

## ARTICLE

# Geographies of discontent: Public service deprivation and the rise of the far right in Italy

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## Abstract

Electoral support for far-right parties is often linked to geographies of discontent. We argue that public service deprivation, defined as reduced access to public services, plays an important role in explaining these patterns. By exploiting an Italian reform that reduced access to public services in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 residents, we show that far-right support in national elections increased in municipalities affected by the reform compared to unaffected ones. We use geo-coded individual-level survey data and party rhetoric data to explore the mechanisms underlying this result. Our findings suggest that concerns about immigration are exacerbated by the reform, and that far-right parties increasingly linked public services to immigration in their rhetoric after the reform. These demand and supply dynamics help us understand how public service deprivation shapes geographic patterns in far-right support.

Far-right parties and candidates have gained significant vote shares and representation in many countries in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Studies explaining the rise of the far right stress two sets of factors—(1) grievances stemming from exposure to globalization, trade shocks, or changing labor markets (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Bacchini & Sattler, 2024; Bolet, 2020; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Dehdari, 2022; Gingrich, 2019; Walter, 2021); and (2) grievances related to migration shocks or demographic shifts (Dancygier & Laitin, 2014; Dancygier et al., 2024; Dinas et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2019, 2020; Schaub et al., 2021)—or the interaction between the

two (Ballard-Rosa et al., 2021; Bolet, 2021; Gidron & Hall, 2020). Much less attention has been paid to people's experiences with public service provision (cf. Nyholt, 2023; Stroppe, 2023).

This lack of scholarly attention is surprising. Prior research suggests that ordinary people believe that access to public services is crucial to their lives (Grossman & Slough, 2022; Vogler, 2023). Public safety, infrastructure, education, and health care are some of the most fundamental services provided by the state, and have been shown to be important anchors of people's electoral choices (Golden & Min, 2013). Since public services are financed through taxes and accessible to virtually all residents, it is one of the most direct ways in which people interact with the state and learn about how it spends their taxes (Dowding & John, 2012; Golden & Min, 2013; Grossman & Slough, 2022; Hager & Hilbig, 2024; Hern, 2019). Reductions in access likely generate discontent about the way the state is taking care of one's community, which in turn

<sup>1</sup> The term far-right is an umbrella concept that includes populist radical right and extreme right parties that combine anti-immigration, nationalist and anti-elite rhetoric (Pirro, 2022).

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might increase support for challenger parties (Bolet, 2021; Colombo & Dinas, 2023; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Patana, 2021; Zibblatt et al., 2023).

Building on these insights, we argue that exposure to a reduction in access to public services (henceforth, “public service deprivation”) generates grievances that make affected communities more likely to support far-right parties. This, we suggest, is due to a combination of demand- and supply-side factors. When it comes to the demand side, public service deprivation triggers grievances about one’s community not receiving a “fair” share of public resources (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018; Patana, 2021), and raises concerns about immigrants who are viewed as “less deserving” of public resources either because they are perceived to have joined the national community relatively recently, or to use more public resources than they contribute through taxes (Alesina et al., 2021; Cavallé & Ferwerda, 2023; Dancygier, 2010). When it comes to the supply side, political parties will aim to strategically address these grievances through their messaging (Ahlquist et al., 2020; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Due to the low degree of excludability of public services—that is, the difficulty of limiting access to only certain groups of the resident population—pledges to completely exclude immigrants from the national territory become particularly appealing to those affected by public service deprivation. As a result, the messages of far-right parties linking public services to immigration by advocating that public resources should benefit more “deserving natives” and that immigration should be reduced by closing borders (e.g., Mudde, 2019; Wimmer, 1997) will resonate more in communities affected by public service deprivation compared to unaffected ones. At the same time, the policy solutions of pro-redistribution parties advocating more spending on public services are likely to be less attractive, as large parts of the electorate oppose increases in taxes (Ballard-Rosa et al., 2017; Barnes et al., 2022) or increases in public debt, especially in times of increased market liberalization and fiscal prudence (e.g., Colantone & Stanig, 2019; Hellwig, 2014).

We empirically examine our argument by presenting evidence from Italy—an ideal test case because far-right parties have enjoyed a substantial rise in electoral support and public service deprivation varies substantially within it. We exploit a recent policy reform to examine the electoral consequences of public service deprivation. Based on a 2010 national reform that reduced access to public services in some Italian municipalities, we employ a difference-in-differences (DID) design to explore the relationship between public service deprivation and far-right support. In line with our argument, we show that support for far-right parties in national elections increased in municipalities affected by the reform compared to unaffected ones. This result is robust to specifications that take

into account differences in observable characteristics between treated and control municipalities through matching and synthetic DID (SDID). We explore the mechanisms underlying this relationship by examining geo-coded individual-level survey data and party rhetoric. Our findings suggest that exposure to public service deprivation generated the demand for the messages of the far-right: In municipalities affected by the reform, displayed concerns about immigration were higher than in unaffected ones, and far-right parties’ messaging increasingly linked public services to immigration in the aftermath of the reform. The combination of demand for, and supply of, far-right messages helps explain how public service deprivation shapes geographic patterns in far-right support.

We rule out three alternative mechanisms and expectations. First, we address the possibility that the reform increased far-right support by fueling anti-incumbent and anti-establishment sentiment. The evidence suggests that public service deprivation is not consistently linked to a higher anti-incumbent vote share or a decrease in turnout; nor did it boost distrust in politicians. Second, we investigate whether the increase in far-right support is driven by concerns about reduced local policy autonomy in the historical strongholds of the regionalist far-right party Lega (Nord). We find no evidence that exposure to the reform generated more far-right support in the North of Italy. Third, we examine the alternative expectation that public service deprivation increased support for public spending and find that if anything, deprivation *reduced* support for pro-redistribution parties. Nor do we find that public service deprivation made residents of affected municipalities more likely to classify themselves as economically left-wing. In fact, our evidence suggests the opposite. Finally, additional robustness checks account for the economic downturn and fiscal tightening associated with the 2008 financial crisis.

Our findings make three important contributions to the literature. First, they help us better understand the geographic concentration of far-right support. While such support is generally higher in rural areas, prior research has also identified substantial backing in urban areas (e.g., Hartevelde et al., 2022; Rydgren & Ruth, 2013). Our findings suggest that public service deprivation helps explain far-right support in both settings.

Second, our evidence advances research on the electoral consequences of public service provision. Prior work has mostly focused on low- and middle-income countries and found that a lack of public service provision may not necessarily translate into political dissatisfaction (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018; Bland et al., 2023; Hern, 2019; Harding & Stasavage, 2014). Our evidence from a high-income country with traditionally high levels of access to public services

shows that public service deprivation has important electoral consequences.

Finally, our results inform the literature on why pro-redistribution parties may not necessarily gain from a reduction in access to public services (e.g., Alesina et al., 2013; Giger & Nelson, 2011). While supply-side explanations highlight that parties raise concerns about noneconomic issues and cultural values to distract voters from hardship or unpopular policy measures (Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Huber & Stanig, 2011; Shayo, 2009; Tavits & Potter, 2015), our findings suggest that experiences with public service deprivation, in combination with elite rhetoric, may increase the demand for far-right messages.

## THEORY

An abundance of research has demonstrated that in virtually all countries, public service provision is indispensable for maintaining contemporary living standards (e.g., Anand & Ravallion, 1993; Ansell & Lindvall, 2020; Baum & Lake, 2003; Pepinsky et al., 2017; Vogler, 2019), and that ordinary people view access to such services as crucial to their quality of life (Grossman & Slough, 2022; Vogler, 2023). Given their importance, the political determinants and consequences of public services—defined as goods and services that are (1) supplied by the state and (2) both formally and factually accessible to virtually all people living in that state—are some of the most studied topics in the social sciences (Golden & Min, 2013; Grossman & Slough, 2022).

An important strand of research has focused on the electoral rewards that incumbents receive from providing public services; work in this area has generated conflicting evidence almost exclusively from developing countries (Adiguzel et al., 2023; De Kadt & Lieberman, 2020; Harding & Stasavage, 2014; Harding, 2015; Imai et al., 2020). With the exception of a small number of studies on geographic inequalities in public service provision (Nyholt, 2023; Stroppe, 2023), surprisingly little attention has been paid to whether (and how) access to public services affects citizens' programmatic vote choices, especially where access has historically been high. While the electoral consequences of reduced access or congestion of particular types of social benefits, such as public housing or social security transfers, have been widely considered (Baccini & Sattler, 2024; Cavaillé & Ferwerda, 2023; Dancygier, 2010; Fetzer, 2019; Giger & Nelson, 2011), the consequences of reducing access to basic public services that are formally and factually accessible to all residents are not clear. Our study seeks to help close this gap in the literature by exploring the electoral consequences of public service deprivation—defined as reduced access to public service provision.

Based on previous findings, we assume that citizens prefer high levels of access to public service provision because they view this as crucial for maintaining their quality of life (Grossman & Slough, 2022; Vogler, 2023). Indeed, public service delivery is one of the most important points of contact between citizens and the state (Dowding & John, 2012; Golden & Min, 2013; Grossman & Slough, 2022; Hern, 2019), and access to public services ratchets up people's expectations that the state will be responsive to their needs (De Kadt & Lieberman, 2020; Vogler, 2023). Citizens also evaluate how their tax money is being spent and how invested the state is in their communities based on service provision (Hacker et al., 2002; Mettler & Soss, 2004). Even less politically sophisticated voters should be able to link access to public services to choices at the ballot box (Dowding & John, 2012; Hern, 2019). While prior research suggests that it might not always be straightforward to correctly attribute responsibility for access to public services (De Benedictis-Kessner, 2018; Harding, 2015; Harding & Stasavage, 2014), experiencing public service deprivation should make at least some voters inclined to support certain policy solutions offered by parties.

We argue that reduced access to public services generate grievances—that is, “feelings of dissatisfaction with important aspects of life” (Klandermans et al., 2001, p. 42)—in affected communities. When citizens are used to high levels of public service provision, such as is the case in Western Europe, public service deprivation may trigger concerns about one's community not receiving its “fair share of public resources” and “political elites not caring” about one's livelihood (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018; Patana, 2021). The grievances that exposure to public service deprivation generates lead affected communities to demand policy solutions to solve them at the ballot box (Bonikowski, 2017). Political parties will likely strategically position themselves to address these grievances (Ahlquist et al., 2020; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). Exposure to public service deprivation, we argue, makes affected communities more likely to support far-right policies due to a combination of demand and supply dynamics.

On the supply side, pro-redistribution and far-right parties are likely to provide different solutions to public service deprivation. Pro-redistribution parties are generally associated with policies aimed at providing universally accessible public services, such as health care, education, and public transport, through more state intervention (Benedetto et al., 2020). Given these ideological constraints, pro-redistribution parties will likely advocate increased public service spending to reverse public service deprivation. As such, these parties seek to deliver universal services across the electorate, expressing their commitment to promote social inclusion (Iversen & Soskice, 2006; Lupu & Pon-

tusson, 2011; Wiedemann, 2022). By contrast, far-right parties are likely to link public service deprivation to their ideological core that combines anti-immigration and anti-establishment sentiment (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020; Mudde, 2019). They do so by exploiting misconceptions about the overutilization of services by immigrants (Alesina et al., 2023; Auerbach & Oreopoulos, 1999) and fears among natives about the public finance burden of immigration (Facchini & Mayda, 2009). By linking public services and immigration, far-right parties provide a policy response aimed at restoring access to public services by reallocating public spending away from “undeserving migrants” toward “deserving communities” (Schumacher & Van Kersbergen, 2016), and reducing the number of immigrants in the country to reduce the “fiscal burden of immigration” (Cavaillé & Van Der Straeten, 2023). Research suggests that pro-redistribution parties are much more constrained in advocating this type of policy solution as taking tougher stances on immigration risks alienating key electoral groups, such as young progressives, middle-class voters, and those with a migration background (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2019; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015).

Turning to the demand side, we argue that far-right parties are more likely to benefit from public service deprivation due to a combination of push factors that make the messages of pro-redistribution parties less attractive, and pull factors that increase the appeal of far-right parties’ anti-immigration messages. We identify two push factors. First, the spending pledges of pro-redistribution parties, to be financed through higher taxes, increased public borrowing, or a combination of both, are likely to meet resistance among considerable number of voters. Not only does research suggest that a considerable share of the electorate is opposed to increases in taxes (Ballard-Rosa et al., 2017; Barnes et al., 2022) or public debt (Bansak et al., 2021), spending pledges might also lack credibility in times of increased market liberalization and fiscal tightening, which have characterized many advanced industrial economies over the last two decades (e.g., Colantone & Stanig, 2019; Hellwig, 2014). Second, public spending pledges by pro-redistribution parties are usually framed to benefit all those that are worse off. Yet, the experience with public service deprivation, especially in contexts where access to such services has historically been high, likely affects a broader group of voters, who might not necessarily identify themselves as the most disadvantaged group in society. As a result, experiences with public service deprivation likely increase people’s uncertainty about the extent to which general increases in public spending will in fact benefit “their communities” (Holland, 2018).

We also identify two pull factors that increase the attractiveness of far-right parties’ pledges to address public service deprivation through reducing immi-

gration. First, research has routinely demonstrated that in-group versus out-group and zero-sum thinking rather than universalist and other-regarding concerns dominate when access to public resources is scarce (Brewer & Caporael, 2006; Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Chinnoy et al., 2023; Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Tajfel, 1982). Against this backdrop, public service deprivation is likely to make the question of what is a “fair” distribution of public resources salient, thereby generating hostility toward people who are perceived as “undeserving” either because they are perceived to use more public resources than they contribute through taxes (henceforth, net-users), or because they are perceived to be relative “newcomers” to the national community (Alesina et al., 2021; Cavaillé & Ferwerda, 2023; Dancygier, 2010). Second, public services are generally characterized by a low degree of excludability. Put differently, it is hard to exclude certain groups of the resident population from accessing public services. Even when requirements to access to public services might exist—as it is sometimes the case with health care and schooling—beliefs that fraud is relatively common are prevalent (Cavaillé, 2023). This might make pledges to completely exclude parts of the perceived net-users from the national territory particularly appealing. While many groups might be portrayed as net-users, immigrants are a relatively easy group to portray as an out-group, and justify their exclusion from the national community. Some of these reasons include the following (for an overview, see Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014): Immigrants are perceived as “newer” additions to a national community than natives, they might be perceived as not completely sharing features of a country’s national identity (due to linguistic, religious, or other differences), and their right to live in a country might be related to some transitory status or requirements (e.g., being employed, being deemed a refugee, not being away from the national territory for more than a specified amount of time). As a consequence, large segments of voters affected by public service deprivation might find the messages of far-right parties appealing because they make the question of who should be cared for by the state salient, while claiming that public services should benefit an “ethnically homogeneous national community” (Wimmer, 1997) and borders should be closed to reduce the “fiscal burden of immigration” (Cavaillé & Van Der Straeten, 2023).

Taken together, these pull and push factors lead us to formulate the following expectation about the electoral consequences of exposure to public service deprivation, which we study in the context of a reform in Italy: We expect the reform to increase support for far-right parties compared to unaffected municipalities and that this comes at the expense of support for pro-redistribution parties. In addition, we expect this result to be likely due to the combination of

demand- and supply-side factors: In affected municipalities, concerns about immigration are expected to be higher than in unaffected ones, and far-right parties increasingly link public services to immigration in the aftermath of the reform.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### The 2010 reform of municipal public service provision

Examining the relationship between public service deprivation and far-right support is far from straightforward. While access to public services likely affects people's electoral choices, elected politicians also shape access to public services, which creates issues of reverse causality. Furthermore, the demographic composition of municipalities influences demand for and supply of public service provision; but demographic composition also correlates with voting choices, which generates omitted variable bias concerns. We aim to overcome these difficulties by exploiting a reform in Italy from 2010 that reduced access to public services in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 residents. Our approach follows recent work that exploits changes in the municipal structure to investigate contextual effects on political behavior (see Harjunen et al., 2021; Koch & Rochat, 2017; Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011). These reforms were part of a general effort by national governments across Europe in the last decade to reduce municipal fragmentation and administrative burdens and inefficiencies (see Bolgherini et al., 2018b; Swianiewicz et al., 2022).

Municipalities (*comuni*) constitute the lowest tier of Italian local government. Municipal governments manage around 10% of public expenditures and are responsible for a plethora of public services, such as local urban planning; roads and transport; local historical and environmental resources; the collection and disposal of waste; the collection and distribution of water and energy sources; services for economic development and commercial distribution; social, educational, vocational training, and other urban services; and administrative police (Carreri, 2021). Before the 2010 reform, Italy had 8,101 municipalities with an average population of 7,455 (median = 2,514).

During the 1990s and 2000s, the Italian government introduced multiple legislative initiatives designed to reduce municipal fragmentation through mergers and other forms of intermunicipal governance. The 2008 financial crisis and the rise of austerity-related cuts to administrative budgets brought a new impetus to the process of municipal integration (Bolgherini et al., 2018b). In 2010, a right-wing government led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi introduced the compulsory joint management (*gestione associata obbligatoria*)

of basic public services (Law no. 78/2010). The law required municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (or “mountain municipalities” with fewer than 3,000 residents)<sup>2</sup> to jointly manage 10 areas of public service (“fundamental functions”): (i) local administration, financial management, and accounting; (ii) general interest public services, including municipal public transport services; (iii) real estate registry; (iv) urban planning and municipal construction; (v) civil protection and first aid; (vi) the collection and disposal of waste and the collection of related taxes; (vii) social services; (viii) school construction and management; (ix) municipal police and local administrative police; and (x) electoral, registry, and statistical services, including the maintenance of civil status and population registers. It required joint management of at least three of these services by January 1, 2013, at least three other services by September 30, 2014, and all remaining services in the list by December 31, 2014.

Municipalities could choose to comply with the law by merging (uniting their municipal institutions in a single administrative entity), forming a union (creating an intermunicipal government tasked with organizing shared public service provision), or stipulating a convention (a contract regulating the joint provision of public services for at least 3 years subject to efficacy audits). The reform affected 65% of Italian municipalities (see Figure 1). Between 2010 and 2018, 200 (2.51%) of the affected municipalities in our data set merged, 1,562 (19.61%) formed a new union, and the rest adopted a convention.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of which governance institution municipalities adopted, the reform's objectives in terms of jointly delivering the provision of services were the same. Although the 2010 reform was designed to enhance the efficiency of public service provision, it was controversial for three reasons (Bolgherini et al., 2018a, 2018b; Bolgherini & Lippi, 2016). First, its uniform application across regions with different administrative traditions and governance practices was perceived as unreasonable. Second, the population threshold often hindered collaborative efforts by failing to account for the geographical proximity of smaller municipalities to larger unaffected counterparts. Lastly, the consolidation of 10 basic services under joint management was viewed as economically and organizationally dysfunctional. The National Association of Italian Municipalities advocated a more pragmatic approach—the simultaneous management of at least three fundamental functions (Bolgherini et al., 2018a). These multifaceted challenges associated with the reform's implementation highlight the importance of scrutinizing its impact on

<sup>2</sup> The definition of “mountain municipalities” can be found in Online Appendix C.

<sup>3</sup> Municipal mergers and unions were already possible before the reform but were rare (see Online Appendix C for more details).



**FIGURE 1** Municipalities affected by the reform.  
*Note:* Municipalities affected by the reform in black.  
*Source:* Spatial data are sourced from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT).

public service provision.<sup>4</sup> In later sections, we provide evidence showing that exposure to the reform reduced access to public services in affected municipalities.

## Data

We construct a rich data set that allows us to study the effects of the 2010 reform on (1) municipal-level electoral returns between 2000 and 2020 using data from the Ministry of the Interior's Historical Electoral Archive, (2) municipal-level access to public services based on official monitoring of the Ministry for the Economy and Finance released through the Open Civitas data set (2010 and 2013), and (3) individual-level political attitudes by linking municipality identifiers to individual-level data representative of the Italian population from two panel surveys conducted before (2001 to 2006) and after the reform (2011 to 2013) by the Italian National Election Studies (ITANES). In a last step (4), we examine changes in party rhetoric between 2000 and 2020 using data from the Manifesto Project Database (MPD) (Lehmann et al., 2023; Volkens et al., 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Online Appendix C provides additional information on the reform implementation. For a comprehensive discussion of its ramifications, see Bolgherini et al. (2018a).

Our key dependent variable is municipal-level vote shares for far-right parties, but we also report the results for vote shares for pro-redistribution parties, incumbent parties, and turnout.<sup>5</sup> For example, Lega (Nord) and Fratelli d'Italia are classified as far-right parties, Partito Democratico and Movimento 5 Stelle<sup>6</sup> as pro-distribution parties, and Forza Italia as the incumbent party that introduced the reform.<sup>7</sup> Online Appendix B provides detailed information on the classification of different political parties across election years and uses Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015; Jolly et al., 2022) data to validate our coding.

We merged our data on municipal-level electoral returns, municipal-level access to public services, and individual-level political attitudes with information about municipality characteristics. We draw information on municipality mergers and unions from 1968 to 2018 from the Interior Ministry's Unified Territorial System. We collect data on mountain municipalities from lists provided by regional governments and other publicly available sources. We rely on data from the Italian National Institute of Statistics to capture the municipalities' social, economic, and demographic characteristics before the reform. Online Appendix Tables A.1, M.1, and P.1 list all the variables we use in our analyses and report descriptive statistics.

To build a time-consistent panel, we maintain the municipal structure associated with the last election before the reform (2008). Since electoral records are collected at the municipal level, vote shares for municipalities that fused after 2008 (112 treated and 100 control units) take the value of the municipal aggregation. Online Appendix A provides further details on how we calculate vote shares and other municipal characteristics for merging municipalities. We exclude from the sample 121 municipalities due to missing data. The final sample includes 7,964 municipalities.

## Empirical strategy

We compare the results of national elections held before and after the reform in a DID design. We thus construct a counterfactual change in electoral outcomes in elections held before and after the reform for affected municipalities (above the threshold) using the change in electoral outcomes in unaffected municipalities (below the threshold).

Our main model examines how the reform affected the share of valid votes for different political blocs

<sup>5</sup> In Online Appendix B, we further discuss why focusing on national elections rather than municipal election is more appropriate for this case.

<sup>6</sup> Online Appendix B further discusses the classification of Movimento 5 Stelle as pro-redistribution party. Online Appendix Figure B.1 shows how the parties we classify as far-right and pro-redistribution hold distinct views on economic redistribution and immigration policy.

<sup>7</sup> From 2009 onwards, Berlusconi's party was named Popolo della Libertà, which combined the former Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale.

and turnout in national elections for the lower chamber (*Camera dei Deputati*). We estimate the following two-way fixed effects (TWFE) equation:

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta X_{i,t} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{i,t}, \quad (1)$$

where

- $Y_{i,t}$  measures one of the above-mentioned electoral outcomes for municipality  $i \in \mathcal{I}$  in election year  $t \in \mathcal{T} := \{2001, 2006, 2008, 2013, 2018\}$ ;
- $X_{i,t} := \mathbb{1}_{\mathcal{I}_{ref} \times \mathcal{T}_{post}}(i, t)$ , with (i)  $\mathcal{I}_{ref} \subset \mathcal{I}$  denoting the subset of municipalities affected by the reform and (ii)  $\mathcal{T}_{post} := \{2013, 2018\}$ , that is,  $\mathcal{T}_{post}$  denoting the subset of post-reform election years;
- $\mu_i$  and  $\lambda_t$  are municipality- and year-specific intercepts, respectively;
- $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  is an error term, which we allow to be correlated within individual municipalities across years.

A key assumption for the validity of the DID strategy is that if the affected municipalities had not been forced to share services, they would have experienced the same trajectory in electoral outcomes as unaffected municipalities. We test the plausibility of this assumption by inspecting pretreatment trends in affected and unaffected municipalities using an event-study variant of Equation (1). Results reported in Figure 2 illustrate that, among treated and untreated mountain municipalities (i.e., below and above the 3,000-inhabitant threshold for this municipality group, respectively), pre-trends in vote shares for far-right parties were statistically indistinguishable, which lends credibility to the parallel-trends assumption. However, treated non-mountain municipalities (i.e., those with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants) voted relatively *less* for far-right parties before the reform compared to untreated non-mountain municipalities (i.e., more than 5,000 inhabitants). We therefore employ two additional strategies to obtain an alternative counterfactual.

First, we estimate Equation (1) using matching to obtain a set of control units that is balanced relative to the treatment group on observable pretreatment characteristics (population size, average income, share of college graduates, share of the population over 65, share of the population under 15, share of foreigners, share of females, maximum altitude). We measure the similarity between municipalities using Mahalanobis distance and employ a nearest-neighbor procedure to find a matching control municipality for each treated municipality. In Online Appendix D, we provide additional details on this procedure and demonstrate that it successfully reduces covariate unbalance between treated and untreated municipalities. In Online Appendix F, we show that this matched-

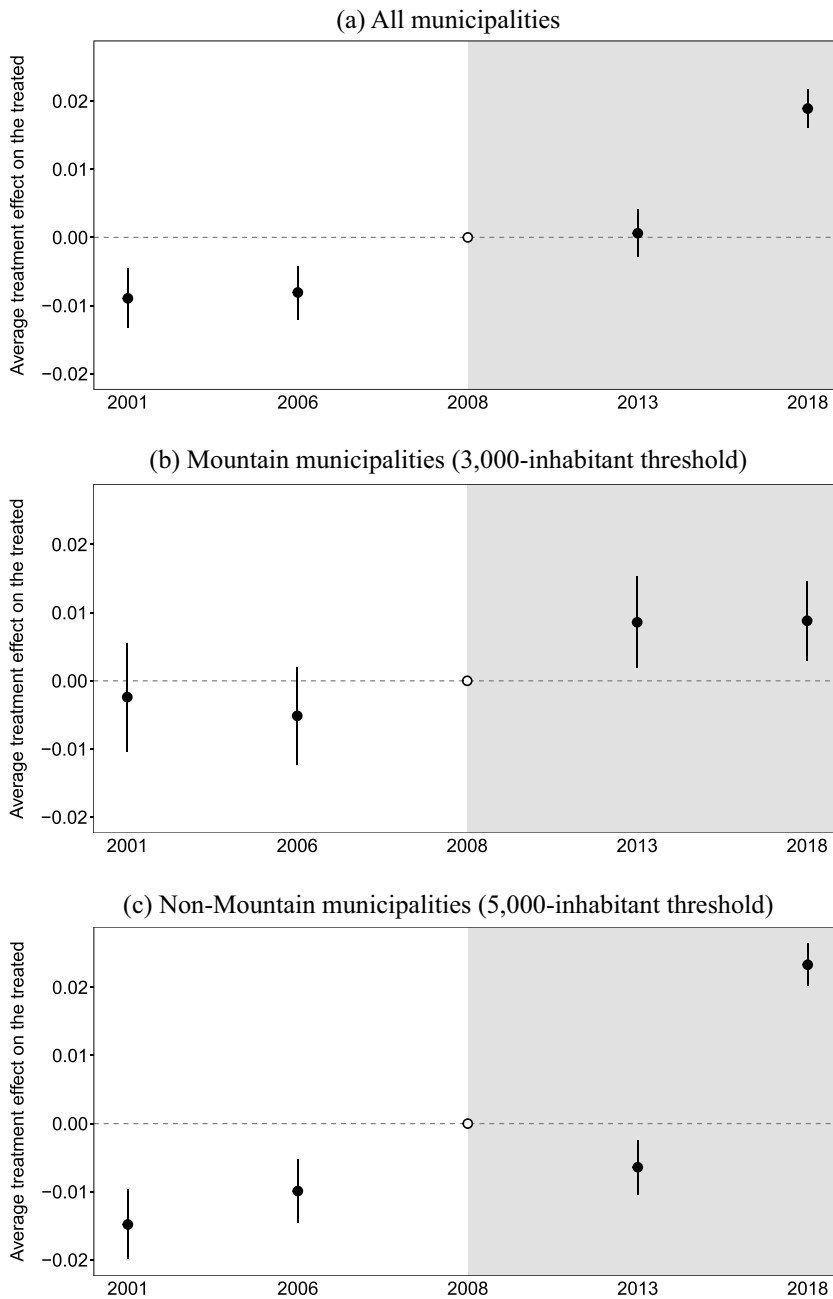
TWFE (MTWFE) specification significantly reduces the divergence in trends of far-right vote shares between control and treated municipalities, which adds credibility to the parallel-trends assumption. In Online Appendix H, we discuss an alternative strategy based on a combination of DID and regression discontinuity design (Eggers et al., 2018). Second, we estimate the reform's effect on electoral outcomes using an SDID estimator (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021). This strategy limits our ability to explore the dynamic and heterogeneous effects of the reform, but adds credibility to our main estimates by using pretreatment electoral outcomes to construct a plausible counterfactual.

Next, we test whether the reform increased public service deprivation in affected municipalities. We estimate variants of Equation (1) using several indicators related to key public services (local police, garbage collection, and public registries) that were affected by the reform as the dependent variable. The variables we are interested in were collected in the year of the reform's introduction (2010) and the first deadline year for its implementation (2013), which allows us to confirm that the reform reduced access to public service provision.<sup>8</sup> Online Appendix M provides further details of these measures.

Finally, we consider the assumption that no other relevant treatment selectively affected municipalities exposed to the 2010 reform during the study period. One may wonder whether the link between public service deprivation and support for far-right parties, as well as the demand mechanism related to anti-immigrant attitudes, may be all driven by economic downturn and fiscal tightening in the post-2008 period. In Online Appendix G, we discuss the 2008 financial crisis and the associated economic downturn. Heterogeneous treatment effect specifications (Online Appendix Table G.1) show that the estimated effect is not driven by municipalities affected by economic downturn between the beginning of the financial crisis (2008) and the introduction of the reform (2010). In Online Appendix E, we discuss the Domestic Stability Pact (DSP) reform, which, between 2013 and 2015, extended budgetary constraints to municipalities with 1,000–5,000 residents. The DSP constituted a form of fiscal tightening that did not necessarily imply a reduction in public services (Daniele & Giommoni, 2022). Additional results (Online Appendix Table E.1) suggest that the DSP reform unlikely explains our results.

After examining the effect of the 2010 reform, we explore the mechanisms underlying the link between public service deprivation and far-right support. We expect that in affected municipalities, concerns about immigration will be greater than in unaffected ones,

<sup>8</sup> A change in the variable definition prevents us from extending our analysis.



**FIGURE 2** Unmatched TWFE event study on far-right vote share. *Note:* The figures show point estimates and 95% confidence intervals of the reform effect on vote share for far-right. The unit of analysis is municipalities.

and that far-right parties will tend to highlight public services more in their messaging and link it to immigration more after the reform compared to other parties. To examine these conjectures, we present evidence from two analyses. First, we rely on questions from two waves (2001 and 2011) of the ITANES panel surveys that probe individuals' immigration concerns. Since the questions were asked in two different panel surveys, we cannot estimate changes *within* individuals, but we can approximate the effect of exposure to the reform holding individual and municipal characteristics constant. Online Appendix P presents the specification we use. In a second analysis, we quantitatively and qualitatively examine party rhetoric on

public services, and show that far-right parties not only stressed public service provision more in their rhetoric, but also consistently related it to immigration after the reform.

## RESULTS

### Effects on election outcomes

Table 1 summarizes the main results of the electoral DID analysis, reporting average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) estimates of Equation (1) for relevant political blocs and turnout. The estimate in column



**TABLE 1** Unmatched TWFE estimates on electoral results.

	Far-right	Pro-redistribution	Incumbent	Turnout
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Estimate	.015** (.001)	−.022** (.002)	.011** (.001)	.002 (.002)
Estimator	TWFE	TWFE	TWFE	TWFE
DV mean	.176	.395	.292	.789
DV SD	.116	.163	.131	.139
Observations	39,820	39,820	39,820	39,816
Municipalities	7,964	7,964	7,964	7,964
Treated units	5,174	5,174	5,174	5,174

Note: Dependent variable is vote share for parties belonging to different families. The unit of analysis is municipalities. “Estimate” refers to the coefficients of the treatment dummy. Turnout estimates discard four control observations due to missing values. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the municipality level.

Abbreviations: TWFE, two-way fixed-effects; DV, dependent variable; SD, standard deviation.

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

1 indicates that exposure to the reform generated a 1.5 percentage point increase in votes cast for far-right parties, which is statistically significant. This result is substantively important as it increases not only far-right parties’ parliamentary representation and legislative influence (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2017; Pasquino, 2019), but also their coalition negotiating power within the right-wing political bloc (Giannetti & Laver, 2001). Column 2 also indicates that the reform *decreased* support for pro-redistribution parties by 2.2 percentage points. These results are in line with our theoretical conjectures that public service deprivation increases support for far-right, but not for pro-redistribution parties.

In column 3, we consider the reform’s effects on incumbent vote shares. The reform was decided and implemented by a right-wing coalition led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. In line with retrospective voting models, which suggest that voters tend to punish the prime minister’s party for policy outcomes (Anderson, 2000; Lewis-Beck, 1997), Berlusconi’s party is classified as the incumbent party. While prior research on how public service provision influences incumbent vote shares has yielded conflicting results (null or negative, but never positive), our unmatched TWFE estimates indicate a positive effect. However, this result is close to zero using the MTWFE specification (Table 2). Table 1 provides evidence of a null effect on turnout (column 4). In later sections, we further discuss these complementary results.

## Dynamic effects and parallel trends

In Online Appendix F, we further assess the dynamic effects of exposure to the 2010 reform estimating the

unmatched TWFE event-study specification described above. The model estimates the impact of being a treated municipality in each election before and after 2010, taking 2008 as the reference. We first consider all municipalities jointly. Then, we estimate separate models for mountain municipalities (3,000-inhabitant threshold) and non-mountain municipalities (5,000-inhabitant threshold). Following standard practice, we test for parallel trends between the control and treatment groups during the pretreatment period by verifying that the pretreatment coefficients are not statistically different from 0 adopting the .05  $p$ -value threshold. Figure 2 reports the results of unmatched TWFE models.

The estimates reported in Figure 2 help us assess the plausibility of the parallel-trends assumption behind the unmatched TWFE estimates reported in Table 1. They highlight how this assumption is met only in the group of mountain municipalities (subject to the 3,000-inhabitant threshold). In this group (Figure 2b), far-right vote shares in treated municipalities were not significantly different from those in control municipalities before the 2010 reform. In the two subsequent elections, treated municipalities in this group display a .9 percentage point excess in vote share for the far-right, which is statistically significant.<sup>9</sup>

The results are less robust when we consider all municipalities (Figure 2a) or only non-mountain ones (Figure 2c). In both cases, the estimates indicate an excess far-right vote share (ATT = 1.9 and 2.3, respectively) in the 2018 election—the second election after the reform (gray area). However, treated municipalities appear to display less support for far-right parties compared to control municipalities during the pretreatment periods, and the effect is negative in the 2013 (post-treatment) election for the 5,000-inhabitant group. Mountain municipalities most likely follow closer parallel trends before the reform compared to other municipalities because they are more homogeneous in terms of population and altitude (see Online Appendix Tables D.2 and D.3).

The reform’s implementation was gradual: Municipalities were required to jointly manage at least three services by 2013, and the remaining services several years later. Smaller and isolated municipalities, such as mountain municipalities, likely felt the reduction in access to a small number of services (in this case three) immediately in 2013, while in larger and less isolated municipalities the consequences of the reform might have become clear only after access to all planned services was reduced. We interpret these results as

<sup>9</sup> While our objective is not to explain overall trends in far-right vote share in Italy, it is important to point out that between 2008 and 2013 the far-right lost electoral support in the country as a whole. This decline is less pronounced in mountain municipalities affected by the reform than in unaffected mountain municipalities, which explains the positive 2013 coefficient we report in Figure 2b.

**TABLE 2** MTWFE and SDID estimates on electoral results.

	Far-right		Pro-redistribution		National incumbent		Turnout	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Estimate	.004*	.014**	-.004	-.021**	-.003	.011**	-.002	-.005**
	(.002)	(.001)	(.003)	(.002)	(.003)	(.001)	(.003)	(.001)
Estimator	MTWFE	SDID	MTWFE	SDID	MTWFE	SDID	MTWFE	SDID
DV mean	.176	.176	.395	.395	.292	.292	.789	.789
DV SD	.116	.116	.163	.163	.131	.131	.139	.139
Observations	33,105	39,820	33,105	39,820	33,105	39,820	33,105	39,800
Municipalities	6,621	7,964	6,621	7,964	6,621	7,964	6,621	7,960
Treated units	5,174	5,174	5,174	5,174	5,174	5,174	5,174	5,174

*Note.* Dependent variable is vote share for parties belonging to different families. The unit of analysis is municipalities. “Estimate” refers to the coefficients of the treatment dummy. Turnout estimates discard four control units due to missing values. MTWFE estimates apply matching weights. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the municipality level. SDID standard errors apply the jackknife procedure proposed by Arkhangelsky et al. (2021).

Abbreviations: MTWFE, matched two-way fixed-effect; SDID, synthetic difference-in-differences; DV, dependent variable; SD, standard deviation.

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

indicating that exposure to the reform increases far-right support, but a strict causal interpretation may not be warranted given that the pre-trends of the control and treatment groups are different. To address these concerns, we provide alternative estimates based on the MTWFE and SDID approaches.

Table 2 reports estimates of the overall effect of the 2010 reform using these complementary estimation strategies. The MTWFE approach consistently reduces the gap in far-right support between treated and control municipalities returning single-year estimates that are not statistically different from zero (see event-study results in Online Appendix Table E.1 and the discussion in Online Appendix F).<sup>10</sup> Estimates of the overall effect on the far-right vote share based on this approach (column 1 of Table 2) specify a statistically significant excess vote share of .4 percentage points. The magnitude of these effects should be related to the magnitude of change in public service provision produced by the reform that we examine in the next section. Estimates for far-right parties using the SDID strategy (column 2), which relax the parallel-trends assumption by construction (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021), amount to an excess vote share of 1.4 percentage points, significant at the .01  $p$ -value threshold. Overall, these results indicate that the reform produced an excess of far-right vote shares in treated municipalities compared to control ones.

The results for the other political blocs using these alternative strategies are less consistent, which helps us evaluate the empirical applicability of alternative mechanisms and expectations. Columns 3 and 4 confirm that the 2010 reform did not increase (or decrease) support for pro-redistribution parties.

MTWFE estimates of the change in vote share for pro-redistribution parties as a consequence of exposure to the reform are negatively signed but not statistically significant at the standard .05 threshold. The statistically significant SDID estimate points to an electoral loss of 2.1 percentage points for pro-redistribution parties. The results for the incumbent reported in columns 5 and 6 are also inconsistent as we find that the reform had either no (MTWFE estimates) or a positive (SDID) effect on the incumbent’s vote share. Finally, columns 7 and 8 report no (MTWFE) or a negative (SDID) effect on turnout.

## Effects on public service provision

We provide evidence that the 2010 reform reduced access to public services in affected municipalities by examining its effects on several indicators of access to such services. We rely on the official indicators collected by the Italian government agency that monitored the restructuring of municipal public service provision. Our baseline indicator (*Delivery Against Standard Demand*) captures the percentage deviation in the level of services offered in the reference year in a municipality compared to municipalities with a similar population size.<sup>11</sup> Online Appendix M provides additional information on the calculation of the measure. The measure is designed to capture the extent to which the municipality was able to satisfy citizens’ demand for a service, accounting for the average access to the service provided in municipalities with similar characteristics.<sup>12</sup> We inspect the three key

<sup>10</sup> In Online Appendix Table I.1, we show that our main estimates are not driven by very small municipalities (with population below 500 [10% of the sample] and 1,000 [23% of the sample]).

<sup>11</sup> The indicator divides Italian municipalities into 11 population segments (e.g., < 500, 500–1,000).

<sup>12</sup> The data released through Open Civitas are official measures used by the Ministry of Economy and Finance for decision-making. The ministry provides

**TABLE 3** Estimates on public service access.

	Police		Registry		Garbage	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Estimate	-.290**	-.196**	-.149**	-.157*	-.062**	-.076*
	(.033)	(.047)	(.033)	(.080)	(.019)	(.036)
Estimator	TWFE	MTWFE	TWFE	MTWFE	TWFE	MTWFE
Observation	9,282	7,238	11,132	8,998	11,794	9,686
Municipalities	4,641	3,619	5,566	4,499	5,897	4,843
Treated units	2,547	2,547	3,354	3,354	3,719	3,719

*Note.* Dependent variables are indices measuring provision of different types of public services. The unit of analysis is municipalities. "Estimate" refers to the coefficient of the treatment dummy. MTWFE estimates apply matching weights. Standard errors (in parentheses) are clustered at the municipality level. Dependent variables are standardized as z-scores.

Abbreviations: TWFE, two-way fixed-effects; MTWFE, matched two-way fixed-effects.

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

services affected by the reform that are also covered by the Open Civitas data set—local police, public registries, and garbage collection.<sup>13</sup>

We examine the reform's effects on public service provision using our baseline TWFE specification and the complementary MTWFE strategy. In the MTWFE model, we apply the same weights used in the electoral estimates. Measures of public service provision are available for the year of the reform's introduction (2010) and the first deadline year for its implementation (2013). We therefore cannot rely on the complementary SDID estimator, which requires a longer pretreatment period. Our estimates are based on a smaller sample than the one used in the main analysis due to missing values on the measures of public service provision, which range from 26% to 42% of the sample.<sup>14</sup>

The estimated coefficients reported in Table 3 consistently indicate that the reform decreased public service provision in affected municipalities; the difference is statistically significant. The reform is associated with reductions of public service provision ranging from 20% to 7% of a standard deviation across different types of services. Such reductions in

access to these composite indicators but withholds the underlying raw data used to calculate them. While we acknowledge the inherent limitations associated with these data, the metrics we use represent the most comprehensive and pertinent source to evaluate the 2010 reform's effects on access to public services across Italian municipalities.

<sup>13</sup> The available indicators are based on the amount of various sanctions for local police, certificates issued by public registry offices, and waste sorting for garbage collection. We deal with outliers on the garbage collection measure by winsorizing the variable at the 97.5 percentile. In Online Appendix L, we list all the services surveyed by Open Civitas.

<sup>14</sup> In Online Appendix Table N.1, we test whether the reform affected a municipality's capacity to report public service indicators. The results suggest possible distortions on the public registry measure but do not provide evidence of any reporting bias in the local police or garbage collection measures. In Online Appendix Table O.1, we show that the main electoral results are robust against the exclusion of municipalities with missing values on the public service provision measures.

public service provision are commensurate with the magnitude of the electoral effects. The reform is associated with an increase in vote share for the far-right ranging between 1.5 and .4 percentage points after matching (Table 2), a result that remains precisely estimated and robust across different robustness checks (Online Appendix Tables I.1 and O.1). A back of the envelope calculation based on our most conservative estimates (MTWFE) suggests that a one standard deviation decrease in public service provision would increase electoral returns for far-right parties by about 5 (.4/.07) to 2 (.4/.2) percentage points.<sup>15</sup> In Online Appendix Table M.2, we replicate the analysis using a complementary indicator available in the Open Civitas data set (*Service Capacity Index*), a linear repositioning of the differential of the first measure (assessed on a 1–10 scale), and obtain robust results.

These findings support the idea that the 2010 reform reduced access to public service provision in affected municipalities. It is important to add one caveat here. Due to data limitations, we focus on the degree of access to public services, not necessarily the *quality* of those services. Moreover, there might be concerns that those who were affected by the reform turned to alternative private service providers (Dowding & John, 2008; Hern, 2019). However, private alternatives are not common or readily accessible in Italy;<sup>16</sup> even if we cannot entirely rule out this possibility, it would make it more difficult to find electoral consequences of public service deprivation.

## Mechanisms

We investigate the mechanisms underlying the relationship between public service deprivation and support for far-right parties. If such parties made electoral gains in communities affected by the 2010 reform because of their messages, we ought to find that voters in affected municipalities became more concerned about immigration than those in unaffected ones (we coin this the *demand mechanism*), and that far-right parties compared to other parties will highlight public services and increasingly link it to immigration in the aftermath of the reform (what we call it the *supply mechanism*).

<sup>15</sup> These calculations suggest that the link between public service provision and far-right voting is relatively strong, especially in light of other phenomena that are considered to affect far-right voting, such as import competition from China (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Dippel et al., 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Dorigatti et al. (2020) examine attempts to privatize certain services (elderly care, early childhood services, and kindergartens), and voters and trade unions strongly oppose market solutions in the provision of these services (Dorigatti et al., 2018).

**TABLE 4** Estimates on anti-immigration attitudes.

	Immigration concern scale		Culture and identity		Employment	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	-.114 (.095)	-.185 <sup>+</sup> (.108)	-.064 (.053)	-.104 <sup>+</sup> (.061)	-.064 (.055)	-.091 (.062)
Post	-.265** (.062)	-.301** (.062)	-.124** (.034)	-.142** (.034)	-.146** (.034)	-.161** (.034)
Treated × Post	.316* (.156)	.320* (.157)	.179* (.087)	.190* (.087)	.166 <sup>+</sup> (.088)	.157 <sup>+</sup> (.088)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Municipal controls		✓		✓		✓
Region fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	4,979	4,979	5,033	5,033	5,073	5,073

Note: Dependent variables are attitudes. “Post” refers to period after the reform. “Treated” refers to municipalities affected by the reform. Level of analysis is individual-level. Individual controls: age, gender, education, occupation. Municipal controls include altitude, share of population 65+, share of foreigners, share of females, share of college graduates, population, and average income. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## The demand mechanism: Concerns about immigration

To determine whether municipalities affected by the reform display greater immigration concerns compared to unaffected ones, we rely on two ITANES survey questions that asked respondents how much they agree that immigration is a danger to national identity and culture, and national employment, respectively (answers ranged from 1 [strongly disagree] to 4 [strongly agree]).<sup>17</sup> We combine answers to both questions into an additive Immigration Concern Scale that we use as our main outcome of interest. We estimate an ordinary least squares (OLS) models that includes a binary variable indicating whether the respondent lives in a municipality affected by the reform (*Treated*), a binary variable indicating if the survey response was collected after the 2010 reform (*Post*), and an interaction term between the two (*Treated* × *Post*). We add individual-level control variables (respondent’s age, gender, education, and profession); municipal-level control variables as in our matching procedure; and region fixed effects.<sup>18</sup> Table 4 reports the results.

The positive and statistically significant *Treated* × *Post* coefficients reported in columns 1 and 2 of Table 4 suggest that the reform had a positive effect on immigration concerns. While in municipalities unaffected by the reform, we see a decline in immigration concerns in the period we analyze (as suggested by the negative *Post* coefficients in same columns), in municipalities affected by the reform, such a decline

in immigration concerns is not observed. Assuming that municipalities affected by the reform would have followed the same pattern in immigration concerns as unaffected municipalities, these results can be interpreted as a positive effect of the reform on immigration concerns, offsetting the decline observed in unaffected municipalities. This result lends support for our hypothesis that exposure to public service deprivation is associated with concerns about immigration due to the combination of supply and demand factors. The single survey items in columns 3–6 indicate that immigration concerns relate more to culture and identity than to labor market competition (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014).<sup>19</sup> In a next step, we examine *how* far-right parties link public service deprivation to immigration concerns.

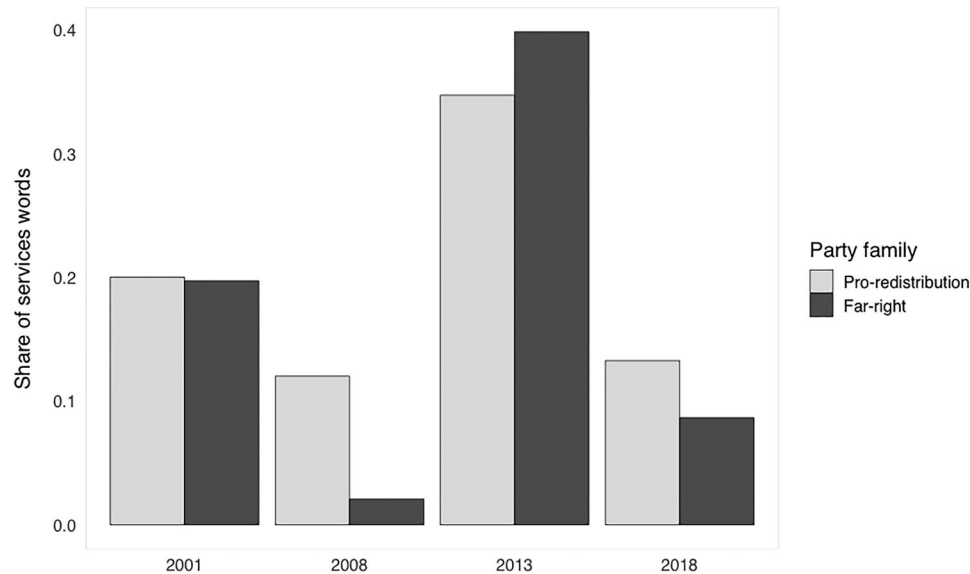
## The supply mechanism: Parties’ rhetoric on public services

We argue that the link between public service deprivation and far-right support is a combination of demand

<sup>19</sup> While we observe electoral behavior three times before the reform (in 2001, 2006, and 2008), we observe attitudes toward immigration only once before the reform (in 2001) and once after the reform (in 2011). This is a limitation of our survey analysis. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that, when considering the full sample, the effect of the reform on attitudes is observed earlier than the effect of the reform on voting behavior (see section “Dynamic Effects and Parallel Trends”). This difference might be explained by the fact that attitudes are more malleable than voting behavior. Because specific attitudes are more circumscribed than voting behavior, fewer considerations are necessary to change attitudes than voting choice. For this reason, voters might need to be exposed to situations (e.g., public service deprivation) and narratives (e.g., messages about immigration affecting public service provision) for a longer period of time to change their voting decision than to change their attitudes about a specific topic, such as immigration (Campbell et al., 1960; Zaller, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Online Appendix P contains the phrasing of each question.

<sup>18</sup> Online Appendix Table P.1 presents descriptive statistics for individual-level variables.



**FIGURE 3** Proportion of service-related words by elections and political blocs. *Note:* Y axis indicates the share of words in manifestos related to public services for each party family in each election year.

for and supply of far-right messages. To explore the role of supply, we first use data from MPD, which contains collected and annotated election manifestos. We quantify how frequently political parties from different blocs referred to public services in their manifestos in the elections around the 2010 reform using an original dictionary that captures keywords related to public services. Online Appendix R provides additional details on this procedure.

Figure 3 summarizes the main result of our dictionary analysis; it displays the proportion of public service-related words used in each election by far-right parties and pro-redistribution parties. The results reveal that while pro-redistribution parties used more public service-related words in their manifestos in elections before the reform, far-right parties used more after the reform. The overall proportion of service-related words spiked in 2013. While our analysis cannot adjudicate the causal role played by the 2010 reform in raising the salience of public service-related topics in 2013, the increase in the use of such words highlights how topics connected to public service provision became a highly relevant political issue by the time of the 2013 election.

In a second step, we conduct a qualitative analysis of party manifestos in the MPD corpus to test the plausibility of our argument that far-right parties link public service deprivation to immigration. Online Appendix Table R.1 reports manifesto excerpts from Lega, the main party in the far-right bloc during the reform years, that support this intuition. Examples of such excerpts include, “To say that services constitute a universal right could dangerously shorten a safety blanket – namely, that of the welfare state –

which already today is not guaranteed for those who have paid for it for an entire lifetime,” or slogans like, “Italians first in access to public services and social housing.”

In an effort to consider both more and less “scripted sources of political rhetoric” (Neiman et al., 2016), Online Appendix R complements sample sentences from party manifestos with a selection of tweets by official party (and party leaders’) accounts. Our sample of tweets confirms the pattern found in manifestos: Far-right leaders frame Italians as “[homeless people] living in campers while immigrants are hosted [by the Italian government] in hotels” or as “the real refugees” (Online Figure R.1), highlighting the perception that non-natives put a strain on public service provision. Our quantitative and qualitative analyses of party rhetoric suggest that after the reform, far-right parties paid more attention to public services and linked it to immigration concerns.

## ALTERNATIVE MECHANISMS AND EXPECTATIONS

We conduct three additional analyses to account for possible alternative mechanisms related to the results presented in Table 1. First, we explore the possibility that the increase in far-right support due to exposure to the 2010 reform is simply the result of heightened anti-establishment or anti-incumbent sentiment. While we presented and discussed incumbent support and turnout in Tables 1 and 2, here we go one step further using the ITANES survey data. We consider a measure of trust in parties and parliament as well as a

measure of perceived political efficacy, and run model specifications that are analogous to the one above. The results, presented in Online Appendix Table Q.1, provide no evidence that exposure to the reform lowered trust in political institutions or perceived political efficacy, both of which can be associated with anti-establishment sentiment.

Second, one could argue that the increase in far-right vote shares due to exposure to the 2010 reform might be driven by municipalities in the North of the country. In addition to anti-immigration positions, the far-right party Lega has long advocated greater local policy autonomy. If increased support for the far-right due to exposure to the reform was driven by concerns about reduced local policy autonomy, we would expect the effect to be more pronounced in historical strongholds of Lega (the northern regions). The findings presented in Online Appendix Table K.1 show limited evidence of heterogeneous effects between the North and South. In fact, the effect of exposure to the reform might be slightly less pronounced in northern regions. The estimates consistently indicate that exposure to the reform increased far-right support across the country.

Third, we consider the alternative expectation that exposure to public service deprivation might have increased support for greater public spending. In a first step, we use vote shares for pro-redistribution parties to proxy for public spending support. Table 1 suggests that public service deprivation might reduce the vote shares of pro-redistribution parties. Next, we use people's self-identification on the economic left-right scale based on ITANES survey data as a proxy for public spending support. We run additional regression models using a DID specification close to the one used in Table 4 with economic left-right self-identification as the dependent variable. The results in Online Appendix Table Q.1 indicate no increase in economic left-wing self-positioning. On the contrary, they demonstrate a small increase in right-wing economic self-identification (estimate = .024;  $p$ -value = .084). Finally, we explore a heterogeneous effect of exposure to the reform based on municipalities' average pre-tax household income. If public service deprivation sparks more support for public spending (i.e., more support for pro-redistribution parties), we would expect this effect to be especially pronounced in contexts where resources are already scarce (Meltzer & Richard, 1981). We estimate a fully interacted TWFE model, interacting the DID estimator with a measure of the average pre-tax household income before the reform in each municipality as specified in Online Appendix J.

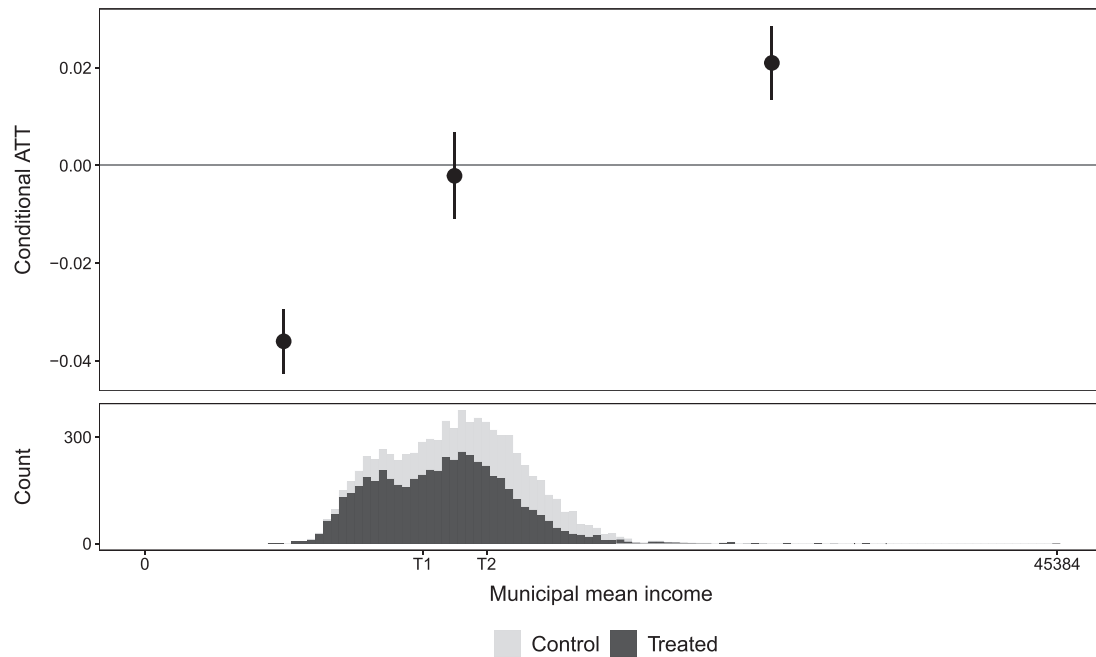
Figure 4 plots the conditional average treatment effect (CATT) of exposure to the 2010 reform on pro-redistribution vote shares across different levels of average income. It reveals substantial variation in

the effects of the shock. Contrary to baseline expectations, the reform's negative effect on support for pro-redistribution parties is concentrated in municipalities in the first tercile of municipal income—those with the scarcest economic resources (CATT =  $-3.6$ ). The effect on pro-redistribution does not differ from 0 in the central tercile and is positive and significant in the third (CATT = 2.1). In Online Appendix Figure J.1, we replicate this result including matching weights. While we consistently obtain a negative result in the first income tercile, the results for the other two are less robust and oscillate between positive and null. Overall, this additional analysis suggests potentially interesting avenues for future research on the scope conditions of the effects of public service deprivation.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between public service deprivation and support for far-right parties. We present evidence from the Italian context where far-right parties have been successful for quite some time and access to state-provided public services has historically been high. Specifically, we exploited a 2010 national reform that reduced access to public services in some municipalities to explore the relationship between public service deprivation and far-right support: Exposure to the reform leads to more far-right support. We delve deeper into the mechanisms underlying this relationship by examining the combination of demand and supply dynamics. These results suggest that in municipalities affected by the reform, immigration concerns were higher than in unaffected ones (demand), and that far-right parties linked public services to immigration in the aftermath of the reform (supply). Finally, we account for possible alternative mechanisms and explanations as well as threats to inference, and demonstrate that our findings are robust to different specifications.

While we theoretically argue and empirically substantiate that public service deprivation helps us understand geographic patterns in far-right support, we do not suggest that such deprivation is the sole or root cause of far-right parties' electoral success. Previous research in this area has made important strides in showing how large-scale economic developments (e.g., Autor et al., 2016; Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Colantone & Stanig, 2019; Emmenegger et al., 2012; Gingrich, 2019; Im et al., 2019; Kurer & Gallego, 2019; Margalit, 2011; Rodrik, 2016) and distinct patterns in individual mobility (e.g., Bratsberg et al., 2021; Campo et al., 2021; Dancygier et al., 2024; Dinas et al., 2019; Dustmann et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2019, 2020; Riaz et al., 2023; Schaub et al., 2021)—or both (Patana, 2020)—fuel support for far-right parties. We argue that



**FIGURE 4** Estimates conditional on pro-redistribution support. *Note:* Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals of treatment dummy on support for pro-redistribution parties across terciles of mean municipal income. The unit of analysis is municipalities and models include two-way fixed-effects. Abbreviation: conditional ATT, conditional average treatment effect on the treated.

distinct geographic concentrations in public service deprivation help us better understand the geographic clustering of far-right support. In advanced industrial democracies like Italy, people are accustomed to having access to public services and expect the state to be responsive to their needs. If these expectations are not met, people might become disgruntled and may turn to far-right policy solutions, as we show here.

Overall, our findings support the notion that citizens' concerns about public services and immigration might be linked (see also Cavaillé & Ferwerda, 2023; Gennaro, 2022; Hooijer, 2021; Magni, 2021). Public service deprivation may make native-born residents worry that they are not getting their fair share of state resources. Far-right parties' rhetoric finds fertile ground in these contexts, but our results also suggest that pro-redistribution parties do not necessarily gain from public service deprivation (see also Alesina et al., 2013; Giger & Nelson, 2011). While prior work on elite behavior and rhetoric suggests that this might be because political elites distract voters from hardship and performance with cultural concerns—such as immigration or ethnicity—(De Kadt & Lieberman, 2020; Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Huber & Stanig, 2011; Shayo, 2009; Tavits & Potter, 2015), our findings suggest that changes in demand may also matter: People's experiences of public service deprivation in combination with elite rhetoric may trigger concerns about immigration. Since Italian politics has in many ways been at the forefront of the wave of far-right elec-

toral success in the advanced industrial world, it is an important, and perhaps even crucial, case to study. Future research should explore the extent to which our results apply beyond Italy.

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### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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