

Progressive Cities, Divided Neighbourhoods: Labour and Migration Preferences in Italy

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Extended abstract

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1 Introduction

In the last decades, populist parties obtained an increasing (and largely unpredicted) electoral support in most developed countries. Previous literature extensively showed that the narrative of these movements found a fertile soil in those areas and among those people affected by the negative effects of globalization and technological change. Rising unemployment (Algan, 2017), low-skilled immigration (Docquier & Rapoport, 2025), manufacturing decline (Bekhtiar, 2025), exposure to international trade (Autor et al., 2020) and automation (Frey et al., 2018) were identified as the main determinants of such phenomenon.

The deteriorating job opportunities and prospects for low-skilled workers are therefore the crucial drivers of the upsurge of populist parties. Hence, it is not surprising that the labour-policy agenda of such movements is strictly aligned to these issues, focusing in particular on two strategies. First, the establishment of highly restrictive immigration policies, expected to reduce job-market competition for the native (low-skilled) workforce.¹ Second, the implementation of various economic measures planned in the exclusive interest of the country, without any exogenous influence of third powers, assumed to relaunch labour demand.²

How do voters react to these two different (but not mutually exclusive) policy goals, i.e. the restrictions to migration and the improvement of job opportunities?

Although previous studies suggested that individuals in conditions of economic disadvantage are more likely to support both kinds of interventions, this was never explicitly tested. Voting behaviour is influenced, in fact, by a multitude of other aspects of identitarian, cultural, and social nature made salient in the parties' *manifesto*, and only marginally related to job market outcomes. Moreover, the definition and identification of populist parties is itself a complex task (Norris, 2019).

These limitations leave a relevant gap in the literature, since the disentangling of the different channels through which voters shape their electoral preferences is extremely important for the understanding of the rise of populist parties, and its implications for social welfare. This paper addresses this issue.

¹ Although the focus on immigration concerns also security- and identity-related issues, the effect of migration on the job market is heavily made salient in the rhetoric of populist parties. For instance, in the case of Brexit, an argument of the “Leave” supporters was the displacement of UK workers as a consequence of migrants’ inflows from the EU (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36261966>). A similar reasoning characterized the Trump presidency campaign in 2024 (<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/09/28/are-immigrants-taking-jobs-from-us-workers-heres-what-economists-say.html>).

² In this case, the program of populist parties is generally vaguer. Usually, they present themselves as opposing an external power, operating somehow against the public interest of the country. In the Brexit campaign, for instance, the “Leave” option was heavily advertised around the successful slogan “Take back control” (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/eu-ref-haughton>). In the US, both the first and second Trump presidencies have been characterized by several and explicit attacks to international organizations and political and trade agreements (Dijkstra, 2025). In this perspective, the imposition of tariffs on imports became a fundamental policy instrument for the relaunch of internal employment, so to “make America great again”.

Recent research in political science often relies on party preferences as proxies for citizens' political preferences, given the difficulty of measuring individuals' positions on specific issues directly (Halla et al., 2017; Edo et al., 2019; Schilling & Stillman, 2024; Pagliacci & Bonacini, 2022). However, besides being aggregate rather than individual-level, partisan preferences of political elections are strongly influenced by candidate-specific factors and short-term campaign or contextual events, which means they may capture momentary dynamics more than underlying, longer-term shifts in public attitudes (Abrams & Fiorina, 2012; Ford & Jennings, 2020).

Our study is able to separate voters' preferences on job market organization and immigration by using the outcome of five abrogative referenda held in Italy on June 8 and 9, 2025. Italian citizens had to express their opinion on two main issues (Newell, 2025). The first one was the abrogation of the so-called "Jobs Act", a reform reducing the costs associated with firing employees introduced by the Renzi government in 2014. These referenda were supported by the trade union confederation (CGIL), under the slogan "For employment that is stable, dignified, protected and safe, I'll sign".³ The second issue was the reduction (from ten to five years) of the time of legal residence in Italy needed for non-EU adults to apply for Italian citizenship.

Consistently with previous literature, our hypothesis is that the lower the voters' job security, the higher their propensity of being i) in favour of norms in favour of enhancing job security, and ii) against the reduction of the time needed to become Italian citizen.

Being aware that individuals' perceptions on these two issues are likely to be influenced by factors outside the job market (such as identity and security concerns in the case of immigration), our analysis is focused on Italian major cities. The focus on urban settings presents at least one important advantage, and a peculiar reason of interest.

The advantage is that, within cities, individuals have potential access to the same job market, public services, educational opportunities and, more in general, amenities. This makes their behaviours more comparable than, for instance, those of people living in communities that differ in many of the abovementioned characteristics.

The reason of interest for the voting behaviour of urban areas is that they are typically portrayed as settings where the populist narrative finds hard to take root, compared with more rural, left-behind places (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). If this is true on average, this study will show how, within cities, voting behaviour is even more spread than among different municipalities. This conveys important implications for the spatial polarization of electoral preferences (Crulli & Pinto, 2025).

2 Context description

On Sunday 8 and Monday 9 June 2025, Italian citizens eligible to vote were called to take part in five abrogative popular referendums concerning labour regulation and citizenship.

The referendums concerned the repeal of four provisions on labour matters and one amendment to the law on the acquisition of Italian citizenship for foreign residents. Specifically, the questions focused on the following aspects:⁴

1. Employment contract with increasing protections (*contratto a tutele crescenti*) – Rules on unlawful dismissals;
2. Small businesses – Dismissals and related compensation;
3. Provisions on the use of fixed-term employment contracts, maximum duration, and the conditions for extensions and renewals;

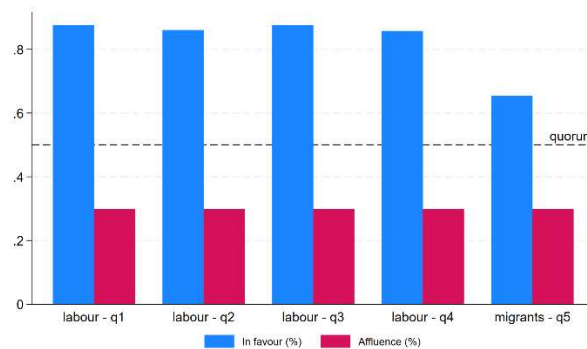
³ The campaign was launched to gather the 500 thousand signatures needed for asking to hold a referendum in Italy.

⁴ Appendix presents the full text of each question.

4. Exclusion of joint and several liability of the contracting authority, the contractor, and the subcontractor for injuries suffered by an employee of a contracting or subcontracting firm as a consequence of the specific risks inherent in the activities of the contracting or subcontracting firms;
5. Italian citizenship: Halving from 10 to 5 years the period of legal residence in Italy required for an adult non-EU foreign national to apply for the granting of Italian citizenship.

All five proposed questions were formulated as abrogative referendums, meaning that citizens could request the full or partial elimination of the contested provisions. Therefore, as provided for by Article 75 of the Italian Constitution, each abrogative referendum would have been declared valid if turnout exceeded the required quorum of a majority (50% plus one) of eligible voters, regardless of whether the outcome was in favour or against. None of the five surpassed the quorum, with turnout remaining below 30% (Figure 1).

Figure 1. national-level results of the referendum by question



Source: authors' elaboration

If this is the formal and technical setting, and although none of these questions reached the quorum threshold, this electoral consultation represents an empirically salient case. It offers the opportunity to consider, within a single electoral event, two themes commonly associated with progressive political agendas—workers' rights protections and a greater integration of migrants—and to examine patterns of electoral response across these two dimensions. In this sense, this consultation represents an unusual instrument: a kind of poll on specific policy preferences that are usually inferred through preferences for political parties. In this respect, it becomes clear that people who are receptive to these political agendas differ from one another. While questions related to labour policies received consistent support across the four questions (around 85% of voters in favour), the issue of migration provokes greater scepticism, with only about 65% of voters expressing support—20 percentage points less than for labour.

3 Aim of the paper

Using the referendum results, the paper has a twofold aim. First, we examine whether there is within-city heterogeneity in residents' attitudes towards traditional progressive stances, comparing neighbourhoods on the basis of their propensity to vote for labour-related stances vs migration-related ones. This highlights the need to move beyond viewing cities as monolithically progressive and instead recognise them as places characterised by diverse attitudes and, crucially, different needs. Second, we investigate the local characteristics that are associated to this heterogeneity and shape individuals' propensity to support different progressive positions. In particular, we analyse how residents' attitudes toward labour market protection and support for immigration vary across urban space.

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Appendix

Table 1. Text of the referendums' questions available on the ballots

Question	Italian	English
Question 1: Employment contract with increasing protections — Rules on unlawful dismissals: Repeal	Volete voi l'abrogazione del d.lgs. 4 marzo 2015, n. 23, come modificato dal d.l. 12 luglio 2018, n. 87, convertito con modificazioni dalla L. 9 agosto 2018, n. 96, dalla sentenza della Corte costituzionale 26 settembre 2018, n. 194, dalla legge 30 dicembre 2018, n. 145; dal d.lgs. 12 gennaio 2019, n. 14, dal d.l. 8 aprile 2020, n. 23, convertito con modificazioni dalla L. 5 giugno 2020, n. 40; dalla sentenza della Corte costituzionale 24 giugno 2020, n. 150; dal d.l. 24 agosto 2021, n. 118, convertito con modificazioni dalla L. 21 ottobre 2021, n. 147; dal d.l. 30 aprile 2022, n. 36, convertito con modificazioni dalla L. 29 giugno 2022, n. 79 (in G.U. 29/06/2022, n. 150); dalla sentenza della Corte costituzionale 23 gennaio 2024, n. 22; dalla sentenza della Corte costituzionale del 4 giugno 2024, n. 128, recante "Disposizioni in materia di contratto di lavoro a tempo indeterminato a tutele crescenti, in attuazione della legge 10 dicembre 2014, n. 183" nella sua interezza?	Do you want to repeal Legislative Decree of 4 March 2015, No. 23, as amended by Decree-Law of 12 July 2018, No. 87, converted with amendments by Law of 9 August 2018, No. 96; by Constitutional Court judgment of 26 September 2018, No. 194; by Law of 30 December 2018, No. 145; by Legislative Decree of 12 January 2019, No. 14; by Decree-Law of 8 April 2020, No. 23, converted with amendments by Law of 5 June 2020, No. 40; by Constitutional Court judgment of 24 June 2020, No. 150; by Decree-Law of 24 August 2021, No. 118, converted with amendments by Law of 21 October 2021, No. 147; by Decree-Law of 30 April 2022, No. 36, converted with amendments by Law of 29 June 2022, No. 79 (Official Gazette 29/06/2022, No. 150); by Constitutional Court judgment of 23 January 2024, No. 22; by Constitutional Court judgment of 4 June 2024, No. 128, concerning "Provisions on open-ended employment contracts with increasing protections, implementing Law of 10 December 2014, No. 183", in its entirety?
Question 2: Small businesses — Dismissals and related compensation: Partial repeal	Volete voi l'abrogazione dell'articolo 8 della legge 15 luglio 1966, n. 604, recante "Norme sui licenziamenti individuali", come sostituito dall'art. 2, comma 3, della legge 11 maggio 1990, n. 108, limitatamente alle parole: "compreso tra un", alle parole "ed un massimo di 6" e alle parole "La misura massima della predetta indennità può essere maggiorata fino a 10 mensilità per il prestatore di lavoro con anzianità superiore ai dieci anni e fino a 14 mensilità per il prestatore di lavoro con anzianità superiore ai venti anni, se dipendenti da datore di lavoro che occupa più di quindici prestatori di lavoro."?	Do you want to repeal Article 8 of Law of 15 July 1966, No. 604, concerning "Rules on individual dismissals", as replaced by Article 2, paragraph 3, of Law of 11 May 1990, No. 108, limited to the words: "between a"; the words "and a maximum of 6"; and the words "The maximum amount of the aforementioned compensation may be increased up to 10 monthly payments for the employee with more than ten years' length of service, and up to 14 monthly payments for the employee with more than twenty years' length of service, if employed by an employer who

Question	Italian	English
		employs more than fifteen employees.”?
Question 3: Partial repeal of rules on fixed-term employment contracts, maximum duration, and conditions for extensions and renewals	Volete voi che sia abrogato il d.lgs. 15 giugno 2015, n. 81, avente ad oggetto “Disciplina organica decontratti di lavoro e revisione della normativa in tema di mansioni, a norma dell’articolo 1, comma 7, della legge10 dicembre 2014, n. 183” limitatamente alle seguenti parti: Articolo 19, comma 1, limitatamente alle parole “non superiore a dodici mesi. Il contratto può avere una durata superiore, ma comunque”, alle parole “in presenza di almeno una delle seguenti condizioni”, alle parole “in assenza delle previsioni di cui alla lettera a), nei contratti collettivi applicati in azienda, e comunque entro il 31 dicembre 2025, per esigenze di natura tecnica, organizzativa e produttiva individuate dalle parti;” e alle parole “b-bis”); comma 1-bis, limitatamente alle parole “di durata superiore a dodici mesi” e alle parole “dalla data di superamento del termine di dodici mesi”; comma 4, limitatamente alle parole “, in caso di rinnovo,” e alle parole “solo quando il termine complessivo eccede i dodici mesi”; Articolo 21, comma 01, limitatamente alle parole “liberamente nei primi dodici mesi e, successivamente,”?	Do you want Legislative Decree of 15 June 2015, No. 81, concerning “Comprehensive regulation of employment contracts and revision of the rules on job duties, pursuant to Article 1, paragraph 7, of Law of 10 December 2014, No. 183”, to be repealed limited to the following parts: Article 19, paragraph 1, limited to the words “not exceeding twelve months. The contract may have a longer duration, but in any case”; the words “where at least one of the following conditions applies”; the words “in the absence of the provisions referred to in point (a), in the collective agreements applied in the company, and in any event by 31 December 2025, for technical, organizational and productive needs identified by the parties;” and the words “(b-bis)”); paragraph 1-bis, limited to the words “of a duration exceeding twelve months” and the words “from the date on which the twelve-month threshold is exceeded”; paragraph 4, limited to the words “, in the event of renewal,” and the words “only when the overall term exceeds twelve months”; Article 21, paragraph 01, limited to the words “freely during the first twelve months and, subsequently,”?
Question 4: Exclusion of joint and several liability of the client, contractor, and subcontractor for injuries suffered by an employee of a contracting or subcontracting company as a consequence of the specific risks inherent in the activities of the contracting or subcontracting companies: Repeal	Volete voi l’abrogazione dell’art. 26, comma 4, in tema di “Obblighi connessi ai contratti d’appalto o d’opera o di somministrazione”, di cui al decreto legislativo 9 aprile 2008, n. 81, recante “Attuazione dell’articolo 1 della legge3 agosto 2007, n. 123, in materia di tutela della salute e della sicurezza nei luoghi di lavoro” come modificato dall’art. 16 del decreto legislativo 3 agosto 2009, n. 106, dall’art. 32 del decreto legge 21 giugno 2013, n. 69,convertito con modifiche dalla legge 9 agosto 2013, n. 98, nonché dall’art. 13 del decreto legge 21 ottobre 2021,n. 146, convertito con modifiche dalla legge 17 dicembre 2021, n. 215,	Do you want to repeal Article 26, paragraph 4, concerning “Obligations connected with contracts for works or services or for the supply of labour”, of Legislative Decree of 9 April 2008, No. 81, concerning “Implementation of Article 1 of Law of 3 August 2007, No. 123, on the protection of health and safety in the workplace”, as amended by Article 16 of Legislative Decree of 3 August 2009, No. 106; by Article 32 of Decree-Law of 21 June 2013, No. 69, converted with amendments

Question	Italian	English
	limitatamente alle parole “Le disposizioni del presente comma non si applicano ai danni conseguenza dei rischi specifici propri dell’attività delle imprese appaltatrici o subappaltatrici.”?	by Law of 9 August 2013, No. 98; and by Article 13 of Decree-Law of 21 October 2021, No. 146, converted with amendments by Law of 17 December 2021, No. 215, limited to the words: “The provisions of this paragraph do not apply to damage resulting from the specific risks inherent in the activity of the contracting or subcontracting companies.”?
Question 5: Italian citizenship: Halving from 10 to 5 years the period of lawful residence in Italy required for a non-EU adult foreigner to apply for the granting of Italian citizenship	Volete voi abrogare l’articolo 9, comma 1, lettera b), limitatamente alle parole “adottato da cittadino italiano” e “successivamente alla adozione”; nonché la lettera f), recante la seguente disposizione: “f) allo straniero che risiede legalmente da almeno dieci anni nel territorio della Repubblica.”, della legge 5 febbraio 1992, n. 91, recante “Nuove norme sulla cittadinanza”?	Do you want to repeal Article 9, paragraph 1, letter (b), limited to the words “adopted by an Italian citizen” and “subsequent to the adoption”; as well as letter (f), setting out the following provision: “(f) to the foreigner who has been legally resident for at least ten years in the territory of the Republic.”, of Law of 5 February 1992, No. 91, concerning “New rules on citizenship”?

Note: the five questions appeared on different ballots. The English translation of the questions is AI made.