

# The Effect of Far Right Parties on the Location Choice of Immigrants: Evidence from Lega Nord Mayors \*

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*Existing evidence suggests that the presence of immigrants has a substantial effect on the political views of the electorate, generating an advantage to parties with anti-immigration or nationalist platforms. This paper aims at exploring a closely related issue: we study whether immigrant location decisions are sensitive to the political leaning of local government. We construct a dataset of mayoral elections in Italy for the years 2002-2014, and calculate the effect of electing a mayor belonging to, or supported by, the anti-immigration party Lega Nord. To identify this relationship we focus on mayors who have been elected with narrow margins of victory in a regression discontinuity framework. We demonstrate a strong effect of electing a Lega Nord mayor in discouraging immigrants to move into the municipality from other Italian municipalities. This effect appears to result from a mixture of existing and new immigrant location decisions.*

*Keywords: Immigration; Geographical Mobility; Voting Behavior; Political economy; Regression Discontinuity Design.*

*JEL Classification: J15; J61; D72;*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of parties where immigration is a core platform is one of the pervasive features of the recent political landscape. Potential explanations for this development are numerous. For instance, there is a debate over the extent to which they reflect economic or rather broader social factors (Hatton, 2016). One particular focus is whether the presence of immigrants in a given area influences political views of the electorate. A recent literature suggests that this is the case, with a positive relationship between the proportion of immigrants in a given area and the receipt of votes by anti-immigration parties (see for instance Otto and Steinhardt, 2014; Barone et al, 2016; Sekeris and Vasilakis, 2016). More generally, it has been demonstrated that immigrant inflows lead to increases in anti-immigrant attitudes in a given location (Halla et al, 2012).

The mechanism explored in this literature is how immigrant inflows shape the attitudes and voting patterns of natives, for instance their tendency to vote for right wing parties with anti-immigration platforms. One of the stated aims of these parties is to either legally restrict entry of immigrants or to deter them in other ways. This leads naturally to an alternative question, does the presence of anti-immigration parties influence the location decisions of migrants and/or ethnic minority groups? The previous literature treats this as a nuisance factor to be controlled for. For instance, a number of papers use the historical location of migrant networks as a source of exogenous variation in an attempt to hold immigrant sorting constant (Halla et al 2012; Otto and Steinhardt, 2014; Barone et al, 2016). While recently Dustman et al (2016) relies on the randomisation of the location of new immigrants in Denmark. We adopt an alternative approach to the existing literature and examine this related, important, but less explored question.

We focus on the case of municipal elections in Northern Italy. This region has seen the ascent of a party with a core anti-immigration political platform, Lega Nord (the ‘Northern League’). We construct a dataset of municipal mayoral elections in Italy for the years 2002-2014. Our chief interest is in how anti-immigrant feeling and the ascent of anti-immigrant political parties influences immigrant location decisions. Our approach to disentangling the effect of immigration and local anti-immigrant feeling is to focus on the effect of electing a mayor belonging to or supported by the anti-immigration party Lega Nord on the location decisions of immigrants. We focus on narrow points of comparison between municipalities in a Regression Discontinuity Design (RDD) framework. By comparing municipalities where Lega Nord mayors won or lost by small margins of victory we argue that we uncover credibly causal effects of anti-immigrants parties on migrant location decisions.

To summarise our results, we find that the election of a Lega Nord mayor leads to a reduction in immigrant numbers in the municipality. This appears to be driven by a reduction in inflows into these municipalities. This effect is generated by a mixture of immigrants already resident in Italy and newly registered immigrants.

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