



Motivation Tarantelli Prize – Year 2018

What Are you Voting for? Refugee Reception Centres and Voting at the 2016 Italian Constitutional Referendum

by

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The paper written by Bratti, Deiana, Havari, Mazzarella and Meroni analyses geographical proximity to refugee centres (SPRAR: Protection System for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) affected Italian municipalities' voting outcomes, in the Constitutional referendum of December 2016. This referendum has been interpreted as a political vote in favor or against Mr. Renzi's action and his left centre party - Partito Democratico. By controlling for the voting turnout, the authors tested the link between the “no” votes, interpreted as anti-government votes, and the distance from the closest SPRAR centre.

The main aim of the paper is to examine whether and which the Italian citizen could be influenced in some way in expressing their opinion about the government through pressure on very sensitive topic for many Italian native (as the migrants' and refugees' crisis)

The theme is politically relevant, as Italy is one of the countries that bears the burden of the refugees' emergency as many of them arrive through the popular and dangerous Central Mediterranean route, departing from the Libyan or Tunisian coast. Thence refugee centres play an important role in terms of refugees' management and integration and they have been in the eye of the storm both in each political and media debate.

Although the growing literature on the impact of immigration on voting behavior, only recent papers have started to look at the impact of refugees, which are often blamed by anti-immigration groups of absorbing public resources that might have been otherwise spent on citizens. The paper of Bratti et al. provides a novel empirical evidence on the impact of geographical proximity to refugee centres using a novel and unique data on the Italian municipalities and also rather than focusing on the impact of the presence of refugees on voting outcomes in the municipality where those refugees are hosted, they look at the effect of the presence of refugees on voting outcomes in a non-hosting municipality. In fact, their core variable is the distance between the municipalities and the closest SPRAR centre. Moreover, the authors use the differences in distances across municipalities that have the same neighbouring municipality hosting refugees also to overcome the problem of endogeneity that is related to the fact that SPRAR centres are often opened in municipalities politically supporting the government.



The hypothesis is linked to the fact that living closest to the centres, increases the physical and media exposure of voters to asylum seekers and refugees. Living in the area of these centres enhances the perception of the amount of money allocated to refugee reception policies and in turn makes citizens more sensitive to anti-migration biased medias or political campaigns. All in all, this situation might increase the negative perception about migrants, and thus might increase vote against the Government, which has the responsibility of managing the ongoing refugee crisis.

Finally the authors investigate potential heterogeneity in the effect of proximity to SPRARs to shaping natives' opinions on migrants by dividing Italian municipalities into quartiles according to their values in 2016 of some potential mediating factors (as municipality size and population size , crime, unemployment, presence of legal migrants, educational level of the population, income levels and political orientation in previous elections).

Estimates confirm that municipalities located closer to SPRAR reception centres experienced an increase in turnout as well as the share of anti-government votes and, controlling for the main causal pathways about the voters' negative opinions, the results are stronger in smaller or less populated municipalities, a higher proportion of individuals with at least a high school degree and in poorer municipalities

The AIEL executive board believes that the paper is highly deserving of the Tarantelli Prize because of its careful estimation strategy and the really up-to-date issue above all now given that populist parties continue to use anti-migration orientation as a self-advertisement as well as to stir up unrest towards other political parties.