IMMIGRATION, ECONOMIC HARDSHIP AND POPULISM IN 2018 ELECTORAL OUTCOME IN ITALY. WAS GROUP THREAT THEORY RIGHT?[1]

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Abstract. According to Group Threat Theory, when the relative size of the immigrant population increases compared to natives, immigrants are increasingly perceived as a menace. This paper argues that right-wing populist parties have effectively exploited threat mechanisms to achieve considerable success in the 2018 Italian National Electoral Competition. The study uses a dataset at the electoral district level obtained by combining data from the Ministry of Interior data and the Italian National Institute of Statistics. In particular, the incidence of foreigners in the total population and socio-economic indicators are examined in relation to the 2018 electoral outcome of right-wing populist parties. We use spatial autoregressive models to account for spatial dependencies and spatial heterogeneity in the data. We find that the higher the share of foreigners and the lower the employment rate, the greater the electoral preference for the platform proposed by right-wing populist parties.

1. Introduction

Populism and immigration are intertwined phenomena that significantly shape contemporary political landscapes worldwide. Their relationship is complex, often marked by rhetoric and societal polarization. Populist movements frequently exploit immigration issues to mobilize support, tapping into public anxieties and grievances.

According to Group Threat Theory (GTT), when the relative size of the immigrant population increases compared to natives, immigrants are increasingly perceived as a threat to: i) cultural identity; ii) the security of the insider group; iii) economic security due to the competition for jobs and welfare support (see, among others, Blumer, 1958; Stephan and Stephan, 2000). These perceived threats are stronger when the condition of the local economy is harsher.

As well-known among Italian political scientists, immigration was one of the hot topics in the 2018 electoral campaign (Combei *et al.,* 2020). This electoral competition represented a turning point in recent Italian politics. Indeed, the electoral outcome was characterized by the decline of two mainstream parties (Partito

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[1] The authors have contributed equally to each section of the paper.

Democratico and Forza Italia) and the striking success of two populist parties (Lega and Five Stars Movement). Populist leaders capitalized on fears of cultural dilution, economic competition, and security risks associated with immigration to rally their base. By framing immigration as a crisis, they reinforced the idea that only they can protect the interests of the native population (see Faggian *et al* 2021).

Moreover, populism tends to simplify complex issues, offering straightforward solutions to intricate problems. In the case of immigration, this translates into calls for tighter borders, deportation, or even outright bans on certain groups.

Conversely, immigration can also fuel the rise of populism. Rapid demographic changes and the perceived failure of mainstream parties to address immigration concerns can breed resentment and disillusionment among segments of the native population. This discontent provides fertile ground for populist rhetoric, promising to restore control and the prominence of the native population. In other words, populist parties exploit the threat mechanisms the Group Threat Theory describes. Dennison and Geddes (2018) showed that migration crises, such as the one in 2015-16 in Europe, significantly raised the salience of immigration in political and media discourse, activating pre-existing anxieties. According to Dennison and Geddes, this shift allowed populist parties to frame immigration as a threat to national identity and sovereignty.

Following Guiso et al. (2017), we consider a party populist when it promotes short-term policies that may have an immediate high electoral payoff (such as trade protection, resistance to foreign immigration, citizenship income, or other safe employment policies) with no regard for their long-term costs. Using this criterion and analyzing the electoral programs and public statements made by political party leaders, we identify Lega, Fratelli d'Italia (FDI), and CasaPound as "right-wing populist parties exploiting the threat mechanism".[2] It should be remarked that another populist, anti-establishment party, the Five Star Movement (5SM), never used the same crude anti-immigrant rhetoric as Lega. In particular, 5SM expressed solidarity for refugees in their electoral programme and proposed limiting their stay

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[2] See Livi Bacci on Neodemos (2018) for a detailed analysis of the electoral program of each party on the immigration issue. See also Emanuele *at al* (2019) for a qualitative analysis of the 2018 political campaign. Some examples of the rhetoric used by Lega, FDI and CasaPound are the following (our translation): "Since illegal immigration has doubled in the last 5 years, sexual crimes have increased by 40%. The PD's policy is mainly responsible for all this. The left and the M5S prioritize ideology over reality, which is clear to everyone. For them, the immigrant, even if illegal, is more important than anything else, even if he rapes, kills, or dismembers a body" (Rossano Sasso, Lega, Elected); "Thousands of homeless people, many of them Italians, risk dying from frostbite. The Government should implement an extraordinary assistance plan: they should be treated like asylum seekers who landed illegally and be guaranteed food and shelter." (Giorgia Meloni, Leader of FDI); "Here they chase the children of Italians to vaccinate them, while those who land illegally can bring any type of disease." (Matteo Salvini, Leader of Lega).

in Italy by negotiating redistribution quotas within European Union. Other social issues were focal to their electoral platform (e.g., introducing a basic income law, the so-called "*reddito di cittadinanza*", establishing stricter limits on holding elective offices for those convicted of criminal offences, etc.). Therefore, our focus is on right-wing populism. See also Faggian *et al.* (2021), who remarked that immigration was not the driver of the 2018 electoral success of 5SM.

Building on GTT predictions, our research questions may be formulated as follows:

RQ1: Have right-wing populist parties obtained more success where the presence of immigrants is higher?

RQ2: Have right-wing populist parties obtained more success where there are more significant socio-economic vulnerabilities?

The answers are not trivial, given that in some regional contexts where Lega has its historical roots, immigrants are crucial for the local economy (e.g., the agricultural workforce in Veneto).

Furthermore, resident foreigners can vote only for local representatives but not for national elections. Obviously, we may have territories where the presence of immigrants is consolidated to have second-generation immigrants who have acquired Italian citizenship. Therefore, we may have that these territories are, simultaneously, those with the highest presence of foreigners who are not entitled to vote and those with the highest incidence of second-generation immigrants who presumably will not vote for an anti-immigrant platform. Indeed, according to Istat data, 87% of foreign citizenship acquisitions happened in the Center-North of Italy in 2022. In the same year, 83.7% of foreigners were residents in the Center-North.[3]

The current study uses a dataset at the electoral district level obtained by combining data from the Ministry of Interior and the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat). In particular, the incidence of foreigners in the total population and socio-economic indicators are examined in relation to the 2018 electoral outcome of right-wing populist parties. We use spatial autoregressive models to account for spatial dependencies and spatial heterogeneity in the data.

Using a completely different approach compared to the one proposed in this paper, Faggian *et al.* (2021) have already pointed out a positive correlation between the presence of immigrants and votes for the Lega. Our empirical exercise confirms this finding, solving some empirical issues left open by this previous contribution. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first work to propose a spatial approach to investigate the success of right-wing populism.

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[3] In 2022, there were about 5 millions of resident foreigners and about 200,000 citizenship acquisitions.

The paper is structured as follows: the second section describes data and method; the third section presents the results; and in the fourth section, we delineate some general conclusions and trace the future development of this research.

2. Data and method

The Istat disseminated the 2018 Geographical shapefiles on electoral districts aggregating municipalities based on the Legislative Decree No. 189 dispositions of December 12, 2017. Istat also integrated a set of socio-economic indicators that includes information on the demographic structure of the population, the economic situation (the employment rate), the structure of the local economy (share of people employed in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors), local human capital (incidence of both low educated people and high educated people). These indicators are calculated by exploiting the 2011 Italian Population Census. However, these databases do not contain information about electoral outcomes. We integrated Istat's data with publicly available data on election results from the Ministry of the Interior, creating a joint database containing each district's electoral outcome and socio-economic and demographic statistics. Note that the fact that socio-economic indicators are not precisely simultaneous to electoral data is not necessarily a drawback in our integrated databases. Indeed, this may attenuate a potential reverse causality problem in our analysis. That is, the presence of foreigners could be higher where they are more tolerated. Thus, one might argue that tolerance, which is related to rejecting anti-immigrant rhetoric, determines the presence of foreigners and not *vice versa*. However, this potential mechanism should be partially mitigated using data from a few years before the electoral outcomes. In addition, as argued by Dennison and Geddes (2018), the salience of migration at time t is only reactivated by contemporaneous episodes, but the reasons behind the success of anti-immigration rhetoric derive from issues that arose well before time t. Concerning the immigrant stock size, we also ran another empirical exercise using the presence of immigrants averaged for the years 2015-2017. The Pearson correlation between the 2011 immigrant stock size and the more recent measure is 0.978, suggesting that being a persistent cumulative process (Massey, 1990) also, using the 2011 data we can still characterize territorial differences in the presence of immigrants.

2.1. Method

As anticipated, We define as «right-wing populist parties exploiting the threat mechanism» the following three lists: Lega, Fratelli di Italia and CasaPound. We

sum the share of votes going to right-wing populist parties on the total number of votes as the dependent variable in the following spatial Durbin regression model:

$$Y_i = X\beta + \bar{Y}\lambda + \bar{X}\gamma + u \qquad (1)$$

Our territorial units i are the 63 plurinominal electoral districts for the election of the Chamber of Deputies.[4] The choice of the plurinominal electoral district is because the electoral rules imply that only in this type of district is possible to distinguish the share of votes going to each party. We focus our analysis on Chamber of Deputies because the composition of the electoral districts for Senate is more geographically aggregated, leading to only 33 districts.

X is an n × K matrix of exogenous covariates. $\bar{Y} = W_p Y_p$ is a n × P matrix of spatial lags for the dependent variable. $\bar{X} = W_p X_p$ is n × P matrix of spatial lags for the exogenous covariates. Our main explicative variable is the incidence of foreigners over 1,000 residents.

We assume that spatial spillovers are captured not only by the spatial lagged dependent variable but also by the spatial lag of the variable capturing foreigner presence. In other words, people from a district i may be feel threated (and vote for parties sustaining anti-immigrants stances) even by the presence of immigrants in neighboring communities. We will call this indirect effect as "encirclement effect".

We define contiguity weights using the Queen criterion. The weights are normalized using the row sum.

The employment rate and the Mazziotta-Pareto Index are also used as regressors in equation (1) to capture the difference in the economic situation and in the socio-material vulnerabilities among territories.[5] Among other control variables, we include: the incidence of people with a post-secondary education title, the aging index, and the share of employment in the secondary sector.

The level of education is defined as the percentage of highly educated people for two reasons: i) education fosters analytical skills and critical thinking, enabling individuals to assess political and social issues with greater nuance. This should reduce the likelihood of accepting simplistic populist narratives; ii) Highly educated people do not suffer competition for jobs from immigrants (Bratti and Conti, 2018).

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[4] The 2018 Italian elections were based on the so-called *Rosatellum* Law. The structure of the law is configured as a mixed electoral system. In particular, part of the deputies (the 37% of the total) are elected in *collegi uninominali* where the candidate that collect most preference is elected, while the 61% are assigned through *collegi plurinominali,* that is, seats are proportionally distributed among the coalitions and individual lists that surpassed a required national threshold. The remaining 2% of seats is allocated to Italians residing abroad. Thus, in uninominal district a coalition support a single candidate, making it impossible to distinguish among the shares of each party.

[5] The Mazziotta-Pareto Index of social and material vulnerability is a synthetic non-compensatory index that combines seven socio-demographic indicators. For details see Mazziotta and Pareto (2015).

Hence, they should be less susceptible to threat mechanisms. The percentage of employment in the secondary sector is introduced to grasp better the difference in the economic structure between Northern and Southern Italy. The aging index is introduced because older population might be less accustomed to cultural diversity and more inclined to support policies that favor restrictionism and populist rhetoric, seeing these as protective measures.

It is important to note that an earlier work on the topic, carried out by Faggian *et al.* (2021), used municipal-level data to analyze the success of Lega and 5SM in the 2018 Senate elections. They focus on the Senate to consider the results associated with more mature electors and to avoid the over-representation of very young electors that characterize the 5SM (only individuals older than 25 can vote to elect the Senate). Another critical difference between their empirical exercise and the present one is that they did not use spatial regression to model the long-lasting political tradition that characterizes some Italian territories. These traditional zones of influence are generally more extended than a single municipality (see Fitzgerald, 2018). This becomes even more relevant in the case of Lega, which derived from Lega Nord, a party, in turn, born from the merger of three main regional autonomist movements (Lega Lombarda in Lombardy, Liga Veneta in Veneto, Piemont Autonomista in Piedmont). The same considerations about the historical territorial ties could be applied to the so-called Red-Belt (Diamanti, 2009). On the empirical ground, ignoring spatial autocorrelation can lead to errors in estimates and inferences (Anselin, 1988). The fact that the origins of Lega are strongly related to some Northern Italian autonomist movements leads us to run a separate analysis only using the share of votes going to this party. This approach enables a clearer understanding of the role played by threat mechanisms. Lega Nord has historically expressed similarly harsh opinions about people from Southern Italy. With the transition from the regional party Lega Nord to the national party Lega, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, the focus shifted from internal to international immigrants. Thus, conducting separate analyses allows us to confirm the party's ability to exploit threat mechanisms even among those previously targets of its populist campaigns.

In addition, we believe that local factors too heavily influence results at the municipal level. The electoral rules for the plurinominal district impose the so-called blocked list, i.e. people are allowed to express a vote on the list but not to express a preference for a candidate within the list. Albertazzi and Zulianello (2021) have shown that local context variations are related to variations in the electoral success of populist parties. Despite the elections being at the national level, these results seem to suggest that people are not allowed to choose directly the representative they trust, so they tend to vote for the platform that better addresses local necessities. By aggregating data at the district level, we believe these local distortions may compensate for each other and thus become less relevant. In any case, our empirical

exercise may also be considered a corroboration of Faggian *et al*'s findings using different statistical techniques and more aggregate data.[6] Figure 1 reports the distribution of the share of votes going to right-wing populist parties, the incidence of foreigners in the total population, and the employment rate. Colors are attributed based on quartiles.

Figure 1 − *Electoral outcome for right-wing populist parties, foreigner incidence and employment rate. 2018 Italian electoral districts*
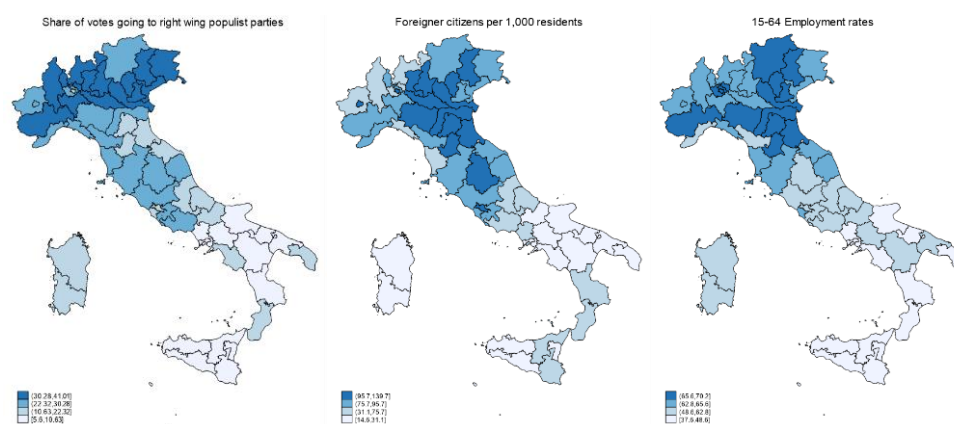
Note:Data refer to 2018 for electoral outcome while to 2011 for foreign presence and 15-64 employment rates.

In general, it seems that where the presence of foreigners is higher, the share of votes going to populist parties tends to be higher. Interestingly, especially in some southern districts, the share of votes to populists seems to be higher where employment rates are lower. This preliminary evidence is in line with GTT's prediction.

3. Empirical results

Table 1 shows the estimation results of equation 1 for the total share of right-wing populist parties (columns 1 and 1-B) and Lega (columns 2 and 2 -B)[7].

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[6] Note also that using electoral districts allows us to solve the problem of giving equal importance to each municipality, even in cases of large differences in population size. Plurinominal districts are constructed by aggregating contiguous municipalities under the constraint that the district population does not deviate (in absolute terms) by more than 20% from the total average population of the districts.
[7] Before running the spatial durbin model, we tested spatial dependency though the Global Moran test. We strongly reject the hypothesis of independence (chi2=81.57, p-value: 0.000)

Table 1 − *Explaining the share of votes going to right-wing populism.*

	(1)	(1 - B)	(2)	(2-B)
	Share Pop	Share Pop	Share Lega	Share Lega
Foreigners	0.109 (0.025)***	.	0.089 (0.022)***	.
Foreigners_15_17	.	0.083 (0.024)***		0.068 (0.022)***
Employment rate	-1.176 (0.205)***	-1.025 (0.205)***	-0.868 (0.183)***	-0.749 (0.189)***
Ageing Index	0.018 (0.014)	0.010 (0.014)	0.015 (0.013)	0.007 (0.013)
Inc_High_Educated	-0.203 (0.153)	-0.181 (0.162)	-0.329 (0.140)**	-0.280 (0.149)*
Employed_Sec	0.272 (0.070)***	0.339 (0.075)***	0.294 (0.064)***	0.326 (0.068)***
MazziottaPareto	-0.630 (0.104)***	-0.502 (0.098)***	-0.472 (0.087)***	-0.379 (0.085)***
Spatial lags				
Foreigners	0.124 (0.038)***		0.083 (0.033)**	
Foreigners_15_17		0.107 (0.033)***		0.075 (0.029)**
Share Pop	0.472 (0.128)***	0.749 (0.107)***		
Share Lega			0.510 (0.105)***	
N	63	63	63	63
pseudo R^2	0.936	0.876	0.950	0.907

The intercepts of each models have been omitted to save space.
Standard errors in parentheses
* p < 0.10, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01
Wald test of spatial terms (MODEL 1):   *chi2(2) = 34.95   Prob > chi2 = 0.0000*
Wald test of spatial terms (MODEL 1-B):   *chi2(2) = 69.47   Prob > chi2 = 0.000*
Wald test of spatial terms (MODEL 2):   *chi2(2) = 34.53   Prob > chi2 = 0.0000*
Wald test of spatial terms (MODEL 2-B):   *chi2(2) = 93.95   Prob > chi2 = 0.0000*

First of all, note that in both columns, the spatial lags are highly statistically significant, which suggests that the necessity of considering the spatial dimension is confirmed on empirical grounds. In particular, we have a positive spatial correlation for both the foreign presence and the share of populist parties (Lega, respectively). This means that our hypothesis of the existence of an encirclement effect seems to be supported by data. In addition, the results support the idea of the existence of a territorial model of voting. The only relevant difference between the first two models and models 2 and 2-B, is that the incidence of highly educated people is significant only in the latter.

A negative relation between votes going to the Lega and educational levels was already reported by Faggian *et al.* (2020). Threat mechanisms are particularly effective among those who may suffer the competition for jobs or for the welfare system from immigrants. Given that immigrants in Italy are mainly employed in low-skill positions (Bratti and Conti 2018), we believe that the negative correlation

between the incidence of highly educated people and the vote share going to Lega is very reasonable. It is more difficult to explain why this result is not confirmed when the analysis is extended to other right-wing populist parties. One hypothesis could be that Lega has historically attracted votes from middle and lower social classes, as well as from less urbanized areas, particularly in the North. As education levels rise, part of this electorate might lose interest in this more regional approach and turn to parties offering a more national or global vision.

It should be noted that the beta coefficients reported in Table 1 could not be interpreted as partial derivates of the dependent variable with respect to each regressor as in the traditional linear regression model since the effect of an explanatory variable also passes through the spatial spillover. More specifically, the spatial lag of the dependent variable modifies the covariate effects. A change in the presence of foreigners in district i changes the conditional mean of y in that i (direct effect), and that change in y_i changes the conditional mean of y in all contiguous districts. Hence, the indirect (or spillover) effect is the effect of foreigner presence on the conditional mean of the share of votes in other districts. Because a spatial lag of foreigner presence is included in the model, there is also a second indirect effect. The latter implies that a change in foreigners in i changes the conditional mean of y in neighbouring districts. The sum of the direct and two indirect effects is our total effect. In Table 2, we then report the direct, the indirect, and total effects of our main variables of interest in model 1: the presence of foreigners, the employment rate, and the Mazziotta-Pareto Index.

Table 2 – *Direct, Indirect and Total effect of the presence of foreigners, the employment rate and the Mazziotta-Pareto Index.*

direct		Coeff	SE	Z	P-Value	Confidence Int	
	Foreign presence	0.139	0.026	5.28	0.000	0.088	0.191
	Employment rate	-1.271	0.226	-5.63	0.000	-1.715	-0.829
	Mazziotta_Pareto_Index	-0.681	0.099	-6.87	0.000	-0.876	-0.487
indirect							
	foreign	0.301	0.090	3.31	0.001	0.123	0.479
	employment rate	-0.954	0.491	-1.94	0.052	-1.916	0.007
	Mazziotta_Pareto_Index	-0.511	0.223	-2.29	0.022	-0.949	-0.073
total							
	foreign	0.440	0.104	4.22	0.000	0.236	0.645
	employment rate	-2.226	0.638	-3.49	0.000	-3.477	-0.975
	Mazziotta_Pareto_Index	-1.193	0.253	-4.72	0.000	-1.688	-0.697

Confirming GTT's predictions, the results indicate that a one-point increase in the incidence of foreigners leads to an increase of 0.44 points in the share of right-wing populist parties, and interestingly, the effect seems to be mainly driven by what

we have called the encirclement effect. Also confirming GTT, for one-point increase in the employment rate, we have a substantial decrease in the share of votes going to right-wing populists. This result also aligns with that obtained by Faggian et al. 2020. On the contrary, with respect to the presence of foreigners, the effect of employment is mainly driven by direct effects. Finally, an increase in socio-material vulnerability leads to a decrease in the consensus for right-wing populism. In this case, it is reasonable to assume that preferences went to 5MS, given that the introduction of basic income was its warhorse during the electoral campaign.

As a check for our model, we test for an eventual auto-correlation in model residuals. We firmly reject the auto-correlation, indicating a good model specification.

By way of final empirical exercises, keeping all the other variables constant, we predicted our dependent variable, assuming a low value for the foreigner presence (the mean minus one standard deviation) and alternatively assuming a high value (mean plus one standard deviation). We repeat the same exercise for the employment rate. Results are reported in Table 3 and refer to model 1.

Table 3 – *Predicting the share of populists for low and high values of foreigner presence and employment rate.*

	Margin	Delta-method st. errors.
Foreign mean - 1 sd	6.817	3.58*
Foreign mean	21.793	0.571***
Foreign + 1 sd	36.77	3.605***
Emplo rate mean - 1 sd	43.166	6.159***
Emplo rate mean	21.793	0.571***
Emplo rate + 1 sd	0.42	6.149

Interestingly, the effect of foreigners' presence seems symmetric around the mean. When their presence is below/above one standard deviation of the mean, we have a share of fifteen percentage points lower/higher than the baseline. The same cannot be said for the employment rates. When employment is high, one of the mechanisms suggested by GTT, the competition for jobs, becomes weaker. Accordingly, our results indicate that the preference for right-wing populist parties is high, especially with a low employment rate.

Note also from table 1 that the results seem to not change significantly when we use the more recent measure of immigrant presence.

4. Conclusions

Our empirical analysis supports the idea that right-wing populism has successfully exploited threat mechanisms. Indeed, GTT predicts that the anti-immigrant rhetoric will be particularly effective where the share of foreigners is relatively high, and economic difficulties may generate competition between insiders and outsiders.

The authors do not want to express any value judgment on exploiting this type of mechanism. In any case, a note of caution should emerge from the present work. When fears are fueled, the consequences can be unpredictable. Research has shown that manipulating perceived threats can have profound and often unintended impacts on social cohesion and political stability (Allport, 1954; Stephan and Stephan, 2000).

When political entities capitalize on and amplify existing anxieties, it may lead to increased social polarization, heightened intergroup tensions, and even spur radicalization among certain population segments. Thus, while the socio-economic context drives the initial sense of insecurity, instrumentalizing these fears for political gain can destabilize communities and erode democratic norms. It is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to recognize the potential for such outcomes and to strive for approaches that address the root causes of these fears without exacerbating divisions within society.

A possible future direction for our analysis is to reconstruct a crime rate at the electoral section level and include it among predictors. Indeed, crimes involving immigrants were frequently exploited by populist leaders to ride the threat mechanism. We also plan to extend the analysis to the 2023 election, which has seen FDI eroding Lega's consensus.

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