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Migrants, religion, and politics: an imperfect combination.
The strange case of Italians in times of migration

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Abstract

How do Italians perceive immigrants? Over the last twenty years, the issue of immigration has become increasingly relevant. With the intensification of landings, the issues connected to immigration have become elements of conflict and confrontation both in civil society and in politics. Among the various determinants that explain attitudes towards immigration, religion appears to play a very important role in orienting public opinion. Using some information collected by the European Values survey (2012; 2016-2018) and adopting different regression models, it emerges that among Catholics, a closed attitude towards immigrants prevails. Nevertheless, something seems to have changed over time because when the religious practice of Catholics intensifies, the anti-immigrant sentiment declines. A contraction of anti-immigrant sentiment is found also when practising Catholics vote for a populist party.

1. Introduction

The issue of immigration, as Hollifield (1997) argued at the end of the last millennium, is seen to be of great importance in many countries and occupies a central role in the agenda of the governments of EU member states (Scheepers et al. 2002). Since 2015, when massive flows of immigrants arrived in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, public concern has increased, and immigration has become one of the two most important issues facing the EU (Welsch and Kuhling 2017). Although immigration has been a central issue in many national elections, facilitating the rise of nationalist parties which gained support from those who saw immigrants as one of the principal problems in their country (Harteveld 2017), voters remain misinformed about the issue (Blinder 2015). Even today, many citizens believe that the number of immigrants is higher than in reality and the fracture between reality and perception of migratory phenomena appears to have widened over the years. Among Italians, in 2018 the difference between the perceived and true share of immigrants was equal to 16 percentage points (26% perceived and 10% true; see Alesina et al. 2018), while in 2019 the gap increased by another 5 percentage points (31 perceived and 9% true; Ipsos 2019).

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The anti-immigrant attitude taking root among European countries is not new. More than a decade ago, Reed (2006) showed that Western democracies were becoming increasingly inhospitable and that voters were not convinced by government choices based on humanitarian principles. Since then, few governments have tried to attenuate popular prejudice against immigrants, while the political class has tended to be reluctant toward reception measures. This is evident in countries such as Denmark, Finland, Hungary, and Slovenia, which have restricted their immigration policies, as well as in some host countries, where immigrants are seen as a problem for national culture (Semyonov et al. 2008). Only countries with more inclusive integration policies, such as Sweden, have a lower perception of ethnic threat (see Callens and Meuleman 2017).

Religion is known to be a long-standing factor in politics and its impact on social and political processes has grown lately, especially where rigid migration policies have closed borders even to those fleeing conflicts (Hatton 2011). In the last two decades, when the influx of immigrants and the complex social and political consequences thereof have been affecting Europe's 'cultural, religious and humanist inheritance' (The Economist 2019), studies on the influence of religion have increased numerically.

Religions have many points in common, with charity, benevolence, and a long tradition of love for humanity shared by the Islamic (Rahaei 2012; Elmadmad 2008), Christian (Groody 2009), and Jewish (Schulman and Barkouki-Winter 2000) religions, and the defence of refugees and those seeking asylum is at the basis of the principles that characterise both Catholics and Lutherans (see Handlin 1951). In Europe, churches provide the social structure to support ethnic communities, promoting the structural assimilation of immigrants and their children, showing a broad competence in interreligious dialogue, and easing the religious and cultural tensions surrounding immigrants in Europe (see Permoser et al. 2010). However, the debate continues as to whether religion is a source of intolerance and exclusion (Brewer et al. 2010), a means to achieving peace and unity (Little 2007) or a two-sided Janus (Appleby 1999). How does religious belief affect anti-immigrant sentiment in Italy?

Immigration is not a stable phenomenon, and it changes over time. Studies examining the connection between religion and sentiment towards immigrants adopt different measures of religiosity and use them separately to test specific hypotheses. In this study, we investigate the attitudes of those who practise religion, because religious practice is something that could favour the capacity to address social problems and concerns (Fagan 2006), such as that of immigration. To this end, we use religious membership and aggregate different measures of religiosity (attendance at Mass, prayer, and grade of religiosity) in a single dimension. Although these religious measures are not exhaustive, the synthesis of religious involvement at the individual level and the religious community to which one belongs are factors that allow us to look more precisely at how religiosity, even in an age of secularisation, causes different attitudes towards immigrants among Italian citizens.

In recent years, the rhetoric of populist parties, especially in Italy, has made the relationship between the public and immigrants more fragile. An example is given by the Lega which, in the last national administrative elections, exploited religion and its contents (see Gnagni 2018; Re 2019), and tried to win over the Catholic electorate. In this work, distinguishing practising Catholics from non-practising Catholics, we will shed

light also on the effects that populist ideology, expressed through the vote, produces on the perception that Catholics have of immigrants.

The paper is organised as follows. The next two sections will highlight theoretical aspects relating to both the European immigration process and religion which define the hypotheses. Subsequently, in section three, we define the research methods adopted, the dependent and independent variables, and describe the phenomenon analysed. In the fourth section, we show the principal results and the final, fifth, section presents our conclusions.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. Immigrants and Europe

Immigration has transformed Europe's southern borders into a death trap (Fargues 2015). In 2015, over one million people arrived in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea, compared with 250,000 in 2014 and 60,000 in 2013. This increase appears clear in Italy especially with respect to asylum seekers. Specifically, as reported by Fiore and Ialongo (2018), in southern Europe between 2014 and 2017, the total number of migrants was 1,766,186, peaking at just over one million in 2015 alone. In Italy, in the same period, 624,747 migrants arrived. Although these arrivals made up only about 1% of the Italian population of 59 million, the perception of the threat of immigrants has increased in the country, also in terms of insecurity (see Steiner et al. 2013). Over time, the perception of insecurity has turned into distrust and lack of social cohesion because migrants are often forced to rely on the informal economy to cope with daily survival. It is no coincidence that where there have been more arrivals and more refugee assistance, the resident population has appeared more hostile and more inclined to support a restrictive, asylum-centred approach (Hangartner et al. 2019). In these contexts, immigrants are still seen as a burden, and represent a problem for the culture of the host country (Semyonov et al. 2008).

The predominant theoretical framework used by scholars to explain the relations between citizens and immigrants falls into the category of threat theories. According to the Intergroup Threat Theory (Stephan, Ybarra and Rios 2016), negative attitudes towards outlying groups are a defensive reaction to the threat of competition. In this perspective, perceived threats from outgroups can be categorized into *realistic threats* (referring to resources or wellbeing) and *symbolic threats* (values, culture). Although an individual's perception of the immigrant is shaped by the social context in which he or she lives, for some scholars whose explanations rely on economic motivations, the defensive attitudes on the part of the internal group are a reaction to a real threat related to immigration (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2009; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010). As the number of immigrants (external group) increases, competition for scarce economic resources also increases, giving rise to concern in the internal group for their own interests (see Blalock 1967). Furthermore, competition and fears tend to increase when there are sudden changes (Newman and Velez 2014), such as the intensification of an economic or migration crisis. For other scholars, who instead adopt an explanatory identity key, concerns towards immigrants have a symbolic matrix. For them, the perception of immigrants is connected to cultural threats, that is to the norms, beliefs and values of the group which may be at risk (see Sides and Citrin 2007). Although the economic and

cultural aspects of immigration are both correlated to attitudes towards immigrants (Ruedin 2020), studies that took into account both measures found that perceived cultural threats largely outperform measures of material and economic threat (Schmuck and Matthes 2017; Vallejo-Martin et al. 2021; Davidov and Meuleman 2012; Semyonov et al. 2004) and they dwarf the effects of economic threat measures (see Ha 2008; Sniderman et al. 2004; Sides and Citrin 2007).

Considering that in Italy almost 90% of the population claim to belong to the Catholic faith (Vezzoni and Biolcati 2015) and that in Italy Catholicism is a specific religion and cultural expression of the core national heritage (Ferrari and Ferrari 2010), in this paper we adopt cultural threats as a measure of anti-immigration sentiment.

2.2. Hypotheses

Religion can be defined as an institutionalised system-based set of beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural realm and personal belief. It is an important source of social identity (Ben-Nun Bloom et al. 2015) and social world (Saroglou 2013) as well as an instrument of aggregation of people in moral communities (Graham and Haidt 2010). However, this is not always the case, especially when we compare the behaviour of religious people of the Catholic faith with those belonging to other religions. Catholics, as well as Protestants, compared to those who profess other religions, tend to score higher in the different dimensions of nationalism and ethnic exclusion (Coenders and Scheepers 2003). At least in Italy, this attitude is also found to be valid towards foreigners of Catholic faith. Ambrosini and Bonizzoni (2021, 828), analysing the Christian migrant churches in Italy, claim that 'for Catholic immigrants, the establishment of new communities involves a negotiation with local Catholic hierarchies, a sometimes-complex process and not without resistance'. Although the Catholic Church in Italy has 'evolved as a religion of a predominantly solidaristic, tolerant and inclusive character' (Maraffi and Vignati 2019, 349), it does not always appear so benevolent even when the proponents are Catholic foreigners.

By shaping social and political attitudes, religion tends to delineate those who are part of the group, distinguishing them from others (Geertz 1993), thus feeding low levels of tolerance towards those outside the group (Grant and Brown 1995), a phenomenon that may enhance anti-immigration attitudes (Creighton and Jamal 2015). In past research, Christians appear more in favour of the ethnic exclusion of legal immigrants than non-believers and non-Christians (Scheepers et al. 2002) and are more likely to express concerns about immigration (Storm 2018). Seventy years ago, Adorno and colleagues (1950) in their study on the authoritarian personality, reflected on the idea that subjects with some religious affiliations are more prejudiced than those without affiliation. When analysing religious anti-Semitism in 28 countries, Tausch (2018), notes that together with some other religions, such as Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist, Catholicism seems to be characterized by anti-Semitic attitudes. While analysing the Catholic Church, Kertzer (2014) shows how it represented Jews as an existential threat in the eyes of European Catholics. This peculiarity is certainly not new and it is likely affected by a not-so-distant past when some Catholic circles were permeable to anti-Semitic and racial prejudices (Valbosquet 2018). Finally, considering that for Catholics migrants could

represent a perfect target for their fears, we hypothesise that Catholics have a more negative attitude towards immigrants (H_1).

Like religious membership, participation in religious activities is relevant in explaining anti-immigrant sentiments. Participation in religious services 'consists in elevating the importance of [some] values in the decision-making process of the members of the [congregation]' (Djupe and Calfano 2013, 644). It indirectly recalls the concept of 'moral communities' (Ruiter and De Graaf 2006), according to which a higher average attendance of religious services indicates greater exposure to religious culture and a greater probability of including religious people in one's social network.

However, being part of a congregation or a large religious network does not always imply a propensity to open up to others with confidence. When analysing the United Kingdom, Paterson (2018, 26–27) observes that "the messages of the elite to which those of high religiosity are exposed (in terms of ecclesial presences) could act as a bulwark against potential intolerances that induce the effects of the religious affiliation ('Membership')". In the same vein, Knoll (2009) suggests that taking part in religious activities increases empathy or induces universal values and, thus, leads to supporting immigration. Conversely, by analysing forty-four countries, Doebler (2014) found that religious practice and religious affiliation have less impact than citizens' predispositions against immigrants and Muslims, while McDaniel et al. (2011) found that attendance at religious services is negatively correlated with anti-immigrant attitudes on cultural grounds, but it has no effect in relation to economic motivations. At this point, given that the theoretical positions on the link between religious practice and attitude towards immigrants appear to be opposed, we generate the alternative hypothesis that practising believers show more positive attitudes towards immigrants (H_2). Furthermore, considering that being religious is very different from being religious and actively participating in religious services, it is possible to hypothesize that among Catholics, the intensification of religious activism has a positive effect on their perception of immigrants (H_3).

Closely connected to the relationship between religion and immigration is politics. In the past few decades, the increase in populist parties in numerous European countries has made the relationship between the public and immigrants increasingly fragile: relying on topics also linked to religion (Marzouki et al. 2016), they have further exacerbated the vision that the public has of immigrants. The Lega party in Italy does not seem to want to be outdone (see Ozzano 2021). Since its inception, the League has tried to capitalize on the lines of national identity based on traditions by combining them with migration and security issues. At the same time, it has identified the main enemy in the illegal Muslim immigrant who threatens Italy's ethnic-cultural and religious homogeneity and Europe's Christian character (see Martino and Papastathis 2016, 115). With the intensification of the landings on the Italian coast, the League has further shifted its rhetoric towards Catholic religious symbols. On several occasions, speeches have made references to the Virgin Mary, without hesitating to attack the positions of the Pope on the immigration theme (see Gnagni 2018; Re 2019). The use of religious symbols during the rallies of the League has not escaped the Church, which has lamented their exploitation for the sole purpose of enchanting voters, who are morally attracted to those symbols. Although the League has strong ties with the conservative wing of the Catholic world, it is possible to hypothesize that the League's populist rhetoric could affect the

anti-immigrant sentiment of non-practising Catholics who, sharing the programmatic contents of the League party and voting for it, could perceive immigrants negatively (H_{4a}). On the contrary, the anti-immigrant attitude should contract among those who, despite voting for Lega, are practising Catholics because they are probably affected by the principles of benevolence and love expressed by the Catholic Church (H_{4b}).

3. Methods, dependent and independent variables

The hypotheses discussed in the previous section have been tested through three European Social Survey datasets round 6 (2012), 8 (2016), and round 9 (2018).

The dependent variable is represented by the item in the survey that reads as follows 'And, using this card, would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?', with response options running from 'Cultural life undermined' (0) to 'Cultural life enriched' (10).[1] The main independent variables of our research are represented by four items. The first item refers to membership of a religious congregation, [2] while the second one is an additive index[3] – the frequency of attendance of religious services,[4] praying,[5] and the overall grade of religiosity[6] – that synthetises religious practices and personal religiosity level (see Driezen, Verschraegen, Clycq 2020). These two variables allow us to test the first three hypotheses.

To test the last two hypotheses (H4a and H4b) we have created two new variables. The first one has been obtained by aggregating religious membership (only Catholics) with a religious activism index,[7] while the second one is represented by a dichotomous variable (0=other parties, 1=Lega) that synthesizes the vote expressed by the respondents to the last national administrative election.[8]

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[1] For interpretative convenience we have inverted the order of the modality so that (0) Cultural life enriched, (10) Cultural life undermined.

[2]The question runs as follows: Have you ever considered yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination? – Which one? We have recoded the variable as follow: (0) No one, (1) Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Other Christian denomination, Jews, Islamic, Eastern religions, Other non-Christian religions, (2) Catholics. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[3] The index ranges from 0 (low level) to 14 (high level); its reliability, measured through Cronbach's alpha, is equal to 0,853.

[4] The question runs as follows: Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays? For interpretative convenience we have inverted the order of the modality in the following way: (0) Never, (1) Less often, (2) Only on special holy days, (3) At least once a month (4) Once a week, (5) More than once a week, (6) Every day. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[5] The question runs as follows: Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray? For interpretative convenience we have inverted the order of the modality in the following way: (0) Never, (1) Less often, (2) Only on special holy days, (3) At least once a month (4) Once a week, (5) More than once a week, (6) Every day. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[6] The question runs as follows: Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are? The variable runs from (0) Not at all religious, (10) Very religious. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

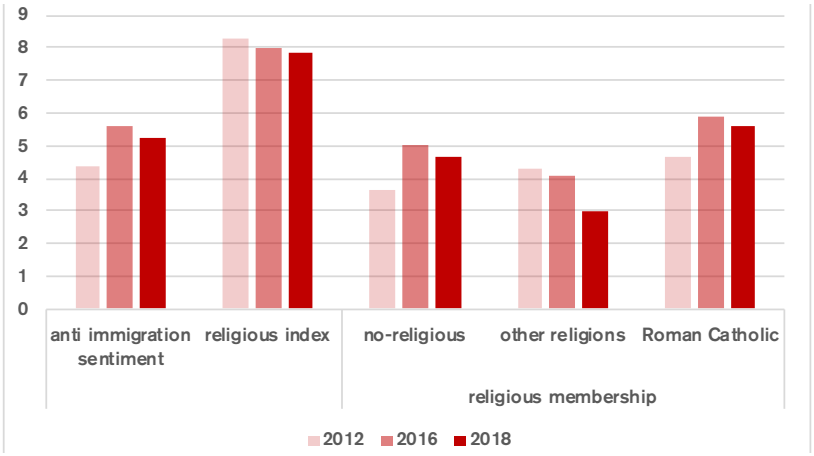
[7] The new variable (Catholic activism) runs as follows: (0) No religious, (1) No practising Catholic, and (2) Practising Catholic.

[8] The question runs as follows: Which party did you vote for in that election (last country's national election)?

The hypotheses reported above were tested, controlling their effects for a set of variables commonly used in the literature, including gender, age, education (see van Der Brug and Harteveld 2021), ideology,[9] insecurity,[10] social trust[11] (see Di Mauro and Memoli 2021), the area in which the respondent lives,[12] and time.[13] The analyses were carried out using linear regression models. In this respect, many studies have examined the relationship between anti-immigrant sentiments and some individual and structural factors. To explore the impact of these factors on anti-immigration sentiments we adopt rounds 6 (2012), 8 (2016) and 9 (2018) of the European Social Survey.

From 2012 to 2018, anti-immigrant attitudes expressed by Italians increased, with an inverted U trend. The highest peak is in 2016, when the landings on the Italian coasts were numerous, and overcrowding of the infrastructures of the national reception system was consistent. In 2018, the fears of the public towards immigrants decline, albeit to levels far higher than those of 2012. (Figure 1). Over time, anti-immigrant sentiment seems to have subsided among those who believe in other religions and participate in religious activities. Among Catholics and the non-religious, anti-immigrant sentiment does not fade after the migration wave.

Figure 1. Anti-immigrant sentiment and religion



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012, 2016, 2018).

[9] The question runs as follows: In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right? We have recoded the variable in the following way: (0) centre (values 4-6), (1) left (values 0-3), (2) right (7-10). 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[10] The question runs as follows: How safe do you – or would you – feel walking alone in this area after dark? Do – or would – you feel... The variable has been recoded as follow (0) very safe+safe, (1) unsafe+very unsafe. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[11] The question runs as follows: using this card, generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people? Please tell me on a score of 0 to 10, where 0 means you can't be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted. The variable is coded as follow: (0) no trust, (10) trust. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

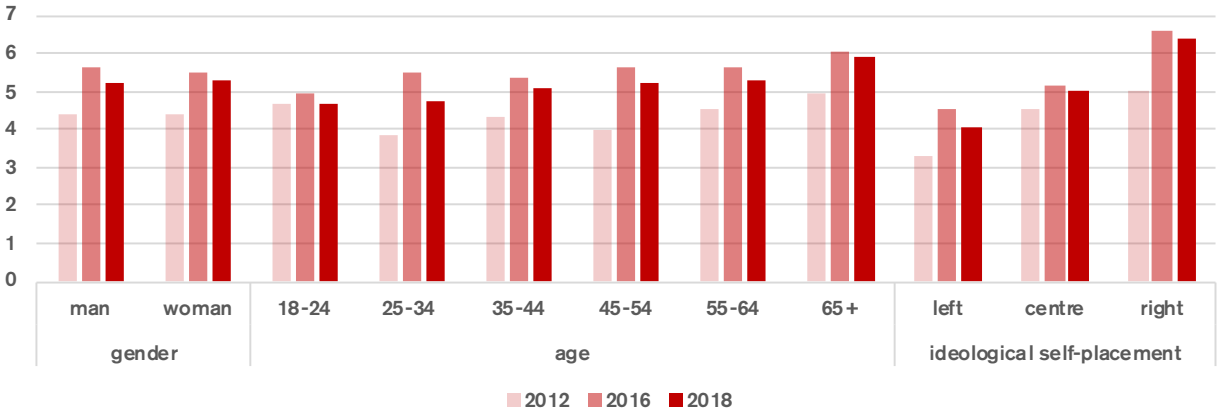
[12] The question runs as follows: Which phrase on this card best describes the area where you live? We have recoded the variable in the following way: (0) a farm or home in countryside, (1) a country village, (2) a town or a small city, (3) the suburbs or outskirts of a big city, (4) a big city. 'Do not know' answers have been coded as missing values.

[13] The descriptive statistics of the variables are reported in Appendix, Table A.

The shock suffered by public opinion with the increase in landings (2016) seems to persist also in 2018. This trend characterizes both the non-religious and those belonging to the Roman Catholic faith, while those who profess other religions seem to perceive immigrants positively. The anti-immigration sentiment level is high among those who take part in religious activities. Nevertheless, the negative perception of immigrants expressed by this specific group towards foreigners remains high even when, in 2018, the landings on the coasts of the *Bel Paese* decline.

On connecting the anti-immigrant sentiment with some socio-demographic indicators, while we find, as stated in previous research (see Eger et al. 2021; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2018), clear distinctions between the age groups of the interviewees (Figure 2a), we do not find differences in terms of gender. The youngest (18-24 years) appear more likely to welcome immigrants than other age groups, probably because they have had the opportunity to know and accept the cultural traits of different models. On the contrary, the elderly (65+) tend to be less benevolent towards immigrants. The evaluation expressed by the elderly could be dictated by a sense of insecurity generated by the presence of immigrants.

Figure 2a. Anti-immigrant sentiment and socio demographic aspects

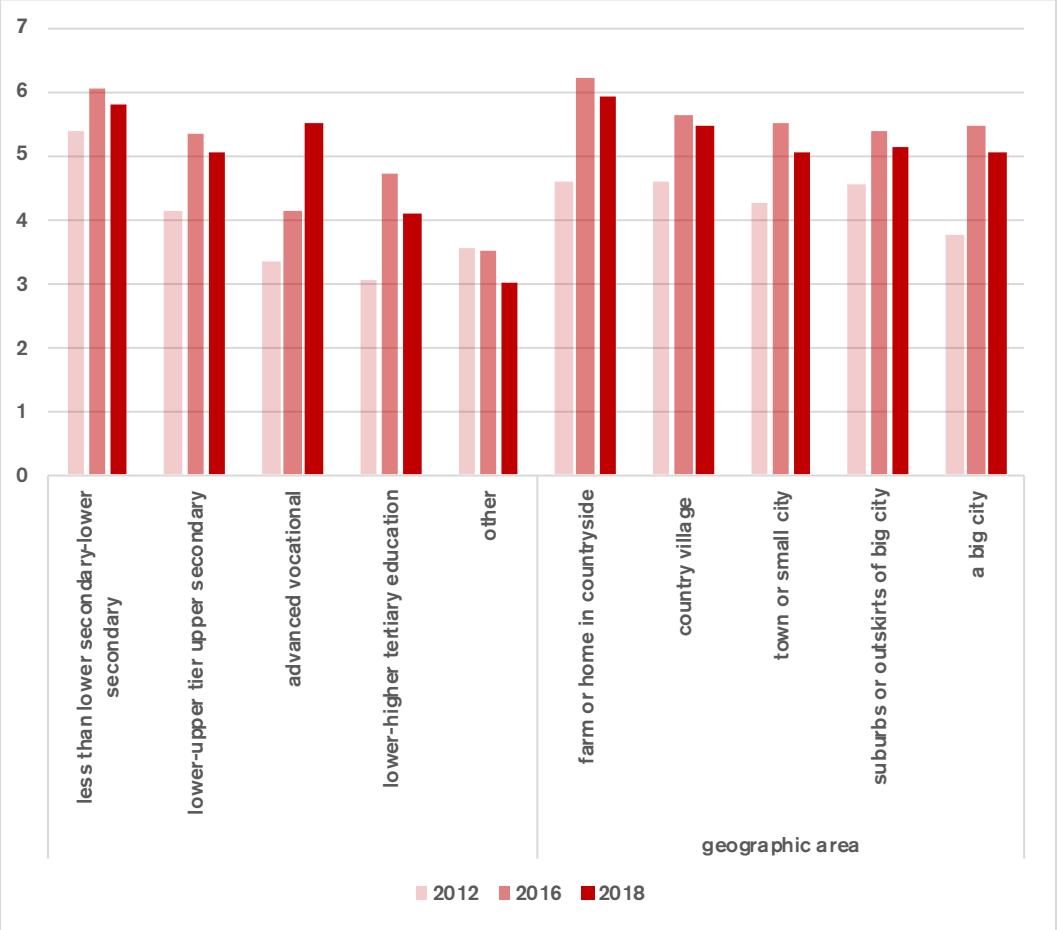


Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012, 2016, 2018)

As was expected, ideology plays a decisive role in defining the anti-immigrant attitude of respondents. Among Italians, the attitude of the 'centrists' is less intense than those who place themselves on the right side of the scale. This trend appears to persist over time, even when arrivals on the Italian coasts have reduced in number. Even if the less educated appear more reluctant towards immigrants, it is among those with a medium-high qualification (advanced vocational) that anti-immigrant sentiment intensifies over time. This attitude could probably be dictated by uncertainties regarding the future, by the weaknesses of the labour market, which has never been particularly prosperous, and by the presence of immigrants. Finally, fears related to immigrants are also found among those who live in a 'farm or country house', where social relations are consolidated over time, and the arrival of foreigners can be perceived as a threat (Figure 2b). Comparing the rural area (farm or country house) with the urban area (a big city), negative attitudes towards immigrants decline in the latter. However, this result must be considered with caution, since immigration attitudes are also related to other aspects,

such as the demographic characteristics of geographic areas (Maxwell 2019) and to the socio-cultural and socioeconomic changes that characterize these areas (Huijsmans et al. 2021), which are not considered in this article.

Figure 2b. Anti-immigrant sentiment and socio demographic aspects



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012, 2016, 2018).

4. Results and discussion

Following the hypotheses reported above, the effects of religion on anti-immigrant sentiments were estimated using the ESS waves of 2012, 2016 and 2018.

As hypothesized, not all those who are religious perceive immigrants positively. In 2012 (Table 1, model 1), Catholics express a negative perception of immigrants (beta = 0.085; H1 confirmed). This result is certainly not new. As known, cultural outgroups pose a symbolic cultural threat to dominant groups (Fetzer 2000). The negative attitude expressed by Catholics towards immigrants may have been conditioned, at least in part, by the migrations dictated by the 'Arab Spring', which in 2011 generated a short but intense shock within Italian society (see Labanca 2012).

Contrary to what we assumed, religious activism correlates positively with the dependent variable, and it is not statistically significant (H2 not confirmed), while those characterized by a sense of insecurity (beta = 0.124), and those on the right of the political

space (beta = 0.078) have a negative perception of immigrants. Compared to men, women, who trust others more, are more trustful of immigrants. The same can be said about those who are between 45 and 54 years old.

In 2016 (model 2), the empirical results are very similar to those found previously. Catholics continue to perceive immigrants negatively, but with greater intensity than in 2012. The intensification of the phenomenon appears connected with the high numbers of landings on the coasts of the Bel Paese, which have probably strengthened a negative perception of immigrants among the public. Young people appear to perceive immigrants negatively (beta = 0.073) to a lesser extent than those on the right of the political space (beta = 0.194) and those who perceive a sense of general insecurity (beta = 0.113). Women appear more sensitive to immigrants in the same way as those who express trust in others in general.

If 2016 is recorded as the year of the peak of landings on the Italian coast and of a net overcrowding of the national reception system infrastructures, in 2018 the immigration numbers changed (see Ministry of the Interior and UNHCR), but not public perception. In 2017, with the 'Minniti Decrees' and the Italy-Libya memorandum, between the then Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and the Libyan leader Fayez al Serraj, migratory flows to Italy were reduced by a third compared to the previous year. In 2018, even if the migration trend towards the coasts of Southern Italy tended to thin further (-80% compared to 2017), Catholics did not seem to notice a change: their perception of immigrants remained negative (model 3). On the contrary, members of other religions are more sensitive to foreigners (beta = -0.097). The role played by social trust was confirmed, but among Italians the overall negative perception of immigrants remained unchanged. The anti-immigrant sentiment, which cuts across different age groups and different levels of education, mainly characterizes the elderly (55+; beta = 0.120) - and the less educated (lower secondary school children; professional upper secondary school). A similar trend is found among those who place themselves on the right side of the political space and live in a town or small city.

In general, looking at the entire 2012-2018 period (model 4), the differences between Catholics and non-Catholics emerge more clearly and highlight the differences inherent in each religious confession. As previously anticipated, taking part in religious activities appears as a two-faced Janus since it can be beneficial (see Knoll 2009) or deleterious (Doebler 2014) for the relationships that exist between 'us' and 'them'. Religious activism, although not statistically significant, appears to nourish the negative perception of immigrants. When the level of Catholic religious activities increases, their negative perception of immigrants contracts, while the opposite is found when instead we look at those who belong to other religions (Figure 3). Nevertheless, the negative attitudes of Catholics towards immigrants appear to hold (H3 confirmed). An opposite scenario is found among those who profess other religions, who appear more open towards immigrants. However, with the intensification of religious activism, their attitude tends to contract in terms of intensity.

Part of the results relating to Catholics are in line with the study conducted by Landini and colleagues (2021, 401) which, analysing only 2018 and 2019 through diversified data sources, argue that 'irregular and non-practicing Catholics exhibit the most negative attitudes toward immigration. In contrast, non-religious people – namely those who

neither attend religious services nor describe themselves as Catholics – show the most positive attitudes toward immigration'. Despite some differences from the work realised by Landini et al (2021),[14] our results confirm how religious membership and religious activism are two key dimensions for understanding the anti-immigrant attitude in Italy, both for Catholics and for those who belong to other religions.

Table 1. Religion and religiosity

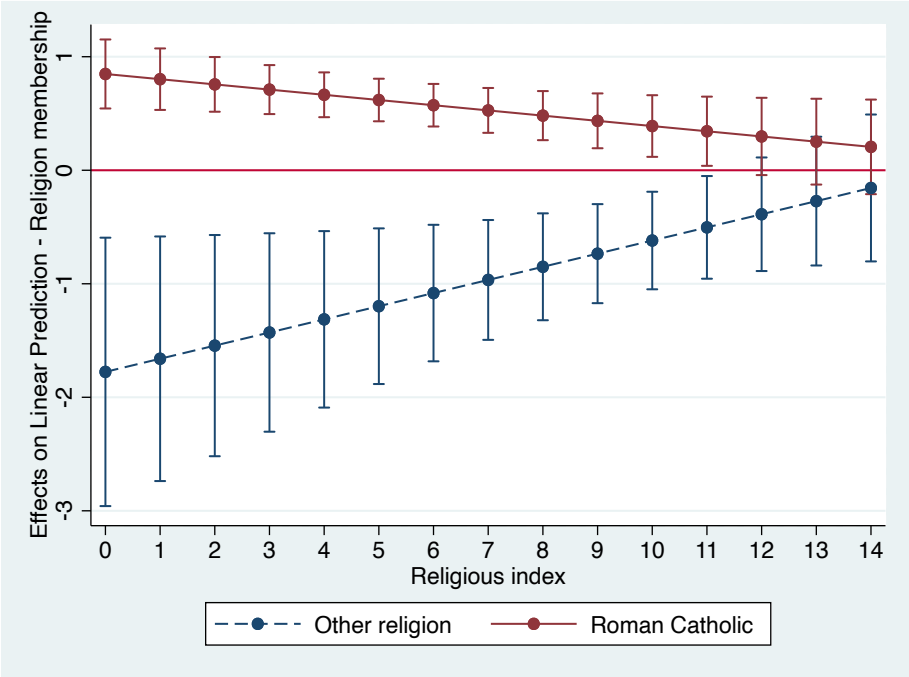
	Model 1 (2016)		Model 2 (2016)		Model 3 (2018)		Model 4 (2012-2018)	
	Beta	**Std. Err.**	**Beta**	**Std. Err.**	**Beta**	**Std. Err.**	**Beta**	**Std. Err.**
Religious membership (no religion)								
Other religions	0.050	0.545	-0.000	0.396	-0.097****	0.355	-0.117**	0.719
Roman Catholic	0.085*	0.304	0.114****	0.183	0.059**	0.162	0.136****	0.185
Religious index	0.012	0.034	-0.038	0.022	-0.038	0.018	0.003	0.022
Religious membership (no religious)								
Other religions* Religious index							0.083*	0.069
Roman Catholic* Religious index							-0.079*	0.027
Social Trust	-0.301****	0.041	-0.246****	0.029	-0.218****	0.025	-0.242****	0.017
Insecurity perception	0.124****	0.222	0.114	0.147	0.055**	0.128	0.087****	0.088
Sex (male)	-0.102***	0.193	-0.052**	0.136	-0.003	0.114	-0.039***	0.080
Age (18-24)								
25-34	-0.072	0.370	0.073**	0.275	0.085***	0.247	0.049**	0.164
35-44	-0.063	0.350	0.056	0.271	0.089***	0.233	0.047**	0.158
45-54	-0.101**	0.342	0.057	0.259	0.087***	0.223	0.038*	0.152
55-64	-0.053	0.360	0.013	0.271	0.060*	0.224	0.020	0.156
65+	0.061	0.353	0.021	0.271	0.120***	0.217	0.046*	0.154
Education (other)								
less than lower secondary-lower secondary	-0.116	1.448	0.358	2.547	0.354*	1.071	0.231	0.822
lower-upper tier upper secondary	-0.242	1.438	0.276	2.549	0.268	1.072	0.142	0.822
advanced vocational	-0.119	1.527	0.013	2.614	0.135*	1.104	0.042	0.851
lower-higher tertiary education	-0.266	1.440	0.147	2.553	0.047	1.077	0.008	0.825
Left-right scale placement (centre)								
left	-0.123***	0.224	-0.077***	0.163	-0.143****	0.143	-0.112****	0.097
right	0.078**	0.236	0.194****	0.156	0.173****	0.131	0.166****	0.092
Geographic area (Farm or home in countryside)								
Country village	0.004	0.457	-0.028	0.353	-0.069	0.308	-0.040	0.207
Town or small city	-0.012	0.472	-0.015	0.356	-0.101*	0.311	-0.046	0.210
Suburbs or outskirts of big city	-0.011	0.618	-0.021	0.430	-0.052	0.368	-0.031	0.254
A big city	-0.077	0.526	-0.046	0.393	-0.064	0.336	-0.060**	0.229

[14] In this study, both dependent and independent variables are different and differently operationalized from those used in our work.

Time (2012)								
	2018						0.163****	0.112
	2019						0.137****	0.110
Constant		7.467****	1.595	4.458*	2.593	4.700****	1.112	0.453****	0.864
R_square		0.256		0.204		0.233		0.231	
Adjust R_square		0.234		0.193		0.224		0.226	
F (sig.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
N. observ.		716		1,530		1,842		4,088	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001.
Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012-2018).

Figure 3. The marginal effects on the anti-immigration sentiments of religious membership as Religious Index change 90% cls



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2012-2018).

In Table 2, we analyse the relationship between practicing Catholics / non-practicing Catholics and their vote expressed for the League in the last administrative elections of 2018. As expected, the non-practising Catholics who voted for the League appear to perceive immigrants negatively. Even if the sign of the relationship is as expected, the effect is statistically insignificant (H4a partially confirmed). As for practising Catholics, we found that although they voted for the League, they still tend to look at immigrants with greater benevolence and love, as probably taught by the Catholic Church (beta=0.160; H4b confirmed).

In the last national administrative elections, Salvini tried to consolidate his electoral consensus by leveraging the Catholic electorate. However, the result was not particularly relevant, as evidenced by the electoral results obtained by his party (see Ipsos 2018). 'Fetishist sovereignty' has certainly made its way into the Catholic world,

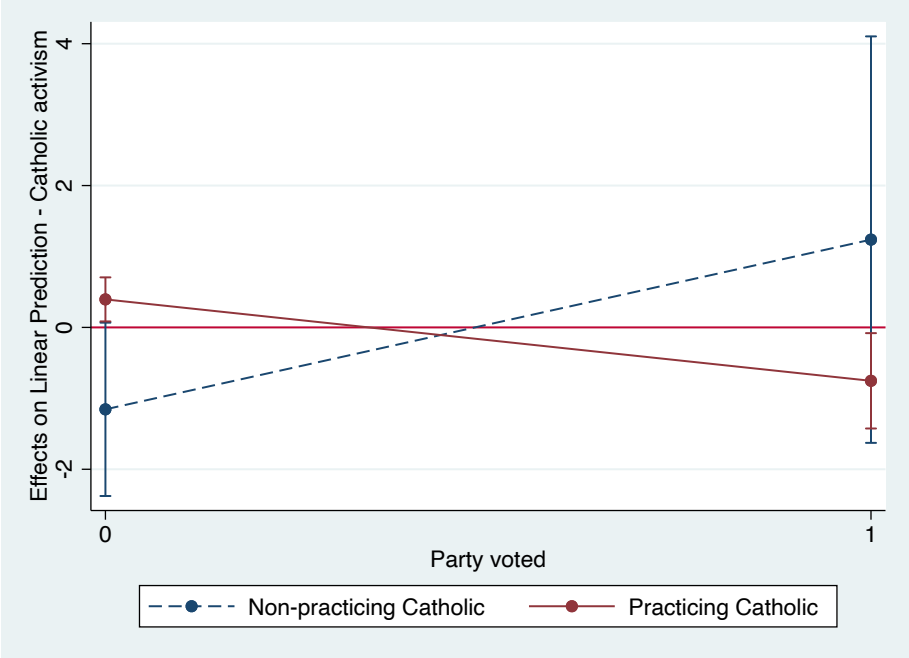
gathering the vote of those who weekly participate in religious services (15.7%; see Ipsos 2018). Nevertheless, it does not seem to have affected their Catholic principles, as they continue to express strong sentiments of benevolence and solidarity towards immigrants (Fig. 4). By checking the empirical results through a series of indicators, we find that less-educated individuals (less than lower secondary/lower secondary; advanced vocational) reveal an undoubted closure towards immigrants. A more positive perception towards immigrants, on the other hand, is found among those who tend to trust others (beta = -0.263).

Table 2. Religion and politics

	Beta	Std. Err.
Catholic activism (non religious)		
non-practising Catholics	-0.000	0.742
practising Catholics	0.062**	0.189
Vote for League (no)	0.370****	0.403
Catholic membership activism *Vote for League		
non-practising Catholics * vote	0.036	1.892
practising Catholics * vote	-0.160**	0.446
Social Trust	**-0.263****	**0.031**
Insecurity perception	**0.038**	**0.164**
Sex (male)	**-0.019**	**0.141**
Age (18-24)		
25-34	-0.005	0.327
35-44	0.003	0.318
45-54	-0.001	0.308
55-64	-0.051	0.307
65+	-0.039	0.302
Education (other)		
less than lower secondary/lower secondary	0.530	1.720
lower-upper tier upper secondary	0.466	1.718
advanced vocational	0.260	1.742
lower-higher tertiary education	0.223	1.722
Geographic area (Farm or home in countryside)		
Country village	-0.024	0.353
Town or small city	-0.063	0.356
Suburbs or outskirts of big city	-0.003	0.430
A big city	0.014	0.393
Constant	**3.988**	**1.746**
R_square	0.213	
Adjust R_square	0.199	
F (sig.)	0.000	
N. observ.	1,216	

Note: *p<0.10, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01, ****p<0.001
Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2018).

Figure 4. The marginal effects on the anti-immigration sentiments of religious membership as vote change 90%



Source: own elaboration on European Social Survey (2018).

5. Conclusions

Since the early years of the new millennium, Italy has experienced a high level of immigration. With a fluctuating trend, landings on the coast of Southern Italy have intensified over time. This increase in foreigners in the last twenty years has exacerbated the attitude of Italians (see Molteni 2020) who, overestimating the actual numbers involved, often see immigrants as a problem.

Religion exerts distinct and even contrasting effects on immigration attitudes in Italy, playing a determining role in the cultural separation between 'we' and 'them'. It shapes social and political attitudes, exacerbating the differences between those who are part of the majority group and those who are not.

Catholics tend to have a negative perception of immigrants and perceive them as a problem for their culture in general. This attitude is also found among Italian Catholics. One explanation could lie in the various migratory waves that have begun to worry the public since the early years of the last two decades. On the contrary, a positive attitude towards foreigners is found among those who profess another religion.

Participation in religious activities (Mass and prayer) and recognising oneself in Catholicism also appear relevant in explaining anti-immigrant sentiment, especially when connected to religious membership. According to Wuthnow (2002), religious activism tends to generate and feed bridging social capital, through which it is possible, as Putnam (2000) has pointed out, to generate wider reciprocity. We find a similar trend among Italians: as religious activism increases, Catholics appear more inclined to express a positive opinion towards immigrants. Nevertheless, their perception of immigrants remains negative.

In the last twenty years, an increase in support for populist parties in Italy has made the Italian case very important (see Vercesi 2021), as confirmed by the results of the last administrative (2018) and European (2019) elections. The cultural populism that distinguishes the League (see Caiani and Carvalho 2021) has influenced Catholic voters but does not seem to have been particularly incisive for a portion of them. Non-practising Catholics who voted for the Lega in the last national administrative elections appear characterized by a negative perception of immigrants. Practising Catholics, on the contrary, appear more inclined to accept immigrants. It would have been interesting to consider how the Church and the Catholic elite have contributed to the formation of the attitudes of the faithful towards immigrants and the consequent choice of vote. The data in our possession are limited and do not allow this level of detail. Future research could shed light on larger temporal dynamics, taking into account these factors and expanding the number of cases.

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Appendix

Table A. Descriptive Statistics

		Mean / %	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Anti-immigration sentiment		5.255	2.82	0	10
Religion membership					
	no religious	23.4			
	other religions	5.8			
	Roman Catholic	70.8			
Religious index		**7.979**	**3.920**	**0**	**14**
Catholic activism					
	no religious	23.4			
	non-practising Catholics	5.8			
	practising Catholics	70.8			
Vote for League					
	no	87.2			
	yes	12.8			
Social Trust		**4.698**	**2.378**	**0**	**10**
Insecurity perception					
	safe	68.3			
	unsafe	31.7			
Gender					
	male	48.1			
	female	51.9			
Age					
	18-24	9.9			
	25-34	13.1			
	35-44	15.7			
	45-54	19.0			
	55-64	16.3			
	65+	26.0			
Education					
	other	0.3			
	less than lower secondary/lower secondary	43.6			
	lower-upper tier upper secondary	38.9			
	advanced vocational	2.6			
	lower-higher tertiary education	13.6			
Left-right scale placement					
	left	29.8			
	centre	30.9			
	right	39.3			
Geographic area					
	Farm or home in countryside	3.7			
	Country village	44.1			
	Town or small city	34.5			
	Suburbs or outskirts of big city	5.9			
	A big city	11.8			
Time					
2012		15.2			
2018		41.5			
2019		43.3			

Source: European Social Survey - round 8 (2016) and round 9 (2018).