−0.064 (0.039)	−0.014 (0.032)	−0.074 (0.051)	−0.108* (0.064)	−0.031 (0.069)	−0.165** (0.078)
- Squared functional form	−0.006 (0.058)	−0.029 (0.040)	−0.046 (0.070)	−0.030 (0.072)	−0.055 (0.089)	−0.119 (0.082)
(IV) Control variables						
- No control variables	−0.062 (0.046)	−0.071 (0.064)	−0.127 (0.089)	−0.089 (0.069)	−0.033 (0.162)	−0.172 (0.151)
- Additional control variables	−0.050 (0.046)	−0.011 (0.033)	−0.072 (0.055)	−0.109* (0.062)	−0.023 (0.072)	−0.152** (0.074)
(V) Placebo thresholds						
- 0.1 point to the left	−0.060 (0.051)	0.044 (0.033)	−0.023 (0.059)	−0.112 (0.073)	0.078 (0.075)	−0.019 (0.079)
- 0.1 point to the right	−0.017 (0.062)	0.001 (0.040)	−0.018 (0.062)	0.035 (0.087)	0.039 (0.090)	0.050 (0.078)
(VI) Others						
- Weighted RDD (population)	−0.061 (0.049)	0.023 (0.050)	−0.046 (0.073)	−0.087 (0.059)	0.022 (0.063)	−0.061 (0.058)
- No t0	−0.036 (0.046)	−0.026 (0.033)	−0.069 (0.056)	−0.144** (0.067)	−0.019 (0.071)	−0.191***(0.073)
- No earthquake municipalities	−0.055 (0.042)	−0.011 (0.031)	−0.069 (0.053)	−0.105* (0.061)	−0.043 (0.070)	−0.170** (0.074)

Notes: Clustered standard errors are reported in parentheses. In the weighted regressions, we dropped the six Italian municipalities with over 500,000 inhabitants to avoid that they would skew the estimates. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

discontinuity thresholds not related to becoming mayor. In particular, we move the threshold 0.1 point to each side of the threshold. In this way we simulate the threshold for becoming a mayor for an anti-immigration candidate at 40% or 60%. As these are 'artificial' discontinuities, we should not expect to see any effect of these 'fake' treatments on the dependent variables, given that the actual treatment status does not change. Indeed, all six estimated coefficients are not statistically significant, strengthening the validity of our empirical approach.

Lastly, we carry out three additional robustness checks in block (VI). Firstly, we run a non-parametric RDD regression weighted by population size. This test leads to negative estimates, which are in no case statistically significant. The smaller size of the immigrant inflows coefficient for the period 2014–2018 suggests that the fall in immigrant inflows in recent years is driven mainly by small and medium-sized municipalities. Secondly, as it takes time to relocate, we remove from the analysis the election year. After doing this, we get a more sizable reduction in migration inflows for 2014–2018, which suggests that most immigrants react to the change in local government after some time. To further investigate the timing of immigrants' reaction, Figure C3 in online Appendix C displays the estimates split by the number of years after the election (for elections held from 2014 to 2018). This figure demonstrates that it takes at least two years to see a statistically significant change in immigrants' location choices. Thirdly, we remove municipalities from the sample after they have been hit by an earthquake. The disruption caused by a natural disaster might indeed affect migration flows for reasons other than the election of a new mayor. The estimated coefficients for immigrant inflows are in line with the main estimates, while those concerning net immigrant inflows get larger and statistically significant in the latter two instances.

Nearly all the tests carried out in Section 3.2 support our main findings. There seems to be a generally negative impact of anti-immigration coalitions on immigrant inflows, which is never statistically significant at the 5% level for the whole period under analysis, but becomes statistically significant over the last few years in most specifications.

Our estimates differ from those of Bracco et al. (2018), especially considering that their observation period ended in 2014. In online Appendix D, we demonstrate that the main reason behind such differences was our use of the non-parametric robust bias-corrected RDD estimator with covariate adjustment that, differently from the parametric RDD, leads to unbiased estimates (Hyytinen et al., 2018; Cattaneo et al., 2020a) and larger standard errors. The fact that our estimates are based on the most up-to-date non-parametric RDD estimator and are relatively stable across many robustness and sensitivity checks lends credibility to the internal validity of our findings.

3.3. Additional findings

This subsection examines different heterogeneity margins to better understand the relationship between narrow anti-immigration coalition victories and post-election immigration flows. All estimates are given in Table 4.

Firstly, we limit the sample to those municipalities in which the outgoing mayor is not supported by an anti-immigration coalition. It is reasonable to assume that municipalities that experience a sharp change in their position on immigration might engender a larger effect on foreigners' location choices. Nevertheless, even in this case, we find a negligible impact on migration flows and not statistically different from 0, as reported in Panel A. We then replicate the same analysis on the 2014–2018 elections. The estimates presented in Panel B show a statistically significant decrease in immigrant outflows at the 10% level and immigrant inflows at the 5% level. These estimates are larger in magnitude than those presented in Table 2, but they are based on a much smaller number of observations.

Table 4
Additional estimates concerning anti-immigration parties.

	Net immigrant flows	Immigrant outflows	Immigrant inflows
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A – Focus only on municipalities whose previous local government was not made up by anti-immigration parties (Elections held from 2000 to 2018)			
Coeff.	−0.009	−0.002	−0.011
SE	0.051	0.039	0.060
N^{-}/N^{+}	2,071/1,812	2,099/1,840	1,961/1,715
Panel B – Focus only on municipalities whose previous local government was not made up by anti-immigration parties (Elections held from 2014 to 2018)			
Coeff.	−0.113	−0.100	−0.213**
SE	0.069	0.096	0.099
N^{-}/N^{+}	320/321	309/311	294/280
Panel C – Pro-immigration coalition (Elections held from 2000 to 2018)			
Coeff.	−0.012	−0.016	−0.056
SE	0.055	0.047	0.069
N^{-}/N^{+}	1,195/1,426	1,376/1,672	1,090/1,299

Notes: See notes of Table 2. ***$p < 0.01$, **$p < 0.05$, *$p < 0.1$.

Lastly, we invert the focus of the analysis by considering winning pro-immigration coalitions as treated. We consider a coalition to be pro-immigration if it includes at least one party having a score between 0 and 2 on the anti-/pro-immigration axis of the CHES classification (see Table A2 in online Appendix A). Pro-immigration parties are usually left-wing parties such as Left Ecology and Freedom (*Sinistra Ecologia Libertà*) and the Italian Communist Party. The estimates given in Panel C are not statistically significant, and display negative coefficients contrary to our expectations. This counter-intuitive result is likely due to the little political weight of pro-immigration parties. Furthermore, immigration is not central to their political agenda, unlike for anti-immigrant parties. Note that the last analysis has not been replicated for 2014–2018 due to the lack of sufficient observations.

Municipal-level data on resident foreigners' inflows and outflows can be split into the following subcategories: new foreigners registered from other municipalities or abroad, and 'other registrations'; foreigners cancelled from the local register that relocate to other municipalities or go abroad, and 'other cancellations'.[16] We use these categories to build as many variables as the disaggregation level of the original data taken from Istat, using the same type of formula described in Section 2.1. Estimates are given in Table 5.

We find that none of the coefficients is statistically significant when considering the whole period, while we get statistically significant estimates for the inflows from other municipalities (5% level) and the category 'other registrations' (5% level) considering elections held from 2014 onwards. While it is difficult to interpret the item 'other registrations', as we cannot disentangle the aspects that really matter, the statistically significant estimate for immigrant inflows from other municipalities suggests that foreigners living in Italy might be more informed about changes in local government and take them into consideration when making location decisions. On the other hand, legal immigrants coming from abroad appear less reactive to the arrival of an anti-immigration local government. While there is a sizable reduction in inflows, outflows are not affected by the arrival of a mayor supported by an anti-immigration coalition. This evidence suggests that the incremental costs of multiple relocations for immigrants already residing in anti-immigrant municipalities could be higher than those of staying in terms of monetary and non-monetary costs.

Even though the narrative on migration has been instrumentalised as a hazy problem of 'outsiders' (see Section 1.2), it is possible to identify a political and media overkill on persons from specific countries. This was exacerbated by the migration crisis that started in 2014. For this reason, we also collect from Istat data on immigrants' citizenship for every municipality from 2003 to 2020.[17] We have aggregated nationalities by macro-area (Africa, North America, South and Central America, Asia, EU-15, EU-12 and other European countries) to test whether targeted political rhetoric (and possibly targeted local policies) push away some specific groups of foreigners from territories governed by an anti-immigration coalition. Estimates are given in Table 6 for the whole period, and for the elections from 2014 to 2018.

The estimates suggest a reduction in foreigners' presence for both time spans considered, which is, however, not statistically significant. The reduction is sizable for immigrants from the EU-12 (Central and Eastern European countries), especially when considering the whole period (statistically significant estimate at the 10% level). On the other hand, the location choices of legal immigrants from Africa seem to be unaffected by the political alignment of the local government.

3.4. Potential mechanisms

This section explores possible mechanisms through which a winning anti-immigration coalition can affect foreigners' location decisions. Firstly, we investigate the role played by local policies, and then we consider the potential repercussions of increased hostility of the native-born population on foreigners' location choices. Looking in depth at these potential mechanisms will shed light on why legal immigrants moved less in 'hostile' municipalities starting from the 2014 elections and not earlier.

Public social spending is often used for propaganda purposes to highlight the precise orientation of political parties' policies. Anti-immigration politicians often stress their willingness to use these funds in favour of the native population. For instance, in 2020, Brothers of Italy submitted a motion called 'council flats first to the Italians' in the municipality of Ladispoli (near Rome), to prioritise the assignment of social housing to Italian rather than foreign families. In Ferrara, a municipality ruled by the League, in 2020 the mayor stated that social housing must no longer be considered a service dedicated almost exclusively to immigrant families but one available to everyone.

Local policymakers can make choices that have a profound impact on citizens. Government ideology influences public expenditure, and left-wing and right-wing governments usually adopt different budget positions (Bove et al., 2021). Although anti-immigration local governments might 'discourage' the location of immigrants in the municipality in several ways, social expenditure is one of the most relevant policy areas. Therefore, we investigate the actual influence exerted by a mayor supported by an anti-immigration coalition on local migration policies, analysing whether anti-immigration propaganda has a real effect on social expenditure and, consequently, on the location or relocation of immigrants. To examine this potential causal channel, we draw on municipality data from Istat on social expenditure that are available from 2013 to 2018. Specifically, we collect information about public social spending

[16] The item 'other registrations' includes newborns and those enrolled as 'reappearing' or for other reasons due to registry adjustments. Similarly, 'other cancellations' consists of those cancelled from the population register due to ordinary or census-related unavailability, death, expiry of residence permit and acquisition of Italian citizenship. Foreigners can acquire Italian citizenship by marriage/civil partnership, by residence in Italy (for at least three years), by descent, or by maternal or paternal recognition.

[17] This data reports the yearly number of individuals by citizenship for each municipality. A critical limitation of this data is that it does not distinguish between inflows and outflows of foreigners.

Table 5
Splitting the main estimates by origin or destination of immigrants.

	Outflows from other municipalities	Outflows from abroad	Other outflows	Inflows from other municipalities	Inflows from abroad	Other inflows
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A - Elections held from 2000 to 2018						
Coeff.	0.002	−0.013	−0.011	−0.046	−0.019	0.001
SE	0.026	0.008	0.020	0.034	0.026	0.016
N^-/N^+	3,576/2,962	2,744/2,294	3,900/3,346	3,318/2,732	3,424/2,838	3,633/3,033
Panel B - Elections held from 2014 to 2018						
Coeff.	−0.031	0.005	−0.052	−0.089**	−0.035	−0.043***
SE	0.041	0.014	0.059	0.041	0.050	0.018
N^-/N^+	662/608	576/509	583/522	657/598	614/567	607/540

Notes: See notes of Table 2. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

Table 6
Splitting the main estimates by citizenship.

	Africa	North America	South and Central America	Asia	EU-15 countries	EU-12 countries	Other European countries	All countries
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Panel A - Elections held from 2000 to 2018								
Coeff.	0.031	0.001	−0.038	0.124	−0.019	−0.264*	0.083	−0.058
SE	0.161	0.006	0.065	0.171	0.047	0.147	0.186	0.141
N^-/N^+	3,184/2,657	3,593/3,062	2,601/2,209	3,759/3,245	2,896/2,432	3,563/3,023	2,679/2,267	3,578/3,039
Panel B - Elections held from 2014 to 2018								
Coeff.	0.007	0.008	−0.076	−0.441	−0.022	−0.151	0.543	−0.151
SE	0.277	0.019	0.165	0.401	0.059	0.351	0.369	0.190
N^-/N^+	588/549	579/536	497/444	588/546	597/572	505/451	532/493	483/437

Notes: See notes of Table 2. ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

for various population groups,[18] including expenditure for immigrants. Table 7 displays the estimates on the impact of anti-immigration local governments on social expenditure. Overall, no statistically significant difference emerges between anti-immigration coalitions and their opponents on the amount of budget devoted to the main categories of social expenditure, including expenditure for immigrants. This finding is coherent with the descriptive evidence reported by Ferwerda (2021), who shows that the relationship between the percentage of the foreign population and social expenditure in Italian municipalities does not depend on left- or right-wing party affiliation.[19] This means that local anti-immigration politicians, contrary to what they promise during election campaigns, do not reduce public social spending once elected, including funding allocated to immigrants.[20]

Over the last few years there has been an increase in the share of resources allocated to immigrant support and social inclusion (Istat). This share reached 4.7% of the total expenditure by municipalities for social services in 2018 (€352 million). Part of these funds is assigned to the 'Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees' (SPRAR), which allows municipalities and other local authorities to implement integrated reception projects, such as residential care facilities, through national and EU funding. SPRARs are

[18] Total and per capita expenditure items in the dataset: elderly people (65 years and over); addictions; disabled; families with children at risk; immigrants and Roma; multiple care; poverty; adults and homelessness; total expenditure. In 2018, the expenditure of municipalities on social services, net of the contribution of users and the National Health Service, amounted to approximately €7.47 billion, corresponding to 0.42% of national GDP. The expenditure from which an average citizen benefits in a year is €124 at the national level, with vast territorial differences. Social expenditure in the South is much lower than in the rest of Italy: €58 compared to values exceeding €94 per year in all the other regions, peaking in the North-East at €177 (Istat).

[19] Similarly, Le Maux et al. (2020) find that once each French Department's socioeconomic characteristics are accounted for, differences in social expenditures disappear between left- and right-wing local governments. Conversely, Tyrberg and Dahlström (2018) find a negative correlation between anti-immigration parties' representation in Sweden and the aid offered to vulnerable European Union/European Economic Area citizens.

[20] These estimates are for the years 2013–2018, which coincide with the period in which anti-immigration propaganda grew stronger. It is thus unlikely that significant differences between anti-immigrant and non-anti-immigrant coalitions in local social expenditure will emerge over the period 2000–2012.

Table 7
Estimates on the social expenditure per beneficiary (years from 2013 to 2018).

	Immigrants and Roma	Elderly people	Addiction	Disabled	Families with children at risk	Multi-user	Poverty
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Average expenditure per capita (€)							
	43.71	85.53	1.88	4,487.75	149.19	8.32	12.44
RDD estimates							
Coeff.	11.22	11.63	0.17	537.82	15.80	1.73	3.14
SE	13.64	11.36	0.23	420.06	18.42	1.93	2.67
N^{-}/N^{+}	502/402	636/561	593/518	477/380	477/380	508/421	472/380

Notes: Per capita values are the ratio between expenditure and the reference population for each user area: for the 'family and minors' area, the number of family members with at least one minor; for the disabled area, disabled people under the age of 65; for the 'elderly' area, the population aged 65 or over; for the 'immigrants and Roma' area, the number of resident foreigners; for the 'adult poverty and hardship' area, the population aged between 18 and 64; for the 'multi-user' area and the total social expenditure, it is made up of the resident population. Concerning the RDD estimates, see notes of Table 2.

the second step of the Italian reception system, and are identified as a measure oriented towards integrating asylum seekers in a given territory.[21] Hence, the role of SPRARs foreshadows the possibility of local administrations developing policies for the inclusion of asylum seekers and, possibly, legal foreigners. As our study focuses on the impact of an anti-immigration local government on legal immigrants' location choices, we are not directly interested in the behaviour of asylum seekers. However, the presence of many asylum seekers in certain localities might bias our main estimates via their influence on local political outcomes.[22] Reassuringly, the adoption of the RDD strategy warrants against this threat, as the number of asylum seekers at the threshold is expected to be approximately the same between treated and untreated municipalities. A more relevant threat to the validity of our estimates is represented by the potential impact of asylum seekers on local policies, the social climate and legal immigrants' location decisions. We test whether this is so by collecting data on the location and new openings of SPRAR centres in Italian municipalities from 2003 to 2018. We consider a municipality to host a SPRAR if, in at least one of the years from T to T+4, there was a SPRAR in its local labour market (LLM).[23] We then repeat the main analysis only for those municipalities with a SPRAR. Estimates are given in Table E1 in online Appendix E for the whole period and the 2014–2018 period. The extent of the estimates increases with respect to those given in Table 2. This suggests that the effect is more concentrated in municipalities with a SPRAR in the LLM. However, the limited number of observations results in larger standard errors, reducing the statistical significance of the estimates.[24]

Levi et al. (2020) suggest that immigrants might avoid areas with anti-immigration sentiments and locate where they can more easily integrate. Two recent analyses on Switzerland reinforce this idea: Rudert et al. (2017) find that immigrants' need to belong to the local community is less satisfied where citizens voted in a more anti-immigration manner, while Slotwinski and Stutzer (2019) find a steep decrease in the likelihood of foreigners moving to a municipality which revealed anti-immigrant attitudes via a national referendum.

As mentioned in Section 1.2, in Italy the political instrumentalisation of the 'foreign issue' has intensified over the last few years, leading to the development of a generally inhospitable climate that may have affected foreign population flows in Italian municipalities. For instance, the League depicts immigrants, even legal ones, as competing with Italians for access to schools, healthcare and pensions (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2012).

Considering 19 European countries, Italy registered the most sizable swing from 2006 to 2016 to more unfavourable opinions on host country perceptions regarding the presence of immigrants (see Figure E1 in online Appendix E). Negative attitudes towards

[21] Initial reception is carried out in reception centres, where newly arrived migrants are identified and can start the asylum application procedure. After an initial assessment, migrants who apply for asylum are transferred to the first reception centres, where they are held for the time needed to find a solution at the second level, represented by SPRAR centres. With the recent refugee crisis, the Italian migrant reception system has proved to be insufficient to meet the reception needs of all asylum seekers. So, in 2014 the Italian Home Office introduced the CAS (*Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria* - Extraordinary Reception Centres), a private enterprise system funded by the central government and managed by Italian Prefectures (Campo et al., 2021). Although CASs were initially conceived as temporary facilities, they have hosted a large percentage of asylum seekers over the last few years (for more details, see Campo et al., 2021). In 2016, CASs were present in over 2000 municipalities (Bratti et al., 2020).

[22] On this matter, the empirical evidence is mixed. For instance, Gamalerio et al. (2022) show that Italian municipalities that opened a SPRAR experienced a 7 percentage point decrease in votes for extreme right-wing parties; conversely, Bellucci et al. (2019), Bratti et al. (2020), and Campo et al. (2021) find a positive effect of the share of asylum seekers on support for right-wing anti-immigrant parties.

[23] In Italy, there are 610 LLMs defined as sub-regional geographical areas (aggregation of several municipalities) in which the bulk of the local labour force lives and works.

[24] It is possible that anti-immigrant coalitions might hinder the opening of a CAS after municipal elections, and this might bias our estimates. Although accurate data on the annual number of asylum seekers in each municipality is hard to collect (for more details, see Campo et al., 2021), we have used the data collected by Openpolis for 2018 for testing whether municipalities with a winning anti-immigrant coalition tend to host fewer asylum seekers than other municipalities. For this purpose, we have reproduced our estimation strategy using as dependent variable the number of asylum seekers hosted in the municipality per 1,000 inhabitants and considering only elections held from 2014. The estimated coefficient are close to zero and not statistically significant.

immigration make integration harder, and tend to be associated with poorer social inclusion. A similar trend can be observed for the percentage of native citizens who view immigration as one of the two biggest issues facing their country (see Figure E2 in online Appendix E). Moreover, the number of Italian citizens who think immigrants represent a problem for employment and a threat to local culture has increased in recent years (see Table E2 in online Appendix E). This result is in line with Dixon et al. (2018), who show that, in 2018, only 18% of Italians believe that immigration has had a positive impact on Italy, while 57% believe it has had a negative impact. These views are rather homogeneous across the Italian peninsula, with relatively few regional differences. Concerning hate crimes, an increase in racist incidents can be observed, with a peak in 2014 (see Table E3 in online Appendix E). This result is confirmed at the local level by Romarri (2020), who finds that the appointment of far-right mayors in Italy increases the probability of hate crimes against immigrants.

The growth in natives' inhospitality goes hand in hand with the focus on the migration issue by anti-immigration political parties, reflecting the tightening of political propaganda against immigration at the national and local levels. Since 2013 more space has been devoted by anti-immigration parties on their election posters to the enforcement or encouragement of cultural integration (see Volkens et al., 2020), highlighting multiculturalism as a negative phenomenon. Furthermore, as suggested by Romarri (2020) and Doerr et al. (2021), the election of an anti-immigration mayor might quickly change social norms, with native-born citizens more inclined to express views or take actions that were previously stigmatised.

The polarisation of society on immigration-related issues can decrease contacts and interactions between immigrants and natives, increase intolerance toward diversity, hinder social cohesion policies, and undermine the economic benefits of immigrants' integration (OECD, 2018). This perspective acknowledges the role of migration's salience in the political debate, transforming the political conflict within societies from economic to cultural and forcing the homogenisation of natives' opinions and beliefs (Alesina and Tabellini, 2022). Therefore, the propaganda of anti-immigration parties and the consequent climate of general mistrust towards immigrants have contributed to the development of an 'inhospitality effect', which has been reinforced over time, and may have affected the choice of the foreign population to settle in a given territory.

4. Conclusion

Causal inference in the case of immigration and attitudinal outcomes is complex, since selection and sorting into (and out of) diverse regions cannot be ruled out in most cases (Edo et al., 2020). We carefully address endogeneity issues via the non-parametric robust bias-corrected RDD estimator with covariate adjustment to estimate the causal impact of anti-immigration parties on foreigners' location choices. According to a classification based on specialists' assessments, we consider as anti-immigration those parties whose political programmes and rhetoric are basically founded on an anti-immigration approach. We find that immigrants' responsiveness to the arrival of a mayor supported by an anti-immigration coalition has increased over time, leading to a sizable and statistically significant decrease in immigrant inflows from other Italian municipalities since 2014. On the other hand, the election of an anti-immigration mayor does not greatly affect the location decisions of foreigners already residing in the municipality. We find solid evidence that the reduction in immigrant inflows is not driven by a meaningful change in local policies that penalise immigrants. Contrarily, it is the more prominent political instrumentalisation of the 'foreign issue', which leads to a generally inhospitable climate towards immigrants in municipalities governed by an anti-immigration coalition. Differently from previous literature, these findings suggest that foreigners' flows are influenced by the local political environment only when immigration is central to the political debate.

Our findings support the idea that propaganda, even when it does not go hand in hand with the implementation of specific anti-immigration local policies, has the power to influence immigrants' behaviour. Moreover, the reduction in immigrant inflows grows over time, and stays statistically significant even four years after the elections. Such results suggest that inhospitable municipalities are likely to pay a significant economic and demographic price in the long run. This vicious mechanism might deepen economic inequalities among municipalities and, in turn, further reinforce anti-immigration sentiments. The potential presence of this 'ripple effect' is worth investigating in future research.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Replication code attached

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Online Appendix. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2022.102275.

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