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What Motivates Immigration Policy in Italy and the U.S.? Economics or political expediency

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— Section 1:Introduction —

Background:

The topic of Immigration and Immigration Policy has long been a contentious issue in American and Italian politics. Prominent political leaders with a tremendous voter base such as Donald Trump and Giorgia Meloni have used nativist political arguments and taken bold stances against immigration in their campaigns to appeal to voters, framing immigration as a threat to economic growth, national security and economic security of native workers. Yet, scholarly economic and political research data reveal little empirical evidence to support the arguments against immigration made in these political campaigns.

Animating Question:

As an immigrant myself, the question guiding the analysis of this paper is why the public often disregards the economic evidence that immigrants do in fact benefit the economy by working in less-desired jobs, contributing to population growth and increased innovation and entrepreneurship. To what extent do economic realities or political expediency guide immigration policies in both nations?

Method:

I first reviewed the history of immigration policy shifts in Italy and the US. I explore the social, historical, and economic contexts behind these policies to assess the extent to which immigration policy was shaped by political or economic factors.

Through literature reviews of scholarly articles, I better understood the current political and economic arguments surrounding immigration, including both supporting and opposing viewpoints, and helped address counterarguments.

Finally, I analyzed public opinion polls on immigration, to gain insight into how immigration attitudes are affected by the interaction of policies, political debates, and economics. I also conducted a survey of current undergraduate students to explore how higher education influences one's view on immigration.

Conclusion

The interplay between economic demands for immigrant labor and political opportunism in exploiting anti-immigrant sentiments for electoral gains explains the shifts between amnesties and crackdowns in immigration policies over time in Italy and the United States. Both countries have histories of shifting between open and restrictive immigration policies based on economic needs and the needs of the political party in power. While arguments for immigration are largely supported by economic data, arguments against immigration tend to be political rather than evidence-based.

Public discourse on immigration is more susceptible to politically expedient nativist rhetoric propagated through media, capitalizing on deep biases, than to empirical economic realities which are less accessible to the general public. Theories of political psychology including System Justification, Social Identity Theory, Motivated Reasoning as well as Group Theory help explain how psychological biases can make people believe false information about immigration, particularly when such misinformation is strategically leveraged through media and political messaging to shape public attitudes.

— Section 2: History of Immigration: Claim regarding immigration policy —

This section explores how economic needs and politicians capitalizing on anti-immigrant sentiments for electoral gains have historically influenced immigration policies in Italy and the United States.

The case of open policies

Periods of growth and labor shortages created demand for immigrant labor, leading to open policies like guest worker programs in the United States and Froschi Law in Italy. From 1943 to 1963, as Americans were called into service for the military in WWII and the war with Korea, the war demanded more than the US labor force could provide and created a labor shortage. The Bracero Program which allowed the "import of Mexican labor" to agricultural and railroad jobs left vacant by the war was created to solve this shortage (Cohn, 2015) . Similarly, from the 1970 to 1980s, Italy experienced rapid economic growth. Italy's GDP, which was approximately half of Britain's in 1950, grew to 87% of Britain's GDP by 1973 (MacroTrends). During this period the first Italian law on immigration, the 1986 Foschi Law passed, which aimed for equal treatment of immigrants, providing them with health, welfare, and education access (Bernardin, 2013). This law also included a mass legalization and amnesty program that provided legal protections for over 100,000 illegal immigrants, and allowed family reunification as Italy suffered from a labor shortage due to the mass migration of Italian citizens.

In the US, the Civil Rights Movement and Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned discrimination based on race, prompted the 89th United States Congress and President Lyndon B. Johnson to switch immigration policies from a race-based to a skill-based system. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act abolished the quota-by-nationality system, ending the era of exclusion based on race for immigrants such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. This was a time of significant

economic growth, with rising GDP and increasing demand for a skilled workforce, tying open policies with economic growth.

The case of restrictive policies

During the 1990s in Italy, high unemployment created resentment towards immigrant workers and episodes of racist violence against immigrants increased, even if structural demand remained for immigrant labor as the manufacturing, textiles and agricultural industry mainly filled by immigrants remained understaffed (Bernardin, 2013).

Right-wing governments exploited economic anxieties and nativist fears for political gain and, when in power, passed more restrictive policies, even when labor shortages persisted. Politicians also saw security fears as an opportunity to stoke xenophobia and an "in-group mentality" and justify harsher policies in the name of law and order.

Right-wing movements and parties gained support campaigning on anti-immigration rhetoric for cultural unity and law and order throughout the early 1990s and Lega Nord, a right-wing political party, gained a prominent role in Italian politics. Lega Nord, which originally campaigned for Northern Italy, a wealthier region of Italy, to separate from the federal government and criticized the federal government's waste, adopted a more anti-immigrant and anti-EU stance and criticized immigrant integration policies as a waste of wealthier Italians' tax money. Lega Nord's rise exploits regional differences in wealth, framing immigrants as a threat to Northern Italy's prosperity by using taxpayer money and cultural integrity, to gain support for anti-immigration platform in the North.

The pressure from the increasingly popular right-wing parties led to the 1990 Martelli Law that implemented restrictive entry quotas for immigrants based on their countries of origin, and the 1995 Dini Decree that further limited this quota to 25,000 immigrant workers annually,

despite demand for low-cost immigrant labor. Amnesty policies were limited to only illegal workers that had a job for at least four months during 1994.

The US also had its own history of exclusionary immigration policies. Notably, President Arthur passed The Chinese Exclusion Act during the Great Depression of 1882 to 1885, one of the most restrictive immigration policies banning skilled and unskilled Chinese laborers for 10 years (Cohn, 2015). State sponsored discrimination increased prejudice and racism within the US and made it hard for Chinese immigrants to assimilate.

In 1910, the Dillingham Commision established by Congress published argued that mass migration was damaging American culture and society, thus immigration must be blocked. Following the report, the 1917 Immigration Act was introduced which banned a long list of groups from entering the US (including illiterate individuals over 16), referencing the Dillingham Report. It established the "Asiatic-Barred Zone" which excluded immigrants from Asia and the Pacific Islands under all circumstances.

WW1 fueled nativist arguments - citizens argued immigrants would never assimilate given their odd dress and speech. Suspicion also grew that immigrants competed for their jobs (Kahloon, 2023). The 1921 Emergency Quota Act drastically restricted immigration, allowing just 3% of migrants entry under a new quota system.

Politicization of immigration policy

Historical analysis reveals that immigration policy has often been deeply politicized in both Italy and the United States, as the party in power seeks to shape the trajectory of openness or restriction.

In Italy, right-leaning governing coalitions have implemented major restrictive reforms, including the 1986 Foschi Law, 1995 Dini Decree, 2002 Bossi-Fini Act, and 2009 "Safety

Package." Conversely, center-left administrations have typically enacted more progressive reforms oriented toward openness, humanitarian concerns and immigrant rights, such as the 1986 Foschi Law and 1998 Turco-Napolitano Law.

In the U.S, in addition to the federal government, the ruling party at the state level also plays an out-sized role in immigration policy due to devolution - the transfer of power from federal to state/local authorities. In Arizona, which has voted Republican in every Presidential election from 2000 to 2016, a series of anti-immigrant policies were introduced from 2004 to 2010 (Jaggers, 2014). The 2006 Proposition 300 prohibited undocumented people from receiving in-state tuition and financial aid at public universities and the 2010 SB 1070 allowed law enforcement to increase police inspection of undocumented people in Arizona. SB 1070 has been criticized for unfairly targeting Hispanic individuals and undermines the trust and fairness of the Hispanic community. Meanwhile, California, which voted Democrat in every Presidential election since 1992, enacted the 2011 California Dream Act allowing undocumented minors to receive financial aid and in-state tuition. Texas, controlled by Republican Governor Todd, recently passed an unconstitutional anti-immigration SB 4 bill which makes illegal immigrants punishable under state crime, even if "immigration enforcement if a federal responsibility" (Garcia, 2023).

This pattern shows the power of the party in power to dramatically impact the immigration policy depending on its ideology and priorities, beyond the economic conditions of the country and the state. By emphasizing border security and exclusion over integration and pathways to citizenship, the governing party shapes the lived experiences of immigrants. Their policies influence whether immigrants feel integrated or marginalized in society, whether they have opportunities to fully participate in civic life or remain living in fear and in the shadows.

The policies impact the overall social fabric - the sense of belonging, networks and bonds that tie the society together across all ethnic, cultural and national origin groups. Both the Italian and the U.S. cases demonstrate how immigration often becomes a politicized issue, at the federal and state levels.

— Section 3: Empirical Support For and Against Economic and Political Arguments —

The debate surrounding immigration policies are often framed by competing economic and political arguments. Economic arguments emphasize the benefits immigrants provide to the labor market and economic growth. On the other side, critics raise political concerns around national security, cultural identity, and the perceived strain that immigrants put on the local job market and social services. Before analyzing the public's opinion on immigration, it is important to provide evidence for and against the key arguments made by both supporters and opponents of immigration, to see which factors influence the public's view on the topic.

<u>Arguments for Immigration</u>

Proponents of immigration frequently cite empirical economic evidence and research that emphasizes the positive contributions immigrants make to their host countries. The core arguments supporting more open immigration policies include immigrant's contributing to long term economic growth through exceptional entrepreneurship, innovation, highly skilled work and their ability to fill the gaps created by labor shortages.

Immigrants contribute significantly to the creation of new businesses, which facilitates job growth. Although comprising only 15% of the US workforce, immigrants accounted for around 25% of entrepreneurs and are 3 times more likely to start a firm in the US. Over 30% of new firms have at least one immigrant founder, and these firms created approximately 1.5 million jobs annually over the past three decades (Bahar, 2017). Jones (2023) also found that

immigrants are significantly more likely to start companies and generate more jobs than they take from the public. In Italy, a report also found that foreign entrepreneurs have significantly increased whilst local entrepreneurs have decreased. In 2019, the number of foreign entrepreneurs made up more than 30% of entrepreneurs in Italy (InfoMigrants, 2020).

Also, STEM degree holders drive innovation and productivity growth through patent creation, technological and research capabilities that raise economic output. Immigrants are disproportionately represented in STEM (23% of all STEM workers) because the US gives preference to high skilled immigration (American Immigration Council, 2022). Therefore, immigrants contribute to long-run US economic growth due to their innovation and employer multiplier effect. Since every STEM job creates 2.5 additional jobs at the local level, each STEM worker also has a job-multiplier effect of 2.5. (Zaiour and Peri, 2022).

The halting of visas for almost 2 years due to the COVID-19 Pandemic shed light on the importance of immigrants in filling the gap of labor shortages in certain sectors of their host nations. As the economy recovered in 2021, employers in the US found it difficult to fill jobs associated with the loss of foreign workers, which is evident by the 10.1 million unfilled jobs domestically, especially in the hospitality and food-related services industry. In Italy, historical analysis shows immigrants fill labor shortages, especially in low-wage jobs such as in the family care sector, enabling higher productivity among native workers who can take skilled roles (Bernardin, 2013).

The arguments present that the presence of immigrant labor in both low and high skilled employment allow immigrants to contribute to strong economic growth in their host countries, and future immigration are further forecasted to increase GDP by 2% over the next 10 years

(Costa, 2024). It highlights the empirical evidence that underscores the importance of immigrants for the local labor market and economic growth in both Italy and the US.

<u>Evidence Against Immigration</u>

Despite the economic advantages, critics cite national security concerns, strain on social services, labor market competition and cultural identity as reasons to limit immigration. Some opposing immigration argue that immigrants displace native workers or suppress wages. For example, Donald Trump stated in a 2015 speech, "They're taking our jobs. They're taking our manufacturing jobs. They're taking our money. They're killing us", alleging immigrants are taking away employment opportunities from US citizens (Hoban, 2017).

Opponents argue that large influxes of immigrants can strain social services and public resources in host countries. There are concerns that immigrants may take advantage of welfare benefits and publicly funded social services like housing at the expense of native citizens. Right-wing political parties, such as Italy's Lega Nord emphasize prioritizing national citizen's access to these social benefits over immigrants (Ambrosini, 2011).

National security is frequently cited as a major argument against open immigration policies. Incidents of crimes committed by immigrants are highlighted to fuel public sentiment that immigration compromises safety and requires stricter security laws like expelling immigrants. When a woman was killed by a Romanian immigrant in 2007, the media reported on this story extensively, which convinced Italians that they live in a very dangerous country due to crimes and illegal immigration. Recently, in the US, Florida's Governor DeSantis has linked illegal immigrants to "the leading cause of death for people 18 to 45 [...] the fentanyl overdose", framing illegal immigrants as drug smugglers and compromising the safety of Americans (Rose,

2022). The media portrayals and politicians' rhetoric that links immigrants to crime fuel demands for stricter policies such as deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Advocates of cultural preservation view large-scale immigration as a threat to social cohesion and national identity. There are worries that immigrants may never fully assimilate into the host culture. As mentioned above, The 1910 Dillingham Commision portrayed mass contributed to the 1917 Immigration Act which banned many individuals from entering the US, including all from Asia (Cohn, 2015). Restrictionists view immigrants as outsiders that destroy national heritage, and White nationalist groups opposite immigration to maintain ethnic homogeneity.

In summary, critics of immigration cite a range of concerns, including perceived burdens on public services, national security risks perpetuated through media narratives, threats to cultural identity and social unity, and displacement of native workers. Political gains from framing immigration as a threat also lead critics to propose stricter policies. In February 2024, Speaker Johnson, and his caucus killed a bipartisan immigration reform bill because Trump wanted to benefit from immigration issues in his campaign, prioritizing political strategy over legislation (Ramirez and Madarang, 2024). These arguments are frequently propagated by restrictionist politicians and fuel calls to limit immigration.

Counter Arguments

Counterpoints challenge the critiques against immigration through well-researched evidence.

Regarding the concern that immigrants are a burden on the social services and tax system, data from Italy in 2019 revealed foreign workers paid 18 billion euros in taxes, outweighing 17.5 billion euros in public spending on migrants. Additionally, although

comprising only 4% of the population, foreign workers were responsible for 9.5% of the Italian GDP that year through what they produce (InfoMigrants, 2020). In the US, due to the high levels of upward mobility, second and third generation immigrants make substantial net positive fiscal contributions of $1,700 and $1,300 respectively, contributing to tax revenues more than they consume public and social services, benefiting the US economy (Bahar, 2017).

Evidence does not support the portrayal of immigrants as criminals and drug smugglers. Available data that shows that immigrants are 60% less likely to be incarcerated than all US-born men, and 30% less likely compared to White US-born men. A London School of Economics study also found that crimes by foreigners across Italy have decreased even if Asylum permits increased from 2006 until 2016 (Di Carlo, 2018). Responding to Gov. Desantis's claim linking fentanyl and illegal immigrants, only 0.2% of illegal immigrants had fentanyl on them at the time of border crossing, and fentanyl is known as a drug that is smuggled by US citizens for US citizens (Vignarajah, 2023).

Lastly, regarding labor market concerns, Nobel-prize winning Economist, Michael Card found no effect on the wages or unemployment rates of less-skilled US workers, as an effect of the influx of immigrants in Florida. In Italy, even during the high level of unemployment in 1990, labor shortages in industries worked mainly by immigrants persisted. There is also little to no competition from foreign immigrants in the professional work environment in Italy due to the presence of very closed professional associations that have legal limits. In the US, as stated previously, immigrants' entrepreneurial nature and high skill workers leads to more job creation and growth. Additionally, many jobs worked by undocumented immigrants in the US are typically jobs that are not wanted by Americans, which are physically demanding such as "gutting fish or work on farm fields" (Hoban, 2017).

In summary, counterarguments refute that immigration strains social services through evidence of immigrants' positive fiscal impacts. Fears over immigration increasing crime rates lack empirical support, while labor market concerns are contested by findings that immigrants fill labor shortages, create jobs through entrepreneurship, and have limited impact on native wages and employment, particularly in low-skilled sectors unwanted by locals.

— Section 4: Public Survey Results: —

Surveys on attitudes toward on immigration in Italy and the United States showhow economic factors and rhetoric from politicians and media outlets shape the public's view on immigration.

Survey Used:

I analyzed US public opinion using the *Gallup Immigration Survey* conducted via telephone interviews on June 1 - 22, 2023. The survey features a random sample of 1,013 adults (18 years old and older), residing in all 50 U.S. States and the District of Columbia.

I also analyzed Italian public opinion from the *Pew Research Center*'s Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey, which involved face-to-face interviews in Italian between May 25 - July 8, 2018. The Italian sample consisted of 1,043 randomly selected adults (18 years old and older) living in urban municipalities of Roma, Milano, Napoli, Torino and Palermo.

It is important to note that while the US survey captured both urban and rural populations, the Italian survey included only urban residents. The discrepancy in sample composition should be considered when interpreting the results. Since refugee camps are primarily located in urban centers like Milano and Roma, and immigrants are concentrated in urban areas, the Italian survey exclusively interviewing urban residents will mean that the Italian respondents may have more frequent interactions with immigrants in their day-to-day life.

Results - US

The public opinion responses contradicts economic data that demonstrate the positive impact of immigrants' contribution to the system through tax payments and increasing job opportunities, and aligns closer with right-wing politicians that portrays immigrants as worsening crime, taking jobs away and using taxpayers money.

Survey results suggest 41% of respondents expressed a desire for decreased immigration, while 26% favored an increase, and 31% believed it should remain at the current level.

When asked about how immigrants impact "the crime situation" in the US, 47% responded "worse", while only 5% indicating an improvement, and 47% cited "not much effect". This suggests a significant portion of respondents perceive immigrants to have a negative effect on crime in the US, linking immigrants with criminality, while a very small minority see them as improving the situation, with nearly half expressing a neutral stance. It showcases the impact the media and politicians have on perpetuating immigrants as criminals to the public.

18% of respondents cited immigrants for making the job opportunities better for them and their family, whilst 26% linked immigrants with worsening the labor market for their households; 47% maintained a neutral stance. The net difference of 8% between perceived negative and positive associations demonstrates the broader influence of political rhetoric and media portrayal that depicts immigrants as labor market competitors, overshadowing the positive effects indicated by economic research and data.

18% perceived immigrants as positive contributors to social services and the welfare system, while 44% viewed immigrants as a burden to the system; 37% of respondents maintained a neutral stance.

In contrast, when asked about immigration's effect on "the economy in general", 39% of Americans perceived immigration for improving the economy, whereas 38% attributed

immigration for a worse economic outcome. This divergence in opinion from the perspectives on labor market competition and social services highlights the divided nature of views on immigration as whole. It could also be argued that perceptions of labor market competition and taxation are more immediate and tangible to individuals on a daily basis, whereas the broader economic landscape may seem more distant and beyond their direct influence.

Results - Italy

In Italy, negative perceptions of immigrants prevail, even surpassing those of Western European counterparts.

Respondents were presented with a binary choice: "Immigrants today make our country stronger because of their work and talents" OR "Immigrants today are a burden on our country because they take our jobs and social benefits" to assess their opinion on immigration and the labor market and social services.

An overwhelming 54% of Italians endorsed the latter view, compared to only 37% and 39% of French and Spanish respondents, respectively. Merely, 12% of Italians regarded immigration as a strength to the labor market. This statistic highlights the extent to which right-wing political and media rhetoric plays a role in shaping the views of Italians on immigrants.

It is important to note that Italy has a low press freedom index, which measures journalists' freedom to report, compared to France and Spain. The index rates Italy as 72.05/100 compared to 75.37 and 78.72 for Spain and France, respectively (Watson, 2023). This may signal that Italian media and news are more censored, and journalists are more likely to be harassed for anti-government reports.

Cultural unity and integration also emerged as a wide concern for Italian respondents. Only 10% of Italians believed that immigrants want to adapt to the customs and ways of Italian life, in stark contrast to 51% of French and 46% of Spanish respondents. 61% of Italians viewed immigrants as unwilling to integrate. This exposes that most Italians are concerned with immigrants' ability to integrate in society, potentially indicating support for restrictive policies to preserve Italian cultural homogeneity.

When asked if immigrants are more to blame for crime compared to other demographic groups, 44% of Italians attributed more blame for crime to immigrants, compared to 22% in France, and 29% in Spain; 27% stated that immigrants are no more to blame for crime. These findings reinforce the stereotype of immigrants as criminals, and reveal the effectiveness of extensive reporting of immigrant crimes on media channels, which is further amplified by right-wing politicians.

Summary

The survey results reveal a mix of attitudes towards immigration among respondents, but with some concerning trends. A plurality (41%) in the US desire decreased immigration levels, suggesting potential public support for restrictive policies. Nearly half in both countries perceive immigrants as worsening the crime situation, perpetuating false associations of immigrants with criminality likely driven by media portrayals.

On the labor market, more respondents view immigrants as harming rather than helping job opportunities and straining social services/welfare - stances that contradict much economic data. These negative perceptions around labor market competition and fiscal impacts appear heavily influenced by political rhetoric showing immigrants as a strain to the economy.

Overall, the public opinion results demonstrate how narratives portrayed by some media and political actors, disconnected from empirical economic reality, can shape significant segments of the population to take negative views on immigration's societal impacts. Public opinion is often overwhelmed by media and politicians successfully portraying immigrants as threats. Closing these perception gaps with facts remains a crucial challenge.

Reasons why people may believe more in political rhetoric and media portrayal

This section investigates factors contributing to the public's susceptibility to political rhetoric and media depictions of immigrants over well-established economic research. Key factors include political psychology, the extensive reach of media to the general population, and the educational levels and sociodemographic characteristics of both citizens and immigrants in both Italy and the US.

Political Psychology

Why do people believe what is not true? Three psychological phenomena, social identity theory, motivated reasoning and system justification theory can help explain why people are vulnerable to political messaging and media portrayals (Weir, 2019).

In Social Identity Theory, people's self-identities are shaped by group associations like political parties, gender, or religion, heavily influencing their perceptions and behaviors. In the United States and Italy, which political party people identify with is a powerful factor determining their political conduct, with strong party loyalty linked to greater political participation. However, this intense partisan identity also makes people unwilling to consider opposing views and supports extreme political positions, preventing cooperation across parties. People's sense of self-identity tied to their political party affiliation can lead them to readily

accept negative portrayals of immigrants from their party's leaders, while rejecting opposing viewpoints, making it difficult to have reasoned discussions about immigration policies.

The concept of Motivated Reasoning further highlights the impact of partisan identity, as people tend to accept information that agrees with their existing beliefs while rejecting contradictory evidence. A 2016 study showed how Republican participants were more likely to believe statements attributed to Trump rather than one's that are not, even if they were marked as inaccurate statements. System Justification theory explains people's tendency to defend the status quo, even when it seems to go against their own interests. This is seen in support for Trump, driven by a desire to uphold traditional social systems despite inequalities in income across race and gender. The desire to uphold the status-quo can explain why people are susceptible to opposing immigration as immigrants are seen as "different" and can disrupt the status quo and cultural homogeneity of the host country.

The study also found that personal beliefs also played a huge role in their voting behavior. Republicans are associated with a preference for authoritarian leadership styles and Trump gained popularity for his authoritarian aggression and group based dominance, which is the idea that certain groups should have more control and superiority over the others. These votes are likely to support more law and order in the country, and more receptive to negative portrayals of immigrants as threats to social order and existing power structures.

Media Reach

An additional significant factor contributing to the public's susceptibility to media portrayals of immigrants is the wide reach and accessibility of media platforms. Both Italians and Americans have broad access to easily-understandable media outlets across diverse platforms such as the internet, television, and social media, reaching millions of individuals daily. In

contrast, access to well-researched economic data supporting immigration is comparatively limited. Such information is not widely disseminated, may be subject to access restrictions (such as requiring academic or institutional subscriptions), and often presents complex academic writing styles, making it challenging for the general population across various age groups and educational backgrounds to fully understand.

A 2022 report by the University of Southern California found that television drama's portrayal of immigrants reinforces negative stereotypes and can significantly influence how individuals perceive and treat immigrants, as well as shape their views on immigration policies and border security measures (Ramirez, 2022). Although the study noted a doubling in the representation of Asian and Black immigrants since 2020, there was also an overreliance on criminal stereotypes when depicting immigrant characters. Notably, immigrant characters were featured in almost half of crime shows in 2022, associating immigrants with criminal behavior. This media association, coupled with the psychological theories discussed earlier, such as motivated reasoning and system justification, can potentially strengthen one's perception of immigrants as criminals, thereby affecting one's preferences for restrictive immigration policies.

Different characteristics can also significantly influence an individual's perspectives on immigration. For example, the educational background and skill level of immigrants play an important role in shaping attitudes towards immigration policies.

The presence of high-skilled immigrants in a community correlates with a decrease in support for the Republican Party, as these immigrants are perceived to bring positive impacts such as innovation and increased tax revenues (Mayda and Peri, 2018). Low-skilled natives may feel they benefit from the presence of high-skilled immigrants, as they are seen as "job creators", resulting in a more positive view of immigration overall.

In contrast, an increase in low-skilled immigrants often correlates with a rise in Republican votes, especially in areas with a higher proportion of unskilled natives and in nonurban regions with less concentration of businesses, employment opportunities and economic activity. In this situation, low-skilled natives may see themselves as being in direct competition with low-skilled immigrants for jobs and resources, leading to greater support for nationalistic views and a more negative stance on immigration.

This could explain why Italy has a broader negative perception of immigrants compared to the US as Statista (2020) found that only 10.3% of immigrants in Italy held a bachelor degree, compared to 32% of immigrants in the US (Medina and Batalova, 2020).

The proportion of college-educated native workers is also an important characteristic, as individuals with higher education levels are more likely to have access to thoroughly researched economic information. Notably, Italy exhibited a lower percentage of college-educated natives (18.7%), compared to 33% of US natives. This disparity in educational attainment may influence the extent to which economic data can influence individuals' views related to immigration.

— Section 5: Survey for College Students —

In order to further understand how educational attainment influences native perspectives on immigration, given its association with greater access to and engagement with well-researched economic data, I independently administered a survey to undergraduate students in both Italy and the US.

Survey population:

Summary Statistics for Respondents

	Italy	United States
Women	53%	59%
Men	47%	41%
Majors		
Humanities and Arts	13.3%	18.5%
Social Sciences	6.7%	33.3%
Creative Arts, Art and Design	13.3%	7.4%
Business/Economics	46.7 %	14.8%
Sciences	6.7 %	25.9%
Computer Science	6.7 %	0%
International Relations	6.7%	0%
Political Beliefs		
Very Conservative/Conservative	7.1%	7.4%
Moderate	35.7%	37%
Very Liberal/Liberal	57.1%	55.5%
# Respondents	15	27

For the US, I surveyed adult students (aged 18 and above) at Connecticut College, a liberal arts institution with a diverse range of academic majors. The survey included a random sample of 27 respondents, consisting of 60% women and 40% men. Historically, women have tended to vote for left-leaning parties, while men lean towards right-wing parties. Regarding political beliefs, 55.5% of students identified as very liberal or liberal, 37% as moderate, and 7.4% as conservative. The distribution of majors among respondents was: social sciences (more than a third), sciences (25.9%), humanities and arts (18.5%), business (finance) and economics (14.8%). The majority of students (66.7%) hailed from the Northeastern region of the US, where Democratic candidate Joe Biden received a majority of votes in the 2020 presidential election.

In Italy, I surveyed adult university students (aged 18 and above) residing in an honors dormitory at Collegio di Milano. The survey included a random sample of 15 respondents, comprising 53% female and 46% male participants. Among the respondents, 57.1% identified as very liberal or liberal, 35.7% as moderate, and 7.1% as conservative in their political beliefs. 46.7% were studying business and economics, 13.3% in humanities and arts, 13.3% in creative arts, art, and design, and 26.7% in others. The majority of students are from Lombardia (26.7%), followed by Veneto and Emilia-Romagna, each accounting for 13.3% of respondents, representing Northern regions of Italy where Lega Nord has a significant presence.

Results

The survey findings reveal college students hold substantially different perceptions about immigration's impacts compared to general public opinion. On crime, negative associations between immigrants and criminality persist among students, though to a lesser degree than the general public in the US, suggesting higher education may counter such false narratives and stereotypes perpetuated through the media in the US. Italian students may be more susceptible to

news channels on this topic as the biggest TV network is 99% owned by the government, which is currently right-wing (Giorgia Meloni) and is known for its restrictive immigration policies.

Notably, the majority of students indicated immigration had little effect on labor market competition or employment opportunities. Few students viewed immigrants as detrimental to the job market, which contrasts widespread public beliefs that immigrants displace native workers - beliefs often contradicted by economic evidence.

Sizable portions of college students also recognized immigrants' positive fiscal impacts through tax contributions, outweighing the view that immigrants strain the social services and welfare system. This contrasts with the prevalent public perception that depicts immigrants as burdens on welfare systems.

Sixty percent of Italian students perceived immigration as worsening crime, contrasting with 18.5% of American students. In the US, 66.7% of students responded with "not much effect," while in Italy, 26.7% held this view. The discrepancy in negative perceptions of crime and immigration between college-educated groups in the US and the general public survey was 28.5%, whereas Italian students were 16% more likely to attribute crime to immigrants compared to the findings of the general public survey.

The majority of Italian and American students (80% and 74.1% respectively) reported that immigration had "not much effect" on the labor market. A minority of respondents from the US (14.8%) and Italy (13.3%) believed immigrants benefited job opportunities for themselves and their families, with no students indicating immigrants as worsening the situation. While the proportion of college students citing immigrants as beneficial to the labor market is similar to that of the general public in both countries, it is important to note the significant drop in those perceiving immigrants as worsening the labor market.

Survey Results

	Italy College	Difference vs Public opinion (Pew)	US College	Difference vs Public Opinion (Gallup)
Immigrants effect on crime				
Immigrants make crime worse	60%	+16%	18.5%	-28.5%
Immigrants effect on labor market				
Immigrants benefit job opportunities for you/your family	13%	+1%	14.8%	-3.2%
Immigrants worsens job opportunities for you/your family	0%	-54%	0%	-26%
Immigrants effect on Fiscal System				
Burden on Social/Welfare Systems	20%	-34%	26%	-18%
Benefit through Tax payments	40%	+28%	33%	+15%

This illustrates a notable shift in perception regarding immigrants' impact on the labor market between college students and the general public in both countries, indicating that negative portrayals of immigrants in the labor context may have little influence among college students.

40% of Italian students perceived immigrants as beneficial for the fiscal system due to tax payments, while 20% considered immigrants a burden on the welfare system. In the US, 33% of students viewed immigrants as beneficial to the system, while 26% saw them as a burden. College students in the US were 15% more likely and 28% of Italian students were more inclined to acknowledge immigrants' positive contributions to the welfare system and social services through taxes. This highlights the ability of the college-educated population to better recognize

the positive fiscal impact of immigrants that aligns with available economic data compared to the general public.

Conclusion:

These results highlight higher education as a way to mitigate people from adopting misformation on immigration's societal and economic effects. Greater education attainment results in viewpoints that better align with empirical evidence across issues like labor markets and the welfare and social services system. Increasing access to quality education can be a crucial way to foster public discourse on immigration that is grounded in facts rather than politically expedient rhetorics.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the divergence between public opinion on immigration and the empirical economic evidence highlights the influence of political opportunism and expediency and psychological biases in shaping attitudes towards immigration. Historically, across Italy and the United States, periods of economic growth led to more open immigration policies to meet labor demands. However, governing parties have repeatedly restricted immigration by exploiting economic anxieties and nativist sentiments, often overshadowing the economic benefits that immigrants provide through job creation, innovation, and fiscal contributions.

Public opinion remains susceptible to politically expedient narratives, framing immigrants as a threat to national safety and the economy, which is fueled by political psychology theories - motivated reasoning, system justification, and partisan identities. Media depictions frequently reinforce negative stereotypes of immigrants, which overshadows objective data. This environment perpetuates a false public discourse on immigration that is contradicted by economic evidence.

More importantly, educational attainment emerges as a key factor, with higher education resulting in greater exposure to well-researched economic data and more understanding of immigration's economic impacts. Italy's lower rates of college education among both immigrants and natives may result in a stronger negative attitude towards immigration compared to the US.

Closing the discrepancy between economic data and false media portrayals/political rhetoric requires increasing academic findings into the public discourse, countering misinformation with facts. Political leaders and media outlets have a responsibility to prioritize empirical evidence over exploitative false narratives that harm immigrants. A more informed general public, based on economic data rather than psychological prejudices, bias and political expediency can result in immigration policies that will fully benefit the economy, and allow immigrants to unleash their full potential in their host countries.

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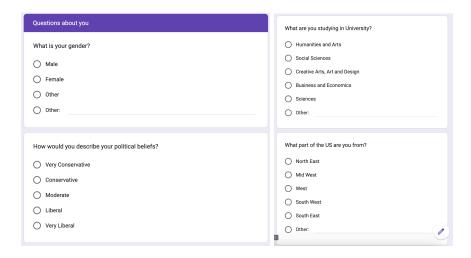States*. Migrationpolicy.org.
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Appendix

US Survey Questions:

Questions about you	What are you studying in University?
What is your gender?	○ Humanities and Arts
○ Male	○ Social Sciences
○ Female	○ Creative Arts, Art and Design
○ Other	○ Business and Economics
○ Other: _____	○ Sciences
	○ Other: _____
How would you describe your political beliefs?	**What part of the US are you from?**
○ Very Conservative	○ North East
○ Conservative	○ Mid West
○ Moderate	○ West
○ Liberal	○ South West
○ Very Liberal	○ South East
	○ Other: _____

Questions about views on immigration:

For each of the following areas, please say whether immigrants to the US are making the situation in the country better or worse, or not having much effect.

Crime/Safety

○ Better

○ Worse

○ Not Much Effect

○ No Opinion

Job opportunities for you/your family

○ Better

○ Worse

○ Not Much Effect

○ No Opinion

The economy in general

○ Better

○ Worse

○ Not Much Effect

○ No Opinion

Taxes

○ Better (by contributing through tax payments)

○ Worse (by being a burden on the welfare system and using public funding)

○ Not Much Effect

○ No Opinion

Do you think immigrants mostly help the economy by providing low cost labor, (or) mostly hurt the economy by driving wages down for many Americans?

○ Mostly Help

○ Mostly Hurt

○ Both

○ Neither

○ No Opinion

Italy Survey Questions:

Questions about you

What is your gender?

○ Male

○ Female

○ Other

○ Other: _____

How would you describe your political beliefs?

○ Very Conservative

○ Conservative

○ Moderate

○ Liberal

○ Very Liberal

What Italian region are you from?

- ◯ Lombardia
- ◯ Lazio
- ◯ Campania
- ◯ Veneto
- ◯ Sicilia
- ◯ Emilia-Romagna
- ◯ Piemonte
- ◯ Puglia
- ◯ Toscana
- ◯ Calabria
- ◯ Sardegna
- ◯ Liguria
- ◯ Marche
- ◯ Abruzzo
- ◯ Friuli-Venezia Giulia
- ◯ Trentino-Alto Adige
- ◯ Umbria
- ◯ Basilicata
- ◯ Molise
- ◯ Valle d'Aosta

Questions about views on immigration:

For each of the following areas, please say whether immigrants to Italy are making the situation in the country better or worse, or not having much effect.

Crime/Safety

◯ Better
◯ Worse
◯ Not Much Effect
◯ No Opinion

Job opportunities for you/your family

◯ Better
◯ Worse
◯ Not Much Effect
◯ No Opinion

The economy in general

◯ Better
◯ Worse
◯ Not Much Effect
◯ No Opinion

Taxes *

◯ Better (by contributing through tax payments)
◯ Worse (by being a burden on the welfare system and using public funding)
◯ Not Much Effect
◯ No Opinion

Do you think immigrants mostly help the economy by providing low cost labor, (or) mostly hurt the economy by driving wages down for many Italians

◯ Mostly Help
◯ Mostly Hurt
◯ Both
◯ Neither
◯ No Opinion

Both Italian and US survey results were sampled from *Gallup Immigration Survey* conducted via telephone interviews on June 1 - 22, 2023 in the US. The survey utilizes this survey as this is the most up-to-date large scale public survey on immigration, and the questions asked were similar to the ones asked in *Pew Research Center*'s Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey in Italy. The survey towards college students is structured similarly to the public surveys to contrast the effects that a college education will have on one's opinion on immigration.