Geographies of Resentment: How Public Service Deprivation Increased Populist Radical Right Support in Italy[*]

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May 9, 2022

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Abstract

Electoral support for populist radical right (PRR) parties is often
linked to geographies of resentment with rural areas showing more
support compared to urban ones. In this study, we argue that public
service deprivation, defined as poor access to public services at the
local level, increases the programmatic appeal of PRR parties. Public
service deprivation signals to voters that public officials do not care
about "their community" and makes them more susceptible to the
rhetoric of PRR parties due to fears that poor access will be further
crowded out by migrants. We examine our argument using three
studies. We examine cross-sectional data from Italian municipalities
(study 1), exploit a national reform forcing Italian municipalities
below a certain population threshold to jointly share existing public
services (study 2), and explore geo-coded individual-level panel data
(study 3). Our findings on public service deprivation and the meaning
that voters attach to it helps us to better understand why PRR
support is higher in some rural or urban areas, but not in others.

The urban-rural divide is a considerable force structuring contemporary politics across the globe, especially when it comes to support for the populist radical right (PRR) (Mudde, 2007).[1] Brexit and the rise of Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party, the election of Donald J. Trump, but also the electoral victories of Jaroslaw Kaczynski's Law and Justice party in Poland or Viktor Orban's Fidesz party in Hungary in rural areas led to a wave of research about urban-rural splits and the politics of "left behind places" (Bolet, 2021; Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Harteveld et al., 2021; Hobolt, 2016; McQuarrie, 2017; Patana, 2021; Scala & Johnson, 2017). Ethnographic studies have suggested that rural communities manifest a geography of resentment, concentrating perceptions of being left behind by mainstream politicians who do not respect the distinct values of rural communities and fail to provide them with a fair share of resources (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018).

While there has been a renewed scholarly interest in the underpinnings of the urban-rural divide especially when it comes to the electoral success of PRR parties (Durovic et al., 2019; Harteveld et al., 2021; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Maxwell, 2019, 2020; Ziblatt et al., 2020), the notion that geography shapes electoral politics is not new. It is part and parcel of the classical work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) on the state-periphery cleavage and reflects deep-run legacies of historically peripheral geographic communities (Durovic et al., 2019; Ziblatt et al., 2020). Although it is difficult to find a political scientist that would disagree with the notion that "geography matters for PRR support", the way in which "geography matters" is more contentious. An important reason for this is that a myriad of factors can operate simultaneously to activate the urban-rural divide, such as deindustrialization and decline of the working class (Baccini & Weymouth, 2021; Emmenegger et al., 2012; Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015; Rodrik, 2016), globalization and trade (Autor et al., 2016; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Margalit, 2011), immigration and emigration (Bratsberg et al., 2021; Dancygier et al., 2022; Dancygier, 2010; Riaz et al., 2021), inequality and austerity (Baccini & Sattler, 2021; Fetzer, 2019; Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Kurer & Gallego, 2019), technological change and geographical sorting

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[1]The concept of populist radical right parties was developed by Mudde (2007). These parties combine populism and right-wing nationalism. Populism generally consists of three elements: anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and references to the "common people". Populism on the right also advocates curbs on immigration and undivided national sovereignty (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

(Anelli et al., 2021; Gallego et al., 2016; Gallego & Kurer, 2022; Gingrich, 2019; Im et al., 2019; Kurer & Gallego, 2019; Maxwell, 2019, 2020), social capital and isolation (Bolet, 2021; Colombo & Dinas, 2021; Rydgren, 2009), or more recently the spatial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Agnew, 2021; Casaglia et al., 2020).

What is more, systematically mapping and causally identifying geographies of resentment is far from straight forward due to a host of conceptual and methodological issues. First, establishing the causally relevant effect of geographic contexts is hard because urban and rural areas differ in many respects. Second, certain attributes of rural areas, such as low population density or geography, make their populations difficult and costly to reach which threatens inference as small numbers may make results particularly prone to measurement error (Scally et al., 2020). Third, the conceptualisation of "rural" is far from uniform (Nemerever & Rogers, 2021), but rather based on plethora of characteristics such as geographic distance to urban centres (Broockman, 2013; Warshaw & Rodden, 2012), populations size and density (Acharya et al., 2016; Cho & Gimpel, 2010; de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw, 2020; Primo & Snyder, 2010; Urban & Niebler, 2014), or the economic basis of the economy (agriculture-based for example, see Scala & Johnson, 2017).

Although we will not be able to address all of these issues here, with this study we aim to better understand the geographical patterns in PRR support by highlighting the role of access to public services. Rather than characterising geographical units as either urban or rural based on classical indicators of population size and density as usually done, we build on insights from geography to introduce a fine-grained measure of public service deprivation— defined as low access to public services at the local level (Barca, 2009; Barca et al., 2012; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). What is more, building on an important body of empirical work demonstrating the role of public service provision for political preferences and electoral behavior (Adida et al., 2020; Arias et al., 2019; Burnett & Kogan, 2017; Chong et al., 2011; Pande, 2011), we argue that higher degrees of public service deprivation makes voters more susceptible to the rhetoric of PRR parties. We argue that public service deprivation fuels PPR support in elections. Public service deprivation, we argue, makes voters more susceptible to anti-establishment and anti-immigrant rhetoric of the PRR, because it signals that public officials do not care about "their community" while stirring up fears that access to services will be crowded out by immigrants.

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We substantiate this argument with empirical evidence from the Italian context. Italy is a particularly fruitful context to test our argument not only because it has witnessed the rise of PRR parties relatively early and displays extensive variation in public service deprivation, but also because it allows us to exploit a municipal reform that affected public service provision at the local level. We present evidence from three studies. First, we develop a novel and fine-grained measure of public service deprivation at the municipal level to demonstrate that it is strongly associated with geographical variation in PRR support (study 1). While this descriptive evidence is interesting, questions about the causal nature of our postulated relationship remain. Hence in a second study, we exploit a 2010 municipal reform, forcing Italian municipalities below a certain population threshold to jointly provide public services, to causally establish the link between public service deprivation and PRR support (study 2). This exogenous change allows us to estimate the causal effect of an increase in public service deprivation on PRR support, and that this effect is larger in municipalities with higher shares of foreign-born that are affected by the reform. Third, we use micro-level panel data to show that exposure to public service deprivation through the reform increases anti-immigrant sentiment, and increases within affected municipalities with higher shares of foreign-born (study 3).

These findings make three important contributions. First, it helps us to better understand why PRR support has been geographically concentrated. Traditional classifications of urban versus rural areas consider population size and density, yet these channels may not always be so useful to explain temporal patterns in PRR support as demographic change is usually rather slow (but also see Dancygier et al., 2022). Changes to public service provision, due to municipal mergers or other reforms, allow for a more direct mechanism nested in time. Our findings thus encourage researchers to move beyond the classic dichotomy of urban versus rural, and consider more fine-grained measures of local context when examining political outcomes.

Second, our findings help to better understand that while PRR support is generally higher in rural areas, it does not blindly follow urban-rural boundaries (e.g., Rydgren & Ruth, 2013). Substantial support for these parties is found in urban areas as well which is explained through different factors mattering in different geographical contexts (Harteveld et al., 2021). By focusing on the role of public service deprivation, our findings provide an unified explanation rooted in public service deprivation. Our argument extends the important work by Cramer (2016) on rural resentment. Our

findings suggest that resentment against liberal elites, accused of not providing a fair share of resources to local communities while supporting other groups in society, might not only be a mechanism that makes people more susceptible to anti-establishment and anti-immigration party platforms in rural areas, but also in some urban areas. Public service deprivation as an important driver of PRR support unites both rural and urban contexts.

Finally, our evidence contributes to an important empirical body of work from the developing world that demonstrates that while people in rural areas have lower access to public services, they seem less likely to translate dissatisfaction about poor access to services into political dissatisfaction (Bland et al., 2021; Brinkerhoff et al., 2018). Our evidence is at odds with this finding, and suggests that poor access to public services at the local level does translate into different electoral choices in an advanced industrial economy like Italy. Future research should examine the reasons behind this difference between developing and more developed countries. This study is structured as follows. First, we discuss the burgeoning research on the urban-rural divide in politics and we present our argument rooted in local provision of public service. Second, we describe our first empirical study and our measure of public service deprivation in Italy. Third, we introduce the 2010 municipal reform in Italy to provide a causal test of our public service deprivation argument. Fourth, we outline the Italian panel data that allows us to our mechanism at the individual level. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the importance of our findings.

Public Service Deprivation and Populist Radical Right Support

Our argument linking PRR support to public good provision starts from the classic model from public economics introduced by Tiebout (1956), referred to as "Tiebout sorting". This model suggests that people reveal their preferences for public good provision indirectly through the location choices they make. People with a strong taste for a high quality primary schools for example will choose to locate to a jurisdiction that invests a lot in primary schools, while people who care about good public transport links will choose a jurisdiction on these grounds. This mechanism is known as "voting with your feet" (Tiebout, 1956). Based on this model, one would

expect most people to leave rural or urban areas at least partially based on the attractiveness of tax-public services packages. They relocate when they are dissatisfied with the supply of local public services because this means that their tax money is not well spent, and remain when they are satisfied.

In Europe, like in the US, due to a growing mobility of capital and people over the last decades combined with large-scale changes to the structure of the economy and trade, we have witnessed increased sorting based on attributes of the local context, such as public services at the local level (Bishop, 2009; Enos, 2017; Odendahl et al., 2019). Geographic sorting in Europe has meant that urban areas are increasingly characterized by a cosmopolitan population, while people in rural areas are more likely to prioritize national traditions and conservative values (Gallego et al., 2016; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Maxwell, 2019, 2020). This helps explain geographical patterns for PRR support. Yet, while PRR support is generally higher in rural areas, substantial support for these parties is also found in urban area (Harteveld et al., 2021; Rydgren & Ruth, 2013). This raises the question of what unites these contexts. While geographic sorting is clearly a key driver in PRR support, this does not rule out contextual drivers (Maxwell, 2020).

The assumption underlying geographic sorting is that people are mobile and can endure both the material or communal costs associated with moving. While surely some individuals may act in accordance to Tiebout's baseline expectation, many others will stay put. Recent work on the effects of trade on the labor market shows that the mobility of workers is fairly limited, which explains the long-lasting effects of local economies decline on welfare (see Autor et al., 2016; Dix-Carneiro & Kovak, 2017). People are also attached to their homes, family ties, community or language (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018; Ziblatt et al., 2020). Having limited opportunities to move may itself generate discontent in specific geographic areas (Patana, 2021). Five decades long panel data evidence from the United Kingdom for example suggests that a large share of people become "locked in" to poor service areas, even when exit options exist (Dowding & John, 2008). On the whole, these insights suggest that sorting models might overestimate the ability of individuals to move, underestimate the strength of connection to the local community, or both.

The fact that many people might not want to or be able to sort into specific places implies that they may not be satisfied with the supply of public services where they live. This dissatisfaction with public services within their community may increase when other members from the community

decide to leave. Population decline tends to reduce the local tax base which in turn may lead to reduced access to public services. It may also reduce the electoral importance of the local area and divert the attention of national or regional politicians away from the constituency (Dixit & Londregan, 1996). As a result, out-migration affects the composition of municipal councils leading to delayed political innovation and increased discontent expressed through low turnout and vote for anti-establishment parties (Anelli & Peri, 2017; Dancygier et al., 2022; Dowding & John, 2008). In many European countries, we have indeed been witnessing the worsening of public services at the local level as a result of economic change, population decline, ageing and the out-migration of economically active groups (e.g., Copus et al., 2011; Odendahl et al., 2019).

Building on an important body of empirical work from developing countries (Adida et al., 2020; Arias et al., 2019; Bland et al., 2021; Burnett & Kogan, 2017; Chong et al., 2011; Pande, 2011), we argue that the access to public services crucially structures political preference formation and behavior. Public services are services provided by the government intended to serve all members of a community and financed through taxes, such as roads, transport link, health care, garbage collection, etc. Access to public services at the local level is one of the most direct way in which politics enters the life of ordinary citizens, creating beliefs about how their taxes are spend, and therefore making it easier, even for the less politically sophisticated, to link first-hand experiences with politics to preferences and behavior (Dowding & John, 2012). We argue that public service deprivation, defined as poor access to public services at the local level, increases support for PRR parties. Public service deprivation signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community" as the remoteness to public services at the local level restricts "their" access.

Public service deprivation also likely sparks off fears about services being crowded out by immigrants, increasing the programmatic appeal of PRR parties even further. Scholars across social science disciplines have long noted how sentiments of group threat (Blumer, 1958) sweep across communities where immigration is made more salient through larger shares of foreign population (Blalock, 1967; Quillian, 1995; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010) or sudden increases of immigration (Dinas et al., 2019; Hopkins, 2010; Meuleman et al., 2009). PRR parties have proven to be particularly effective at mobilizing ethnic or religious fears and prejudice arising in these conditions (Dancygier & Laitin, 2014; Dinas et al., 2019; Dustmann et al.,

2019; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015; Halla et al., 2017)(cf. Schaub et al., 2021), especially in the Italian context (Campo et al., 2021; Devillanova, 2021). Indeed, a growing body of literature shows how anti-immigrant sentiment thrives in contexts where natives perceive to be competing with immigrants over state-provided resources and how worries about competition electorally benefits PRR parties (Cavaille & Ferwerda, 2018; Gennaro, 2022). Understandings of how the state should spend their taxes and provide for its citizens through public service provision and redistribution appears to be closely related to people's perceptions about the ethnic composition of their community (Alesina et al., 2018; Alesina & Stantcheva, 2020; Luttmer, 2001). These intuitions help us understand why public service deprivation favors PRR parties (instead of left-wing parties arguing for more generalized redistribution). PRR parties combine anti-establishment sentiment ("the corrupt elite") with an anti-immigration stance ("political elites sold out 'the ordinary people' at the expense of others/migrants") in their rhetoric, thus vocalizing a sense of decline, nostalgia and ethnic belonging (Belot, 2021; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2017; Gidron & Hall, 2020; Mudde, 2007) that allows citizens to make sense of public service deprivation.

Scope Conditions

Before we turn to the empirical examination of our argument, it is important to highlight three important scope conditions. First, public service deprivation is not a characteristic specific to rural geographies. It is the result of a lack of socioeconomic and political connections (*connectivity*) that is not necessarily bounded to a rural location (Castells, 2000). This is an important insight, because as we will demonstrate in the next section public service deprivation is pronounced in rural areas, but also characterizes certain urban areas. Our argument rooted in public services allows us to provide an explanation for the geographical patterns in PRR support that is not solely rooted in rural places or rural resentment, but also accounts for the popularity PRR parties within certain urban areas. What is more, our argument about public service deprivation and what this means for voters can be seen as a complement to existing work on rural resentment. In her work on rural Wisconsin, Cramer (2016) showcases how the lived experiences of those residing in rural areas lead to resentment towards liberal, urban elites, in part because people feel that they are ignored and do not get their

fair share of resources, next to having distinct values and lifestyles (p. 23). Our argument shows much affinity with some key aspects of rural resentment as conceptualised by Cramer. What is different is that we suggest that resentment about being ignored by politicians and frustrated about a lack of state resources may not only be something that rural residents experience.

Second, while our argument about how public service deprivation helps explain geographical patterns in PRR party support, we by no means wish to suggest that public service provision is the root cause of the electoral success of PRR parties. The literature thus far has made important strides in showing how large-scale economic developments (e.g., Autor et al., 2016; Colantone & Stanig, 2018, 2019; Emmenegger et al., 2012; Gingrich, 2019; Im et al., 2019; Kurer & Gallego, 2019; Margalit, 2011; Rodrik, 2016) and distinct patterns of growing mobility of people (e.g., Bratsberg et al., 2021; Campo et al., 2021; Dinas et al., 2019; Dustmann et al., 2019; Maxwell, 2019, 2020; Riaz et al., 2021; Schaub et al., 2021)—or the combination of both (Patana, 2020)—coincides with higher support for PRR parties. What we argue here is that the geographical concentration of both economic decline due to globalization and technological change as well as out-migration coincides with distinct patterns of access to public service at the local level. Public service deprivation, we argue, sparks off grievances about being ignored by public officials and not getting one's fair share of resources at the expense of other groups in society, most notably immigrants, which increases the programmatic appeal of PPR parties. The relationship between structural economic changes and population dynamics on the one hand and public service deprivation on the other is clearly endogenous. Changes to the regional and local economic structure due to deindustrialization (Emmenegger et al., 2012; Rodrik, 2016), trade shocks (Autor et al., 2016; Colantone & Stanig, 2018, 2019) or offshoring (Margalit, 2011) reduce the local tax base and reduce the access to public services. Yet at the same time, public service deprivation makes local communities less attractive for companies and businesses at least in part, because it makes it more difficult to attract and retain personnel. Similarly, it may trigger younger generations to move away from deprived places to more connected places. But at the same time population outflows reduce the tax base that aids the access of public services. To isolate the effect of public service deprivation, we exploit a 2010 national reform forcing Italian municipalities at a specific population threshold to share public services through intermunicipal unions or mergers. This allows us to demonstrate that public service deprivation

increases PRR support. In doing so, we follow recent research that exploits changes to the municipal structure as a means to study contextual effects on political behaviour (see for example Harjunen et al., 2021; Koch & Rochat, 2017; Lassen & Serritzlew, 2011).

Third, our argument about the way in which public service deprivation makes people more susceptible to the rhetoric of PRR parties might need to scoped in terms of geographical context. Within democracies, one of the crucial avenues for accountability runs through the capacity of citizens to evaluate the outputs of government, and protest at the ballot box when outputs are bad (Riker, 1988). This is indeed what we find in the Italian context that we examine here, but recent evidence suggests that this might not happen in developing countries in the Global South (Bland et al., 2021; Brinkerhoff et al., 2018). In these contexts, public service deprivation is most pronounced in rural areas, but rural voters seem less likely to translate dissatisfaction with services into dissatisfaction with government (Brinkerhoff et al., 2018), especially in remote rural communities far removed from urban centers (Bland et al., 2021). While some of this might be explained by a low sense of political efficacy and deference to hierarchy in remote rural communities, researchers suggest that the precise reasons why this happens need further investigation (Bland et al., 2021). Understanding how the political consequences of public service deprivation differ across country contexts is an important area for future research.

Urban-Rural Divides and Populist Radical Right Support in Italy

Our analysis focuses on Italy. Italy is a country where the electoral success of PRR parties has one of the longest traditions in Europe (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2007; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020). At the same time, the country is marked by considerable territorial variation when it comes to PRR support, often associated to an urban-rural divide (Kenny & Luca, 2021). What is more, the Italian case provides us with ample variation in public service deprivation, and allows us to exploit a reform that changed the access to local services within Italian municipalities with a certain population threshold. These features allow us to sufficiently measure and estimate the effect of public service deprivation on PRR support. In order

to do so, we in a first step developed a novel dataset of municipal level electoral results for the Italian lower house (*Camera dei Deputati*) in national elections. We combined this electoral data with a host of municipal characteristics, including mean altitude, seismic risk, employment rates, ageing (old-age-dependency ratio), presence of public libraries, share of foreign-born population, share of area covered by forest, and population size. We also add a measure classifying Italian municipalities as either rural or urban based on a classical measure, a combination of population size and density also used by the Italian government, as well as compile our novel measure of public service deprivation. This allows us in a second step to replicate political science findings pointing to more support for PRR parties in rural areas, and demonstrate that public service deprivation helps explain geographical patterns in PRR support beyond rurality alone. Due to the fact that public service provision is likely endogenous to politics, we aim in a third step to exploit the 2010 reform to isolate the effect of public service deprivation in municipalities on PRR support.

As a first step, in Figure 1 we replicate political science findings pointing to more support for PRR parties in rural areas. We focus on votes for the lower house in Italian national elections because these provide us with a measure of PRR support that is further removed from local political dynamics, and as such likely less endogenous to public service provision. We calculate the municipal-level share of votes for PRR parties by dividing the number of votes for PRR parties in each municipality by the total number of votes in that municipality. In the appendix, we report the list of parties that we classify as PRR. We also classify municipalities as rural or urban according to their population size and density. Following the official definition by the Italian National Institute of Statistics, rural municipalities are those with a population smaller than 5,000 inhabitants and density lower than 300 inhabitants per squared kilometre. The results in Figure 1 demonstrate that PRR support has been constantly stronger in rural than in urban Italian municipalities since the 1990s. It also shows how the divide has steadily increased since the 2008 economic crisis. Note that the difference between urban and rural municipalities remains robust even when we control for a host of municipal controls tapping into population and economic characteristics.
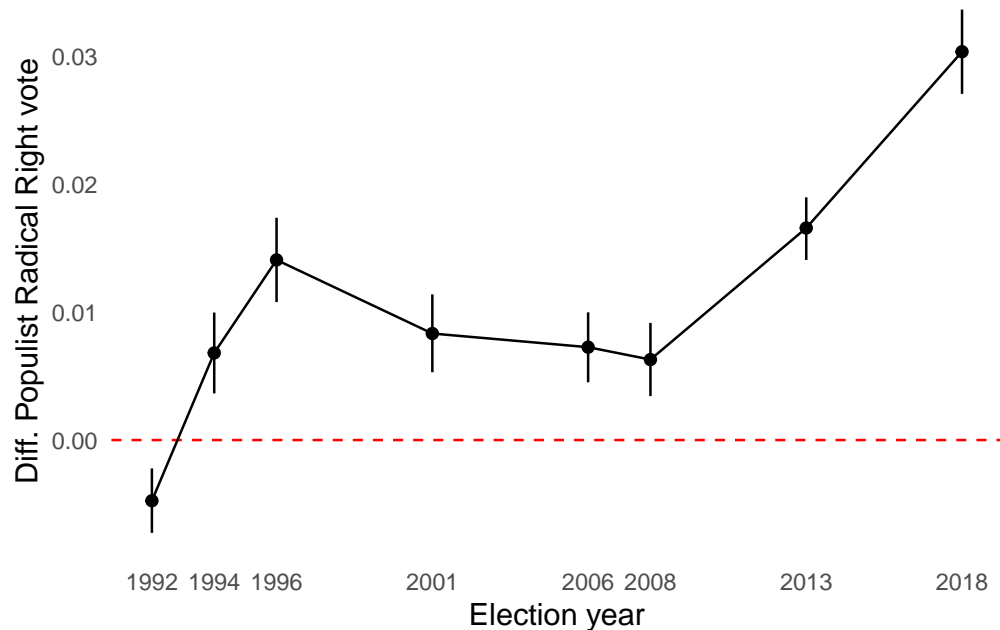
Figure 1: Populist radical right support in rural Italy, 1992–2018

Notes: The figure reports results from an OLS regression of a binary indicator of rural municipality on populist radical right vote share. The model includes province and year fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.

Study 1: Cross-Sectional Evidence from Italian Municipalities

To better understand geographic patterns of PRR support, we replicate the analysis of PRR electoral support with our new, fine-grained measure of public service deprivation. Rather than relying on differences between urban and rural areas based on population or economic development, we suggest that the accessibility of public services is a powerful lens through which to understand how place-based grievances are translated into political demands and behaviour. Conceptually, this means that rather than focusing on how distance to cities, population or economic structure may make rural areas different from urban ones, as is often done in research on the urban-rural divide (Acharya et al., 2016; Broockman, 2013; Cho & Gimpel, 2010;

Table 1: Urban-rural communities and public service deprivation (distance to public service hubs).

	Urban		Rural		Total	
	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.
Distance to service hubs						
1st tertile	1,652	56.2	1,027	19.9	2,679	33.1
2nd tertile	854	29.1	1,837	35.6	2,691	33.3
3rd tertile	432	14.7	2,290	44.4	2,722	33.6
Total	2,938	100	5,154	100	8,092	100

de Benedictis-Kessner & Warshaw, 2020; Primo & Snyder, 2010; Scala & Johnson, 2017; Urban & Niebler, 2014; Warshaw & Rodden, 2012), we focus on public service provision at the local level. So rather than characterising geographical units as either urban or rural based on classical indicators of population size and density as we did above, we build on insights from geography to introduce a fine-grained measure of public service deprivation—that is, low access to public services at the local level (Barca, 2009; Barca et al., 2012; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Our public service deprivation measure captures driving distance to *public service hubs*—municipalities or clusters of neighbouring municipalities featuring (i) a fully functioning train station,[2] (ii) a hospital of DEA first level,[3] and (iii) the full offer of secondary schools. The measure was developed by the Italian governmental agency for territorial cohesion to better target policies for local development (see also Barca, 2009). The map in Figure 3 shows how the measure classifies Italian municipalities.

Table 1 further shows the relationship between the urban-rural measure we used in Figure 1 and our public service deprivation measure. It demonstrates two important points—namely, that, while public service deprivation

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[2]Only small stations dedicated exclusively to regional transport are excluded from the classification.

[3]The hospital of DEA first level offers several services in addition to those of an emergency department. These services include observation, short stay, resuscitation. It carries out diagnostic and therapeutic interventions of general medicine, general surgery, orthopedics and traumatology, and cardiology intensive care. In addition, it ensures the provision of laboratory services of chemical-clinical and microbiological analysis, diagnostic imaging, and transfusion.

Figure 3: Public service deprivation (distance to public service hubs), 2014

Notes: Dots indicate public service hubs. Colors indicate tertiles of distance from hubs.

is definitely a characteristic of rural areas, there is considerable variation between rural areas. Not all rural areas are the same. What is more, a substantial share of urban areas (roughly 35 per cent) are further removed from public services. This suggests that unpacking the dichotomy of urban versus rural areas is important, and can allow us to go a step forward to better understanding PRR support in both rural and urban areas by accounting for what these local communities have in common.

Table 2: Public service deprivation (distance to public service hubs) and populist radical right support.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Distance (km)	0.001***	0.000***		
	(0.000)	(0.000)		
Distance (tertiles, ref. $= 1^{st}$)				
2nd tertile			0.016***	0.009***
			(0.001)	(0.001)
3rd tertile			0.028***	0.013***
			(0.002)	(0.002)
Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Municipal controls		✓		✓
N	16,194	16,194	16,194	16,194
R^2	0.81	0.82	0.81	0.82

Notes: Controls include mean altitude, diff. employment rate 2001-2011, share of population older than 65, share of population younger than 15, share females 2013, share college graduates 2011, share foreigners 2013, population size, income. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

We explore the relationship between public service deprivation and PRR support using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses. As shown in Table 2, PRR support parties increases with public service deprivation. The estimates reported in the Table include national elections held in 2013 and 2018 (i.e., the elections held after that distance from public services was measured). We model public service deprivation in two different ways. Column 1 and 2 report results based on a continuous measure of distance to public service hubs, showing how PRR support increases with kilometric distance.

The fine-grained nature of this measure somehow masks its substantive implications returning coefficient of small size (equivalent to the effect of one kilometre distance from public service hubs). To better appreciate the magnitude of variation in PRR support, we report results using a categorical measure of public service deprivation based on tertiles of distance to public service hubs (Column 3 and 4). All estimates are robust to the addition

of several municipality-level controls collected before 2014 (column 2 and 4), including population size, income, average altitude, the difference in employment rate between 2001 and 2011, share of population older than 65, share of population younger than 15, share of foreigners in 2011, share of females in 2013 and share of college graduates in 2011.

Study 2: Evidence from the 2010 Reform of Municipal Public Service Provision in Italy

Results based on our measure of public service deprivation leave open questions concerning the causal nature of the relationship between public service deprivation and PRR support. In order to identify the causal effect of public service deprivation, we exploit a 2010 Italian administrative reform that forced municipalities of a certain population threshold to manage part of their public services jointly. The reform stemmed from a general effort undertaken by national governments across Europe in the last decade to reduce municipal fragmentation and the burden of administrative costs on state budgets (Swianiewicz et al., 2022: for an overview)(see also Bolgherini et al., 2018: for Italy). The reform offers a unique opportunity to study the electoral consequences of public service deprivation. Before turning to the empirical strategy and results, we provide additional details on the case.

Municipalities constitute the lowest tier of Italian local government covering crucial administrative functions such as local urban planning, roads and transport, local historical and environmental resources, collection and disposal of waste, collection and distribution of water and energy sources, services for economic development and commercial distribution, social, school, vocational training, and other urban services, administrative police. Each municipality is governed by a municipal council chaired by a mayor, who is elected every five years. The number of municipalities in Italy has historically averaged around 8,000. Municipalities were 7,720 at country unification, in 1861, and reached the peak of 8,201 in 2001. In 2016, municipality population size averaged around 7,600 inhabitants, a number close to the European median.

Over the last three decades, the national government has tried to reduce municipal fragmentation through different legislative initiatives, culminating in the 2010 reform that forced small municipalities to jointly provide and
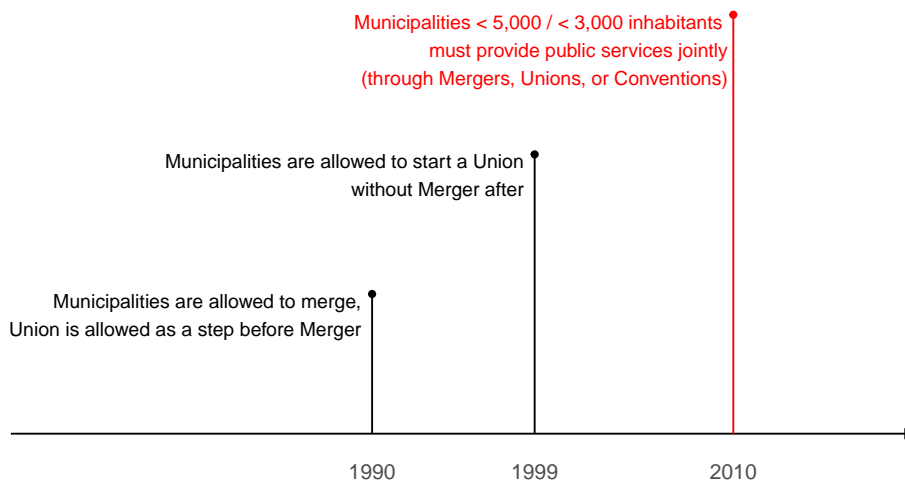
Figure 5: Timeline of intermunicipal-cooperation laws, 1990—2010

manage basic public services. In 1990, a national law (no. 142/1990) introduced several forms of inter-municipal cooperation aiming at economies of scale in local public services provision. In particular, the 1990 law introduced the possibility to form *municipal unions*, a form of municipal cooperation that has assumed a crucial role in subsequent reforms. Small municipalities (smaller than 5,000 inhabitants) were allowed to form municipal unions within which to share public services. In this initial phase, municipal unions were intended as a first step towards stronger municipal integration; after ten years, member municipalities that had formed a union were forced to merge into a new municipality (a procedure, municipal mergers, that has always been possible in Italy but rarely practiced until recent years).

For the first decade after their introduction, not many municipal unions were formed. Between 1990 and 1999, only eight municipal unions were formed, involving 29 municipalities in total. This situation changed in 1999 when a new law (no. 265) relaxed the requirements needed to form unions. In particular, the 1999 law abolished the 5,000 population threshold, allowing municipalities of any size to form unions, and, most importantly, the obligation to merge after ten years. Between 2000 and 2009, 263 new municipal unions were formed, involving 1,320 municipalities in total. But municipal integration only gained real momentum after the reform that lies at the core of our analysis.

The 2008 financial crisis and the rise of austerity-related cuts to administrative budgets brought new impetus to the process of municipal integration (Bolgherini et al., 2018). In 2010, a new reform introduced the so-called compulsory joint management (*gestione associata obbligatoria*) of basic public services (law no. 78/2010). The law established that municipalities below a certain population threshold had to start jointly managing at least three "fundamental functions" by January 1, 2013; at least three other functions by September 30, 2014; all the remaining functions by December 31, 2014. Fundamental functions include (a) administration, financial management, and accounting; (b) general interest public services, including municipal public transport services; (c) real estate registry; (d) urban planning and municipal construction; (e) civil protection and first aid; (f) collection and disposal of waste and collection of related taxes; (g) social services; (h) school construction and management; (i) municipal police and local administrative police; (l) electoral, registry, and statistical services, including the maintenance of civil status and population registers. The law used two different thresholds: a general threshold of 5,000 inhabitants and a special threshold of 3,000 inhabitants for municipalities that were part of a "mountain community" (another kind of sovra-municipal institution). Municipalities whose territory extended over one or more islands were exempted from the reform.

Municipalities were let free to choose how to comply with the law. They could merge—dissolving their municipal institutions into a single administrative entity—form a union—creating a sovra-municipal government deputed to the organisation of shared public service provision—or stipulate a convention—stipulating a contract regulating the joint provision of public services. Conventions, the most flexible and least demanding form of joint management, had to last minimum three years and meet efficiency and efficacy audits by the government. The process of forming unions and mergers was further simplified by a new law introduced in 2014. Figure 5 shows the timeline of the reform process. Figure 6 presents the progressive uptake of the reform by Italian municipalities. Figure 6 displays how the 2010 and 2014 laws were followed by a marked increase in intermunicipal-cooperation through municipal unions and mergers.[4]

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[4]Forty five percent affected municipalities complied with the reform by establishing a municipal union or a merger. The government did not collected systematic data on conventions.
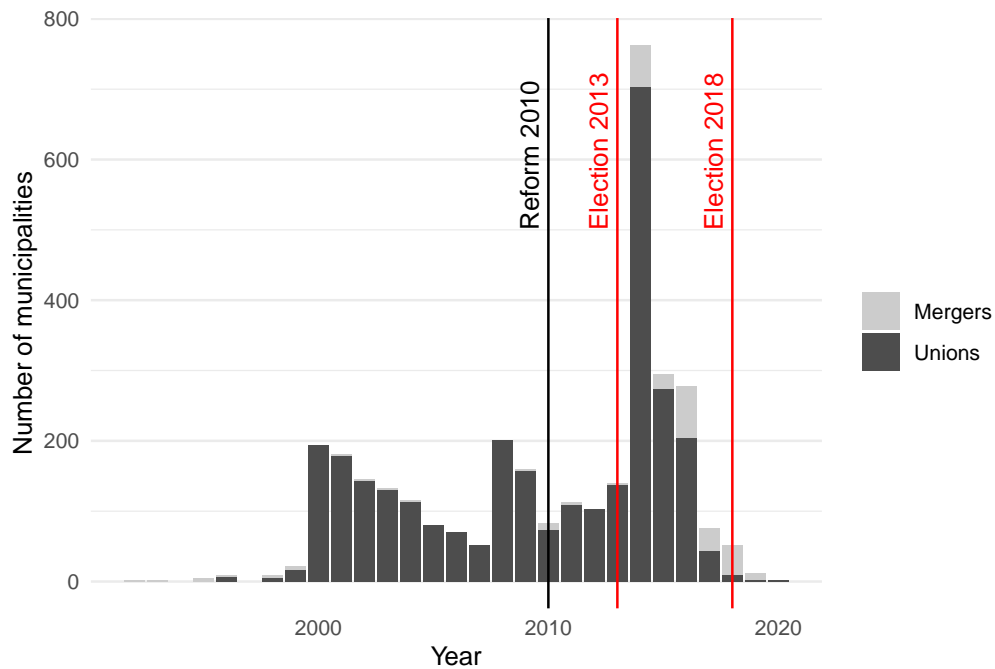
Figure 6: Creation of municipal unions and mergers, 1992–2020

Empirical Strategy and Results

To assess the impact of public service deprivation on electoral support for PRR parties we follow a differences-in-difference (DID) strategy. More precisely, we compare electoral outcomes in elections hold before (2001, 2006, and 2008) and after (2013, and 2018) the 2013 reform deadline in municipalities below the reform population threshold—which were forced to provide public services jointly—and above—which were allowed to remain independent. The underlying logic behind the research design is that we construct the counterfactual change in vote share of PRR parties between elections held before and after the reform for the municipalities that were forced to start sharing public services by using the change in vote for populist radical right parties in unaffected municipalities. In other words, we assume that had the affected municipalites not been forced to share services they would have experienced the same change in vote for PRR parties as the unaffected municipalities.

This strategy yields causal estimates so long as the parallel trend as-

sumption holds. In the present context, this assumption implies that the vote share for PRR parties would follow the same trajectory from May 2014 to June 2019 among treated and non treated municipalities in the absence of the Vaia storm. Our treatment and control group include municipalities that are very different in terms of size, which invalidates the parallel trend assumption (Grembi et al., 2016; Tricaud, 2021). In order to obtain a valid set of treatment and control units, we restrict the sample to a municipalities within a tight population bandwidth around the threshold adopted by the reform (Grembi et al., 2016; Hager & Hilbig, 2021). We perform placebo tests to validate the parallel trend assumptions under this strategy.

To estimate the effect of the reform on vote for PRR parties we use a two-way fixed effects (TWFE) panel estimator, which allow us to make full use of the temporal dimension of the data. Our model estimates the effect of the reform with a binary variable taking value 1 from 2013 for municipalities below the population threshold. We report results for all observations within the population bandwith $h = 1000$, which we selected following the optimal bandwidth procedure developed by Calonico et al. (2014) for regression discontinuity designs. In other words, we include all municipalities whose population before the 2010 reform was up to 1000 inhabitants bigger or smaller than the population threshold of reference.

Our estimating equation is the following:

$$v_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta_{DID} t_i + \gamma_t + \mu_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where i stands for municipality and t for the election year (2001; 2006; 2008; 2013; 2018). $v_{i,t}$ represents the municipal-level share of votes for the populist radical right parties. The binary indicator t_i estimates the effect of the reform. The vectors of dummies γ_t and μ_i identify year and municipality fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level. Under the parallel trend assumption, the main coefficients of interest β_{DID} captures any deviation from a parallel evolution in votes for the populist radical right between the treatment and the control group due to the 2010 law.

For those municipalities merged after the reform, we can only observe the combined vote share of the merged municipalities because electoral records are collected at the municipal level. Given that our estimation strategy is based on each municipality's distance from the population threshold, we need to maintain the municipal structure fixed to the last election before the reform (2008). We thus keep the number of municipalities and their

Table 3: Effect of public service deprivation (exposure to the 2010 reform) on vote for PRR parties

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Exposure to the reform (t)	0.005*	0.008*	−0.008*	−0.005$^+$
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Placebo ($t-1$)		0.007		
		(0.005)		
$t\times$ Foreign share 2008			0.263***	
			(0.039)	
$t\times$ Foreign change 2003-8				0.358***
				(0.054)
Municipality FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	6,195	6,195	6,195	6,195
R^2	0.57	0.57	0.57	0.57
h	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. $^+$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

relative population fixed to 2008, but we substitute the municipal vote share of each merged municipality with the weighted average of vote shares within the merger.[5] We exclude from the sample 15 municipalities for which we are unable to assign a population threshold of reference due to lack of information on mountain community membership at the time of the reform. We also drop 12 island municipalities that were exempted from the reform. The final sample includes 8,071 municipalities, 67 percent of which were affected by the reform.

Column 1 of Table 3 reports results from our baseline model. The regression coefficient associated with the binary variable t indicates that exposure to 2010 reform is associated with a small but statistically and electorally significant increase of 0.005 vote share for populist radical right parties. In column 2 of Table 3, we test the parallel trend assumption adding a placebo binary variable taking value 1 for treated municipalities in the

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[5]As an alternative strategy, we create synthetic municipalities by summing the votes of municipalities that merged after 2010 and assign the synthetic municipal population with a random draw among the merged municipalities. The two strategies return virtually identical results.

year before the reform (2008). The estimated coefficient on the placebo is not statistically different from 0, indicating that vote shares for the PRR in control and treated municipalities were not distinguishable before the reform. These results confirm that reduced local access to public services caused by the 2010 reform increased support for PRR parties in affected municipalities.

We investigate the mechanism through which public service deprivation increases PRR support by examining the heterogeneous treatment effects of the 2010 reform with respect to salience of immigration at the local level. Since PRR parties combine anti-establishment and anti-immigrant rhetoric to garner electoral support, public service deprivation might spark off even more voter discontent in contexts with a higher foreign-born population, because PRR parties can combine sentiments of abandonment by the state with fears that public services will be further crowded out by migrants. We augment our TWFE model by interacting the treatment variable t with a measure of immigration salience at the municipal level. We consider both the share of foreign-born population at the last election before the reform (2008) and the change in migrant population in the previous 5 years. Results in Column 5 and 6 indicates that the positive effect of the reform on PRR support is largely driven by affected municipalities where immigration was more pronounced in the years before the reform.

Robustness Tests and Additional Results

We test the robustness of our results to measurement error of the running variable and the eventuality that municipalities strategically manipulate population statics to select out of the treatment estimating so-called donut-RD regressions (Eggers et al., 2015). We obtain robust results that we report in the appendix. We also estimate the effect of the reform on turnout and find no effect. We report also these results in the appendix. Overall, the additional results support the idea that a reduction in accessibility to public services causes an increase PRR support.

We also test a possible alternative implication of our argument. Our theoretical argument suggests that public service deprivation signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community", and sparks off fears about poor access to public services at the local level to be crowded off even more by migrants. This should fuel the demand for the messages of the populist radical right whose anti-elite and anti-immigrant rhetoric gives

expression to a sense of decline and ethnic belonging (Belot, 2021; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2017; Gidron & Hall, 2020; Mudde, 2007). If it is indeed the case, we should *not* find that public service deprivation increases support for parties advocating for pro-redistribution messages. If voters support parties advocating redistribution this would suggest that public service deprivation fuels demand for more generous public services overall.

To test this implication, we replicate our analyses looking at the electoral performance of *pro-redistribution parties*—namely, left-wing parties and the Five Star Movement in Italy. First, we regress support for pro-redistribution parties in 2013 and 2018 on local isolation. Second, we estimate our two-way fixed effects panel regression using the municipal-level vote share for pro-redistribution parties as outcome variable. We report the results of this empirical exercise in the appendix, showing that the municipalities that were forced to jointly manage public services voted less for pro-redistribution parties after the 2010 reform. The negative and statistically significant coefficient associated with the 2008 placebo also shows that these parties were already experiencing a decreasing trend before the reform in treated municipalities. Overall, these results confirm the idea that low/reduced accessibility to public services makes people more receptive of messages of populist right parties rather than pro-redistribution ones.

Study 3: Evidence from Individual Panel Data

In a final step, we explore a key aspect of the mechanism we propose by examining how public service deprivation fuels anti-immigrant sentiment and thus helps explain how voter discontent about public service provision fuel PRR support parties when local access to public services is reduced by using micro-level data. The results so far indicate that public service deprivation increases PRR support, especially in contexts with higher shares of foreign-born population. To validate these findings, we explore whether public service deprivation increases anti-immigrant sentiment. To do so, we geo-code individual-level panel data representative of the Italian population collected by Itanes based on the implementation of the 2010 municipal service provision reform in Italy. We assemble data from two panel surveys collected between 2001 and 2013 for a total of eight waves.

Table 4: Effect of public service deprivation (exposure to the 2010 reform) on anti-immigrant attitudes.

	Anti-Immigrant Scale		Bad for Culture		Bad for Employment	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Exposure to reform	−0.109	−0.214*	−0.067	−0.115$^+$	−0.054	−0.105$^+$
	(0.096)	(0.107)	(0.054)	(0.060)	(0.054)	(0.061)
Post 2010	−0.531***	−0.571***	−0.221***	−0.243***	−0.326***	−0.345***
	(0.106)	(0.107)	(0.059)	(0.060)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Exposure × Post 2010	0.374*	0.385*	0.201*	0.212*	0.187*	0.186*
	(0.153)	(0.154)	(0.086)	(0.086)	(0.086)	(0.087)
Individual controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Municipal controls		✓		✓		✓
N	4,932	4,932	4,984	4,984	5,023	5,023
R^2	0.15	0.15	0.11	0.12	0.13	0.14

Notes: Controls include wave and region fixed effects, age, gender, education, profession, mean altitude, diff. employment rate 2001-2011, share of population older than 65, share of population younger than 15, share foreigners 2013, share females 2013, share college graduates 2011, population size, income. Standard errors in parentheses. $^+$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

We consider three dependent variables. First, we create two variables based on questions asking respondents how much they agree that immigration is a danger for national identity and culture, and for national employment, respectively. The two variables span from 1 ("not at all agree") to 4 ("totally agree"). Then, we combine these two variables into an additive scale measuring the respondent's overall anti-immigration attitude. We analyze these variables through OLS regressions including a binary variable indicating if the respondent lived in a municipality affected by the reform, a binary variable indicating if the survey response was collected after the 2010 reform, and and interaction term between the two. We further integrate our OLS model with a set of binary variables for survey waves, region fixed effects, individual level control variables capturing the effect of respondent's age, gender, education, and profession, and municipal level control variables as in our previous model for the effect of public service deprivation. Given that the surveys where not collected in the same municipalities across all waves, we have to adopt a more relaxed specification than that adopted in the electoral returns model because we are not able to insert municipality

fixed effects. Due to the restricted number of observations we cannot restrict our sample to municipalities within a narrow population bandwidth around the reform threshold.

Results reported in Table 4 support the idea that public service deprivation fuelled anti-immigrant sentiment in municipalities affected by the reform. Although data limitations prevent us from estimating a properly identified model, this individual-level evidence coupled with previous evidence on electoral returns are in line with our argument that public service deprivation fuels PRR support, in part due to fears that public services will be crowded out by immigrants.

Conclusions

The idea that geography plays an important role in explaining PRR parties success is longstanding and widely accepted. Yet, the mechanisms through which geography shapes PRR politics are much more contentious. Starting from the notion that rural areas provide a more fertile ground for PRR parties that mobilize "rural resentment", this study aims to advance our understanding of how place-based grievances come to shape political outcomes. We introduce new theoretical argument, empirical measure, and present novel causal evidence that allows us to better explain why PRR parties succeed in rural areas, but also in some urban ones. By developing an argument rooted in public service provision at the local level, we aim to theoretically and empirically link place-based grievances to political preferences and behavior. We argue that public service deprivation—the lack of access to public services at the local level—increases the programmatic appeal of PRR parties that combines anti-establishment sentiment and anti-immigration stances. Public service deprivation signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community" and sparks off fears that poor access to public services at the local level might be further deteriorated by the presence of immigrants.

We focus on Italy, a country that has witnessed an early rise of PRR parties and displays considerabld variation in public service deprivation. We empirically substantiate our argument integrating results from three different studies. First, we introduce a fine-grained measure of public service deprivation and show it helps us to understand geographical patterns in PRR support. Our novel measure allows us to account for the significant

differences within rural areas, and make sense of why PRR parties succeed in some rural areas and not in others. It also allows us to account for why PRR parties can also succeed in certain urban settings. These findings help us understand the underpinnings of support for PRR parties in both urban and rural areas through a parsimonious explanation rooted in public service deprivation, without having to resort to a multiple roots argument (see Harteveld et al., 2021).

We also exploit a 2010 national reform of public service provision that forced Italian municipalities at a certain population threshold to provide services jointly. This reform allows us to further examine the link between public service provision at the local level and PRR support, by providing an opportunity to identify the causal effect of public service deprivation on PRR support. In doing so, our study adds to the body of research detailing the effects of reforms adopted in many European countries intended to reduce municipal fragmentation and administrative costs in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession. It also provides a mechanism better nested in time than traditional urban-rural classifications to make sense of changing PRR support in rural areas. Studying how changes to public service provision affect electoral outcomes, allows us to understand why PRR parties became prominent at specific moments in time. Taken together, our results encourage researchers to move beyond traditional classifications of rural and urban areas and adopt more fine-grained measures, which are able to account for how contextual effects vary in both space and time.

Our examination of a specific municipal public service provision reform highlights that reducing access to public services does not have uniform effects across affected municipalities. Forcing municipalities to share public services increases support for PRR parties especially where the share of foreign-born population is high or has been increasing. Our results suggest that reducing access to public services fuels concerns about immigration. In our third study, we further investigated this intuition by examining individual-level panel survey data. Our results confirm the idea that anti-immigrant sentiment deteriorated in the municipalities affected by the 2010 reform. These findings are consistent with the idea advanced in prior work that citizens' concerns about state-provided resources and the composition of the local population are intertwined Cavaille and Ferwerda, 2018; Gennaro, 2022. Increasing public service deprivation combined with a substantial immigrant presence may spur feelings of competition over access to public resources among natives. In these contexts, the rhetoric of PRR parties

combining anti-elite and anti-immigrant stances, finds fertile ground.

That said, our argument should be scoped in important ways. While our argument about how public service deprivation helps us understand geographical patterns in PRR support, we do not suggest that it is the root cause of the electoral success of PRR parties. Our explanation can be combined with other drivers of PRR support highlighted by prior research. Public service deprivation allows us to provide a unified explanation for PRR support in both rural and urban areas, while also making sense of temporal patterns within the same geographical unit. What is more, it remains to be seen if our argument about the way in which public service deprivation fuels PRR support needs to be scoped in terms of geographic context. This is because studies conducted in the Global South show that rural voters seem less likely to translate dissatisfaction with public services into dissatisfaction with government. Understanding the different political consequences of public service deprivation based on the level of economic and state development is a crucial avenue for future research.

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Appendix

Table A1: Populist Radical Right Parties in Italian Elections

| Party	Election Year							
	1992	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
Alleanza Nazionale		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Alternativa Sociale Mussolini					✓			
Azione Sociale Mussolini						✓		
Casapound Italia							✓	✓
Destra Nazionale					✓			
Fiamma Tricolore				✓	✓		✓	
Forza Nuova				✓		✓	✓	
Fratelli d'Italia							✓	✓
Fronte Nazionale				✓				
Futuro e Libertà							✓	
Italia agli Italiani								✓
La Destra							✓	
La Destra - Fiamma Tricolore						✓		
Lega								✓
Lega Lombarda	✓							
Lega Nord		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Movimento Sociale Tricolore			✓					
MSI-DN	✓							
Rifondazione Missina Italiana							✓	

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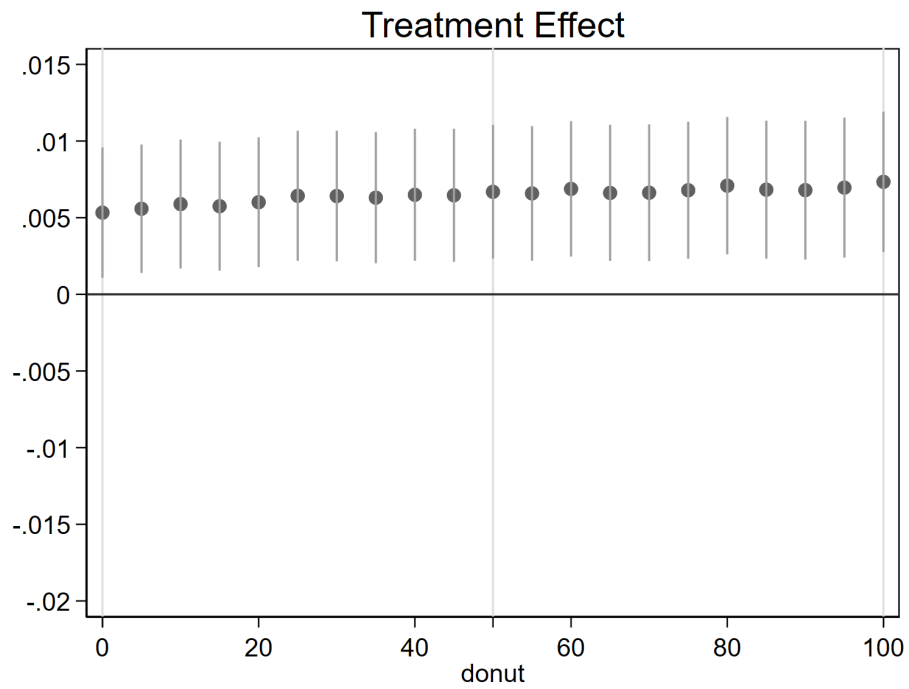
Figure 7: Effect of exposure to the 2010 reform on vote for the populist radical right (donut-hole approach)

Notes: The figure reproduces results from column 1 of Table 3 excluding a number d of observations around the 2010 reform population threshold. The radius d determining whether a municipality is excluded is given on the x-axis.

Table A2: Support for pro-redistribution parties and local isolation

	(1)	(2)
Isolation (ref. = 1st tertile)		
2nd tertile	−0.023***	−0.013***
	(0.002)	(0.002)
3rd tertile	−0.042***	−0.025***
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Controls	No	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes
N	16,194	16,194
R^2	0.60	0.62

Notes: Controls include mean altitude, diff. employment rate 2001-2011, share of population older than 65, share of population younger than 15, share females 2013, share college graduates 2011, share foreigners 2013, population size, income. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. $^+$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A3: Effect of exposure to the 2010 reform on vote for pro-redistribution parties

	(1)	(2)
Exposure to the reform (t)	−0.009**	−0.011**
	(0.004)	(0.004)
Placebo		−0.005*
		(0.003)
N	6,195	6,195
R^2	0.83	0.83
h	1,000	1,000

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. $^+$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A4: Turnout and local isolation

	(1)	(2)
Isolation (ref. $= 1^{st}$ tertile)		
2nd tertile	−0.024***	−0.006***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
3rd tertile	−0.050***	−0.016***
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Controls	No	Yes
Year/Province FE	Yes	Yes
N	16,194	16,194
R^2	0.61	0.67

Notes: Controls include mean altitude, diff. employment rate 2001-2011, share of population older than 65, share of population younger than 15, share females 2013, share college graduates 2011, share foreigners 2013, population size, income. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A5: Effect of exposure to the 2010 reform on turnout

	(1)	(2)
t	−0.001	0.001
	(0.005)	(0.007)
p1		0.004
		(0.007)
N	6,195	6,195
R^2	0.11	0.11
h	1,000	1,000

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.