Blaming migrants doesn't always pay: the political effects of the Ebola pandemic in Italy

M.Boldrini[1] P. Conzo [2,4] S. Fiore [3] R. Zotti[2]

[1]Bocconi University

[2]University of Turin

[3]University of Verona

[4]Collegio Carlo Alberto

EEA 2023, Barcelona

Outline

Introduction (1/3)

▶ If diseases travel with people, mobility is key a spreading factor during a
  pandemic
  ▶ Immigration is a special type of mobility: immigrants may be seen as vehicles
    of contagion
  ▶ Individuals may change their attitudes and behavior because of higher chances
    of contact with the potential importers of a dangerous virus
▶ Difficult to assess whether such health risks and potential contacts are:
  ▶ Empirically grounded
  ▶ Stem just from misperceptions
▶ An exogenous shock that changes citizens' contagion expectations but does
  not turn into an actual change in health risks (ideal test)

Introduction (2/3)

▶ This is the case of the 2014 Ebola outbreak
▶ Differently from the more recent Covid-19 pandemic - did not increase actual
  health risks for Italians
  ▶ But heightened the perceived risks of interacting with immigrants, especially
    those from countries hit by the disease.
  ▶ Political effects of the increased perceived health risks associated with
    immigration, without the confounding effects of real contagion

Introduction (3/3)

▶ What are the political effects of perceived health risks from immigration during a pandemic?

  1. We exploit the natural experiment provided by the Ebola outbreak in 2014
  2. Most of the cases were reported in the West African region
  3. In Italy, only two official cases of Ebola were documented by the WHO

▶ No substantial variation in the actual health risk of Italians!

▶ Yet...higher perceived health risks associated with immigrants from Risk-Ebola countries

▶ Ebola became a salient topic in political competitions

  ▶ Extreme right-wing parties strategically exploited the immigration/health crises to increase citizens' perceived threat of immigration

Introduction
○○○
Results
●
Literature
○○○
Ebola
○○
Data
○
Identification
○○○
Main results
○○○
Robustness
○
Conclusions
○○
Appendix
○○○○○○○○○○○

Results in a nutshell

▶ In municipalities that are more vulnerable to risk-Ebola immigration support for Lega drops by about 1.2 pp

▶ While support for extreme-left parties decreases (0.4 pp) and support for left-wing parties increases (0.6 pp)

▶ Strategically exploiting a crisis to gain support for anti-immigrant policies could prove politically counterproductive

Recent empirical literature (1/3)

1. The political impact of the Ebola crisis (Campante et al., 2020; Adida et al. 2016; Beal et al., 2016, Fluckiger et al. 2019; Kostova, 2019; Gonzalez-Torres and Esposito, 2020)
   - ▶ We study the electoral effect of a health pandemic in a country that was not directly affected by the disease, thereby focusing on the role of perceived health threat

2. The effect of other health pandemics on political and electoral outcomes (Mansour et al. 2020; Leininger and Shaub, 2020; Giommoni and Loumeau, 2020; Adam-Troian et al. 2020; Fernández-Navia et al. 2020; Leromain and Vannoorenberghe, 2022, Picchio and Santolini, 2022)
   - ▶ By focusing on real health risks, could not disentangle whether the political effects of the pandemic were driven by (mis)perceptions or actual contact probabilities

Recent empirical literature (2/3)

3. The change in satisfaction with political parties during severe crises (Atkeson and Maestas, 2012, Healy and Malhotra, 2013, Getmansky and Zeitzoff, 2014, Albertson and Gadarian, 2015, Vasilopoulou and Wagner, 2022.)

   ▶ (a) **Emotional response**; (b) retrospective voting; (c) **prospective voting**

▶ If immigration affects political preferences in normal times, then its effects might be amplified in times of a pandemic

   ▶ The common/external threat could reduce polarization (e.g. rally 'round the flag, Bol et al., 2021)

      ▶ Reducing support for populist and radical parties

   ▶ Heightened insecurity could boost anti-immigration attitudes

      ▶ Fostering support for populist and radical parties

Recent empirical literature (3/3)

4. Increasing support for far-right and right-wing populist parties in EU countries (Otto and Steinhard 2014; Barone et al. 2016; Halla et al. 2017; Edo et al. 2019; Levi et al. 2020; Bracco et al. 2018; Dustmann et al. 2018; Vertier and Viskanic 2018; Steinmayr 2019; Hangartner et al. 2019; Bratti et al. 2020; Gamalerio and Negri, 2023)

5. How electoral outcomes are affected by biased expectations about prospective immigration (Newman and Velez, 2014) often due to media coverage of migration (Benesch et al., 2019) and the spread of fake news (Barrera et al., 2020, Cantarella et al., 2023) that boost immigration worries

Ebola outbreak: stylized facts

▶ The 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa was the largest and most complex since the virus was first discovered in 1976 (WHO, 2017)
  ▶ Started in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia
  ▶ Spread to 7 additional countries: Italy, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Spain, the UK, and the USA
  ▶ In June 2016, the outbreak was declared over, with more than 28,600 people infected and 11,325 people dying (WHO).

▶ Most Ebola-related cases and deaths recorded worldwide were in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone
  ▶ Death toll was much lower when the outbreak spread outside Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia (36 cases and 15 deaths)

Ebola outbreak: public reaction in Italy

▶ Italy experienced two official cases. In late 2014 - early 2015
  ▶ Well understood by public health experts at the time that the likelihood of an
    outbreak of the disease in Italy was extremely low
▶ Despite the almost null risk of contagion, the concern of a potential virus
  spread has also been raised in Italy
  ▶ A national poll revealed that more than 40% Italians were worried or very
    worried about the Ebola diffusion (SWG, 2014)
▶ Ebola received large media coverage in Italy, often associated with
  immigration-related issues especially salient during political competitions
  ▶ Tweets 2a   ▶ Tweets 2b
▶ Ebola-related words in Twitter are more prominent in municipalities having
  large historical clusters of regular immigrants from West Africa   ▶ Tweets 3

Data (1/2)

▶ Electoral outcomes are obtained from the Italian Ministry of Interior
  ▶ Day of the election, size of the electorate and turnout, number of blank and
    null ballot papers, number of candidate mayors and share of votes obtained

▶ Municipalities' characteristics, such as total population and share of migrants,
  are obtained from the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT)'s website

▶ The amount of taxable income available is retrieved from the Ministry of
  Economy and Finance

▶ The geographical position and presence of SPRAR reception centres active
  across Italy are collected from the Italian Ministry of the Interior

▶ ▶ sum stats

Empirical strategy

▶ We rely on a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) approach:

$$Y_{i,t,r} = \beta_1 \text{WA Migrants Share}_{i,r,2004} + \beta_2 E_t + \beta_3(\text{WA Migrants Share}_{i,r,2004} \\ * E_t) + \beta_4 X_{i,t,r} + \lambda_i + \delta_r + \delta_r * D_t + \epsilon_{i,t,r}$$

(1)

▶ Y is the electoral outcome for municipality i, region r, and year t

▶ *WA Migrants Share* identifies our treatment variable in municipality i, region r, and year 2004

▶ E is the election-year dummy variable, equal to 1 when elections are held at time t with 2014 being the Ebola period

▶ X is a set of control variables (resident migrants/pop, the electorate, age structure, taxable income, presence of SPRAR) for municipality i, region r, and year t

▶ λ_i, δ_r and $\delta_r * D_t$ capture, respectively, municipality, region and region-by-year fixed effects

Treatment variable (1)

1. We exploit historical clusters of regular West African immigrants across Italian municipalities

$$
\text{WA Migrants Share}_{i,2004} = \frac{\text{Count of RE resident migrants}_{i,2004}}{\text{Count of total resident migrants}_{i,2004}} \quad (2)
$$

▶ To identify the Risk-Ebola (RE) cluster, we consider a broad definition of the risk-Ebola macro-area: West Africa region (total of 16 countries)
   ▶ Including the three countries most severely hit by the Ebola outbreak: Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia

Identification

▶ Use two electoral waves in Italian municipalities (2009 and 2014), plus an earlier one (2004) to test for the absence of pre-trends

▶ Electoral outcomes are compared time and across municipalities characterized by different levels of (perceived) vulnerability to immigration-related health risks

   ▶ TREAT: historical clusters of immigrants from countries that were later affected by the Ebola pandemic, i.e. West African countries

▶ The geographic concentration of "risk-Ebola" immigrants would capture:

   1. The increase in citizens' expectations of future arrivals when the Ebola shock hit the headlines
   2. Relative importance of regular immigrants with origins in West Africa

Main results (1/2)

Lega

Dummy treatment   Continuos treatment
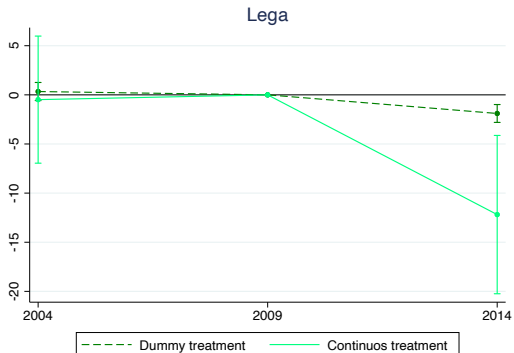
▸ Table 1

Main results (2/2)
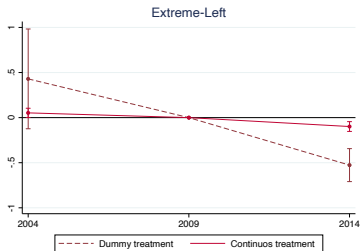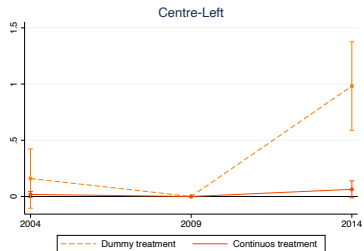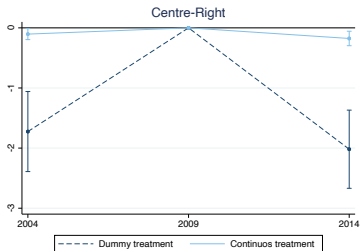
Takeway message

▶ After excluding the presence of significant pre-trends, the Ebola outbreak in 2014 caused a significant loss in the vote share of Lega

▶ Municipalities with above-median exposure to risk-Ebola migration experience a drop in the vote share of Lega by around 1.2 pp
  ▶ One-standard-deviation increase in the exposure to the risk-Ebola migration index leads to a decrease in vote share for Lega by 0.4 pp

▶ Voters shifted support from Lega and extreme-left parties towards more moderate, established left parties

Robustness checks

▶ Add new and post-Ebola election rounds (the year 2019) to control for long-run effects (▸ 2019)

▶ Placebo tests (using different years and nationalities) (▸ Placebo)

▶ Treatment with alternative denominator (▸ Alternative Denominator)

▶ Alternative treatment (proximity of municipalities to active refugees reception centres) (▸ Alternative Treatment)

▶ Immigrants' self-selection (▸ Self-selection)

Introduction
000
Results
○
Literature
000
Ebola
00
Data
○
Identification
000
Main results
000
Robustness
○
Conclusions
●○
Appendix
00000000000

Concluding remarks

▶ We study the political effects of perceived health risks associated with immigration in Italy, exploiting the exogeneity of the Ebola pandemic

▶ Ebola caused a major public reaction, with right-wing politicians strategically claiming citizens were at risk because of ongoing immigration

▶ We compare the vote share of the major extreme right-wing party over two electoral waves and across municipalities with different levels of (perceived) exposure to immigration-related health risks

▶ Results document a shift in political support from Lega (and other extreme parties) to moderate left-wing parties

▶ The heightened health risks from immigration led to a substantial loss in political support, mostly for politicians leveraging the health-immigration threat for personal gains

Introduction
000
Results
0
Literature
000
Ebola
00
Data
0
Identification
000
Main results
000
Robustness
0
Conclusions
0●
Appendix
00000000000

▶ Thanks!

Roberto Zotti - roberto.zotti@unito.it

Figure: Dynamics of Ebola and its salience in Italian tweets

(a) Ebola cases and Ebola-related tweets

(b) Ebola cases and Ebola-Migration related tweets

Note:

▶ Back

Figure: Dynamics of Ebola and its salience in Italian tweets

(a) Residuals of Ebola-Migration tweets dynamics not explained by variation in n of cases

Note:

Figure: Dynamics of Ebola, salience in Italian tweets and elections

(a) Low and high presence of risk-Ebola migrants

Note:

Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
WA migrants share	6.029	8.834
Share of votes Lega	3.609	11.342
Share of votes centre-right	1.242	5.686
Share of votes centre-left	1.408	7.25
Share of votes extreme left	0.618	3.709
Electorate (log)	7.444	1.17
Ageing	1.965	1.567
Share of immigrants	6.478	4.138
Taxable income	23.266	2.732
Presence of SPRAR	0.006	0.076
Observations	6950	

▸ Back

Introduction
ooo
Results
o
Literature
ooo
Ebola
oo
Data
o
Identification
ooo
Main results
ooo
Robustness
o
Conclusions
oo
Appendix
ooooo●oooooo

Main Results 1/2

	(1)	(2)
	Share of votes	
	Lega	
WA migrants share (above median)#2004	0.587	
	(0.464)	
WA migrants share (above median)#2009	-	
WA migrants share (above median)#2014	-1.155**	
	(0.450)	
WA migrants share#2004		0.037
		(0.031)
WA migrants share#2009		-
WA migrants share#2014		-0.059**
		(0.028)
Observations	9,264	9,264
R-squared	0.062	0.061
Number of municipalities	2,321	2,321
Region by year fixed effects	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

▶ Back

Main Results 2/2

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
			Share of votes			
	Centre-Right	Centre-Left	Extreme-Left	Centre-Right	Centre-Left	Extreme-Left
WA migrants share (above median)#2004	-1.172***	0.130	0.359			
	(0.313)	(0.131)	(0.264)			
WA migrants share (above median)#2009	-	-	-			
WA migrants share (above median)#2014	-1.611***	0.562**	-0.376***			
	(0.307)	(0.250)	(0.090)			
WA migrants share#2004				-0.038**	0.009	0.016
				(0.019)	(0.007)	(0.017)
WA migrants share#2009				-	-	-
WA migrants share#2014				-0.045**	0.037**	-0.008*
				(0.019)	(0.014)	(0.005)
Observations	6,950	6,950	6,950	6,950	6,950	6,950
R-squared	0.072	0.061	0.051	0.069	0.061	0.052
Number of municipalities	2,321	2,321	2,321	2,321	2,321	2,321
Region by year fixed effects	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

▸ Back

Robustness check - 2019

	(1)	(2)
	Share of votes	
	Lega	
WA migrants share (above median)#2004	0.650	
	(0.466)	
WA migrants share (above median)#2009	-	
WA migrants share (above median)#2014	-1.168***	
	(0.450)	
WA migrants share (above median)#2019	0.915*	
	(0.522)	
WA migrants share#2004		0.041
		(0.031)
WA migrants share#2009		-
WA migrants share#2014		-0.060**
		(0.028)
WA migrants share#2019		0.012
		(0.037)
Observations	9,264	9,264
R-squared	0.062	0.061
Number of municipalities	2,321	2,321
Region by year fixed effects	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

▸ Back

Robustness check - Placebo

	(1)	(2)	(3)
		Share of votes	
		Lega	
Share of Asian migrants#2004	-0.020		
	(0.016)		
Share of Asian migrants#2009	-		
Share of Asian migrants#2014	-0.006		
	(0.017)		
Share of South American migrants#2004		0.014	
		(0.012)	
Share of South American migrants#2009		-	
Share of South American migrants#2014		0.028*	
		(0.017)	
WA migrants share#2003			-0.332
			(0.217)
WA migrants share#2008			-
WA migrants share#2013			-0.169
			(0.138)
Observations	6,950	6,950	296
R-squared	0.086	0.086	0.111
Number of codiceistat	2,321	2,321	99
Region by year fixed effects	YES	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

▸ Back

Robustness check - Treatment with Alternative Denominator

	(1)	(2)
	Share of votes	
	Lega	
WA migrants share (above median)#2004	0.338	
	(0.470)	
WA migrants share (above median)#2009	-	
WA migrants share (above median)#2014	-1.895***	
	(0.464)	
WA migrants share#2004		-0.487
		(3.299)
WA migrants share#2009		-
WA migrants share#2014		-12.186***
		(4.109)
Observations	6,949	6,949
R-squared	0.089	0.089
Number of municipalities	2,320	2,320
Region by time fixed effects	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

▶ Back

Robustness check - Alternative Treatment

	(1)	(2)
	Share of votes	
	Lega	
RCC proximity above median#2004	-0.533	
	(0.489)	
RCC proximity above median#2009	-	
RCC proximity above median#2014	-0.930*	
	(0.480)	
RCC proximity#2004		-0.757
		(1.168)
RCC proximity#2009		-
RCC proximity#2014		-4.378***
		(1.300)
Observations	6,946	6,946
Number of municipalities	2,319	2,319
Controls	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

▶ Back

Robustness check - Immigrants' self-selection

	(1) WA migrants share
Two years before elections	0.074
	(0.092)
One year before elections	0.037
	(0.080)
One year after elections	-0.026
	(0.082)
Two years after elections	-0.107
	(0.095)
Observations	34,625
Controls	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

▸ Back