Politics of Isolation: Populist Radical Right Support & Public Service Provision in Italy[*]

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This is an early draft. We would appreciate it if you would not cite the paper without our permission as the data collection is not yet completed. Your comments on the other hand are very welcome!

Abstract

Electoral support for populist radical right parties is usually higher in rural areas compared to urban ones. Yet, the mechanisms underlying these geographical patterns are not fully understood and difficult to causally identify. In this study, we argue and empirically substantiate that low/reduced accessibility to local public service increases the programmatic appeal of populist radical right parties that combines anti-establishment sentiment and right-wing nationalism. Low/reduced accessibility to local public goods signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community", and that contributing to public goods in general might be futile as remoteness restricts "their" access to benefits. We empirically substantiate our argument in three specific steps. First, we introduce a fine-grained measure of the local public service provision and demonstrate that low accessibility to local public services is strongly associated with populist radical right support. Second, we exploit a national reform in Italy, forcing municipalities below a certain population threshold to jointly manage public services, to causally identify the link between reduced accessibility of local public services and populist radical right support. Finally, we propose a survey experiment to explore the mechanisms driving our results. The focus on local public service provision and the meaning that voters attach to it helps us to understand why populist radical right parties succeed in some rural and urban areas and not others.

Introduction

An urban-rural divide is a considerable force structuring contemporary politics across the globe. Within the Anglosphere, both Brexit and the election of Donald J. Trump as U.S. president led to a wave of commentary and scholarly articles about urban-rural splits and the so-called "left behind places" (e.g. McQuarrie, 2017, Scala and Johnson 2017, Goodwin and Heath, 2016, Hobolt 2016). The electoral victories of Jaroslaw Kaczynski's Law and Justice party in Poland or Viktor Orban's Fidesz party in Hungary are also often attributed to their strong rural power-base (Mares and Young 2019, Szczerbiak 2017). The urban-rural divide seems especially wide when it comes to support for the populist radical right whose anti-elite rhetoric gives expression to a sense of decline, nostalgia and ethnic belonging (Mudde 2007; Elgenius and Rydgren 2017).[1] The urban-rural divide in populist radical right support risks to deepen existing regional inequalities, spark off segregation in societies and weaken prospects for political compromise (Hetherington and Weiler 2018, Jennings and Stoker 2016, Rodden 2019, De Vries and Hobolt 2020).

Geographic sorting, that is to say the process by which certain people end up living in urban centers and others in rural ones (e.g. Gallego, Buscha, Sturgis and Oberski 2016; Maxwell 2019, 2020), goes along way in explaining geographical patterns for populist radical right support. While urban areas are characterized by an increasingly cosmopolitan population, people in rural areas are more likely to prioritize national traditions and conservative values (Maxwell 2019, 2020, Huijsmans et al. 2021). Yet, ethnographic work also suggests that rural communities are characterized by a distinct geography of discontent that shapes people's political attitudes, such a nostalgic longing for better times and a deep-seated resentment towards political elites (Cramer 2016, Hochshild 2018).

That said, systematically mapping and causally identifying geographies of discontent has been proven difficult for a host of methodological and conceptual issues. First, accurately establishing the causally relevant effect of geographic contexts is hard because urban and rural areas differ in many

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

respects. Second, certain attributes of rural areas, such as low population density or geography, make their populations difficult and costly to reach which threatens inference as small numbers may make results particularly prone to measurement error (e.g., Payton Scally et al. 2020). Third, the conceptualisation of "rural" is often very varied (Nemerever and Rogers 2021), based on plethora of characteristics such as geographic distance to urban centres (e.g., Broockman 2013; Warshaw and Rodden 2012), populations size and density (e.g., Acharya et al. 2016; Cho and Gimpel 2010; Primo and Snyder 2010; Urban and Niebler 2014, Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020), or the economic basis of the economy (agriculture-based for example, see Scala and Johnson 2017). All in all, the way the urban-rural divide is conceptualised needs more theoretical grounding (see also Patana 2021), and causal identification could be improved by exploiting specific changes in aspects of the geographic contexts may be a particularly worthwhile approach (see Lassen and Serritlew 2013 for example). Although with this study we will not be able to tackle all of these issues, we do provide a specific theoretical lens through which we can better understand the geographical basis of populist radical right support while at the same time allowing for more precise measurement and causal identification. We argue that unpacking geography is crucial for understanding variation in populist radical right support, and develop an argument rooted in the accessibility of local public service provision. By conceptualizing geographic contexts based on the accessibility to public services, defined by proximity in supply, we argue that low/reduced accessibility to public services fuels populist radical right support in elections. This is because experiences with low/reduced accessibility to local public goods provide two easy ways to grasp information signals to voters. First, it signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community". Second, it signals that contributing to public goods for them is futile as the remoteness to local public services restricts access to benefits. Both signals should fueling demand for the right-wing anti-establishment messages of the populist radical right.

We empirically substantiate our argument in three specific steps. First, we introduce a fine-grained measure of local provision of public service and demonstrate that it is strongly associated with geographic variation in populist radical right support. While this descriptive evidence is interesting, questions about the causal nature of this relationship remain. Hence in a second step, we exploit a 2010 national reform in Italy, forcing municipalities below a certain population threshold to jointly manage public services, to

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causally establish the link between reduced access to local public service provision and populist radical right support. The exogenous change allows us to estimate the causal effect of changes in the local provision of public goods on support for populist radical right parties. Finally, we designed a survey experiment to explore the mechanisms underlying our results. The focus on local public service provision and the meaning that voters attach to it helps us to understand why populist radical right parties succeed in some rural and urban areas and not others.

Our results illustrate the importance of considering local public service provision for understanding support for populist radical right parties in rural areas and beyond. Low/reduced accessibility of local public services is an important driver of support for radical right populist parties in rural areas but also in several urban areas. Grievances about public service provision unites these contexts and drives support for populist radical right parties. Against this backdrop, we encourage researchers to move beyond the classic dichotomy of urban-rural divides and consider more fine-grained local measures when examining political outcomes.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the burgeoning research on the urban-rural divide in politics and we present our argument rooted in local provision of public service. Second, we describe the Italian case study and our measure of local isolation. Third, we introduce the 2010 municipal reform in Italy to provide a causal test of our local public service provision argument. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the importance of our findings.

How Public Service Provision Structures Geographies of Discontent

The idea that geographically rooted interests and identities shape electoral politics is by no means new, think of the state-periphery cleavage defined in the classical work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Yet recently, there has been a renewed scholarly interest in the underpinnings of the urban-rural divide especially when it comes to the electoral success of populist radical right parties (Maxwell 2019, 2020, Harteveld et al. 2021, Huijsmans et al. 2021). This research suggests that the urban-rural divide in support for the populist radical right may reflect deep-run legacies of historically peripheral

geographic communities and the center-periphery cleavage (Durovic et al. 2019, Ziblatt et al. 2021). But also that these legacies were exacerbated by the combination of large-scale structural economic change, resulting from deindustrialization processes (Emmenger et al. 2012, Rodrik 2016), the liberalization of global trade (Autor et al. 2016, Colantone and Stanig 2018, 2019) and technological change (Kurer and Gallego 2019, Jie Im et al. 2019, Gingrich 2019), and emigration and immigration processes (Maxwell 2019, 2020, Dinas et al. 2019, Bratsberg et al. 2020, Riaz et al 2021).

Notwithstanding the importance of this work, our current understanding of the way in which geographically rooted interests and identities drive electoral outcomes is clouded by a host of thorny methodological and conceptual issues and theoretical challenges. Accurately establishing the causally relevant effect of geographic contexts is hard because urban and rural areas differ in many respects. Relying on methods that allow for the causal identification of contextual effects on political outcomes rooted in exploiting specific changes in aspects of the geographic contexts may be a particularly worthwhile approach (see Lassen and Serritlew 2013 for example), but empirical examples of this may be sparse. What is more, rural areas are generally under-sampled by survey companies because rural populations are difficult and costly to reach and small numbers may make results particularly prone to measurement error (e.g., Payton Scally et al. 2020). When it comes to conceptualizing the geographical units we are interested in, the literature relies on a plethora of characteristics, such as geographic distance to urban centres (e.g., Broockman 2013; Warshaw and Rodden 2012), populations size and density (e.g., Acharya et al. 2016; Cho and Gimpel 2010; Primo and Snyder 2010; Urban and Niebler 2014, Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020), or the economic basis of the economy (agriculture-based for example, see Scala and Johnson 2017). The need for clear conceptualisation of the geographical unit of interest seems particularly pressing in the context of the urban-rural divide in populist radical right support as the demand for populist radical right parties does not blindly follow urban-rural boundaries. Substantial support for these parties is found in urban areas as well (Hartveld et el. 2021). Although we will not be able to tackle each of these issues in this study, we develop a theoretical argument about the geographical basis of populist radical right support that is rooted in local public good provision, and this allows for a precise measurement of geographic context and the identification of a causal effect.

Our argument starts from the classic insight from public economics that

links sorting to local public goods provision. The classical model introduced by Charles Tiebout (1956), often referred to as Tiebout sorting, suggests that people reveal their preferences for public good provision indirectly through the location choices they make. People with a strong taste for a high quality primary schools for example will choose to locate in a jurisdiction that invests a lot in primary schools. This mechanism is known as *voting with your feet* (Tiebout 1956). Based on this model, we would expect most people to leave rural or urban areas at least partially based on the attractiveness of tax-public goods packages. They relocate when they are dissatisfied with the supply of local public goods because this means that their tax money is not well spent.

In Europe, like in the United States, due to a growing mobility of capital and people over the last decades combined with large-scale changes to the structure of the economy and trade, we have witnessed increased sorting based on attributes of the local context, such as local public good provision (Bishop 2008, Enos 2017, Odendahl et al. 2019). This geographic sorting is a key driver in the development of cosmopolitan urban areas and national conservative rural areas in Europe (Maxwell 2019, 2020). Yet, the assumption underlying these notions of sorting is that people are mobile and can endure both the material or communal costs associated with moving. While surely some individuals may move in line with Tiebout's theory, many others will stay put. In fact, recent literature on the effects of trade on the labor market shows that the mobility of workers is limited, which explains the long-lasting effects of local economies decline on welfare (see Autor, 2016; Dix-Carneiro, 2017). People are attached to their homes, family ties, places and communities (Cramer 2016, Hochschild 2018). Having limited opportunities to move may itself generate discontent in isolated rural areas (Patana 2021). Indeed, five decades long panel data evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that a large share of people become "locked in" to poor service areas, even when exit options exist (Dowding and John 2008). On the whole, these insights suggest that sorting models generally overestimate the ability of individuals to move or underestimate the strength of connection to the local community, or both.

Due to the fact that many people might not want to or be able to sort into places, this implies that they may not be satisfied with the supply of public good provision where they live. This dissatisfaction with local public good provision may increase when other members from the local community decide to leave. Population decline tends to reduce the local

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tax base which in turn may lead to a worse supply of accessibility of local public services. It may also reduce the electoral significance of the local area diverting the attention of national politicians away from the constituency (Dixit and Londregan 1996). As a result, out-migration affects the composition of municipal councils leading to delayed political innovation and increased discontent expressed through low turnout and vote for challenger parties (Dowding and John 2008, Anelli and Peri, 2017). In many European countries, we have indeed been witnessing the worsening of local public service provision as a result of economic change, population decline, the out-migration of economically active groups and ageing (e.g., Copus et al. 2011, Odendahl et al. 2019).

In line with the classical work by Hirshmann (1970), we argue that the accessibility to public services crucially structures political preference formation and behavior. Local public service provision is one of the most direct way in which politics enters the life of ordinary citizens therefore making it easier, even for the less politically sophisticated, to link experiences to political preferences and behavior (Dowding and John, 2012). Specifically, we argue that low/reduced access to local public services, and the reduction in accessibility, is associated with higher support for populist radical right parties. This is because experiences with low/reduced accessibility to local public goods provide two easy ways to grasp information signals to voters. First, it signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community". Second, it signals that contributing to public goods for them may be futile as the remoteness to local public services restricts "their" access to benefits. Both signals should fuel demand for the messages of the populist radical right rooted in an anti-elite rhetoric that vocalizing a sense of decline, nostalgia and ethnic belonging (Mudde 2007, Elgenius and Rydgren 2017, Gidron and Hall 2020, Belot 2021).

Scoping Our Argument

Before we turn to the empirical examination of these expectations, it is important to highlight three important scope conditions. First, low/reduced accessibility to local public services is not a characteristic specific to rural geographies, but results from a lack of socioeconomic and political connections (*connectivity*) that is not necessarily bounded to a rural location (Castells 2000). This is an important insight, because as we will demon-

strate in the next section, we find a low accessibility to local public services, something we will coin *local isolation* in the next section, in remote rural areas, but also in certain urban areas. Our argument based on local public services allows us to provide an explanation of the geographical patterns in populist radical right support that is not solely rooted in rural places or rural resentment, but also accounts for the popularity populist radical right parties within some urban areas.

What is more, our argument about low/reduced accessibility of local public services and the signals this sends to voters can be seen as a complement to existing accounts of rural resentment. In her work on rural Wisconsin, Cramer (2016) showcases how the lived experiences of those residing in rural areas lead to resentment towards urban elites, in part because people feel that they are ignored and do not get their fair share of resources, next to having distinct values and lifestyles (p. 23). Our argument thus shows much affinity with some key aspects of rural resentment as conceptualised by Cramer. What is different is that we suggest that resentment about being ignored by politicians and frustrated about a lack of state resources may not only be something that rural residents experience.

Second, while our argument about how public service provision helps us understand geographical patterns in populist radical right party support, we by no means wish to suggest that public service provision is the root cause of the electoral success of populist radical right parties. The literature thus far has made important strides in showing how large-scale economic developments (e.g. Emmenger et al. 2012, Rodrik 2016, Autor et al. 2016, Colantone and Stanig 2018, 2019, Margalit 2011, Kurer and Gallego 2019, Jie Im et al. 2019, Gingrich 2019) and distinct patterns of growing mobility of people (e.g. Maxwell 2019, 2020, Dinas et al. 2019, Bratsberg et al. 2020, Riaz et al. 2021, Dustmann, et al. 2019, Campo et al. 2021, Schaub et al. 2021)—or the combination of both (Patana 2018)—coincides with higher support for populist radical right parties. What we argue here is that the geographical concentration of both economic decline due to globalisation and technological change as well as out-migration coincides with distinct patterns in the accessibility of local public service provision. Low/reduced accessibility of local public service provision, we argue, sparks off grievances about being ignored by public officials and not getting one's fair share of resources which increases the programmatic appeal of populist radical right parties.

The relationship between structural economic changes and population

dynamics on the one hand and public service provision on the other is clearly endogenous. Changes to the regional and local economic structure due to deindustrialization (Emmenger et al. 2012, Rodrik 2016), trade shocks (Autor et al. 2016, Colantone and Stanig 2018, 2019) or offshoring (Margalit 2011) reduce the local tax base and reduce the supply and accessibility of public services. Yet at the same time, low/reduced accessibility of public services make local communities less attractive for companies and businesses at least in part, because it makes it more difficult to attract and retain personnel. Similarly, low/reduced accessibility of public services may trigger younger generations to move away from isolated places to more connected places. But at the same time population outflows reduce the tax base that aids the accessibility of public services. To isolate the effect of local public goods provision, we exploit a 2010 national reform in Italy forcing municipalities at a specific population threshold to share public services through intermunicipal unions or mergers. This allows us to demonstrate that reduced accessibility in local public services increases populist radical right support. In doing so, we follow recent research that exploits changes to the municipal structure as a means to study contextual effects on political behaviour (see for example Lassen and Serritlew 2013, Koch and Rochat, 2017, Harjunen et al. 2019).

Third, our argument rooted in local public service provision suggests that low/reduced accessibility of public services increases the programmatic appeal of populist radical right parties, because it signals that public officials do not care about the community and the communal returns on contributing to public goods are low. As it stands, we have not yet been able to fully demonstrate the empirical validity of our signalling mechanism. In future iterations of this paper, we aim to complement our empirical analysis with a survey experiment. So far, we have conducted some preliminary interviews with elites in places with low accessibility of public services which corroborate our mechanism (we do not yet report them here).

Case, Data and Measurement

Our analysis focuses on Italy. Italy is a country where the electoral success of populist radical right parties has one of the longest traditions in Europe (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2008, De Vries and Hobolt 2020). At the same time, the country is marked by considerable territorial variation when it

comes to populist radical right support, often associated to an urban-rural divide (Kenny & De Luca 2020). What is more, the Italian case provides us with ample variation in local isolation, i.e. the low accessibility to local public services, while at the same time allows us to exploit a national reform that changed the supply and accessibility to local public good provision within municipalities with a certain population threshold. These features allow us to sufficiently measure and estimate the effect of local public good provision on populist radical right support. In order to do so, we in a first step developed a novel dataset of municipal level electoral results for the Italian lower house (*Camera dei Deputati*) in national elections. We combined this electoral data with a host of municipal characteristics, including mean altitude, seismic risk, employment rates, ageing (old-age-dependency ratio), presence of public libraries, share of foreign-born population, foreigners, share area covered by forest and population size. We also add a measure classifying Italian municipalities as either rural or urban based on a classical measure, a combination of population size and density also used by the Italian government, as well as compile our novel measure of local isolation. This allows us in a second step to replicate political science findings pointing to more support for populist radical right parties in rural areas, and demonstrate that local isolation helps explain geographical patterns in populist radical right support beyond rurality alone. Due to the fact that local public service provision is likely endogenous to politics, we aim in a third step to exploit the 2010 reform to isolate the effect of the supply and accessibility to local public good provision in municipalities on populist radical right support.

First, in Figure 1 we replicate political science findings pointing to more support for populist radical right parties in rural areas. Recall that we focus on votes for the lower house (*Camera dei Deputati*) in Italian national elections, as these provide us with a measure of populist radical right support that is further removed from local political dynamics, and as such likely less endogenous to local public good provision. We calculate the municipal-level share of votes for populist radical right parties by dividing the number of votes for populist radical right parties in each municipality by the total number of votes in that municipality. In the appendix, we report the list of parties that we classify as populist radical right. We also classify municipalities as rural or urban according to their population size and density. Following the official definition by the Italian National Institute of Statistics, rural municipalities are those with a population smaller than 5,000
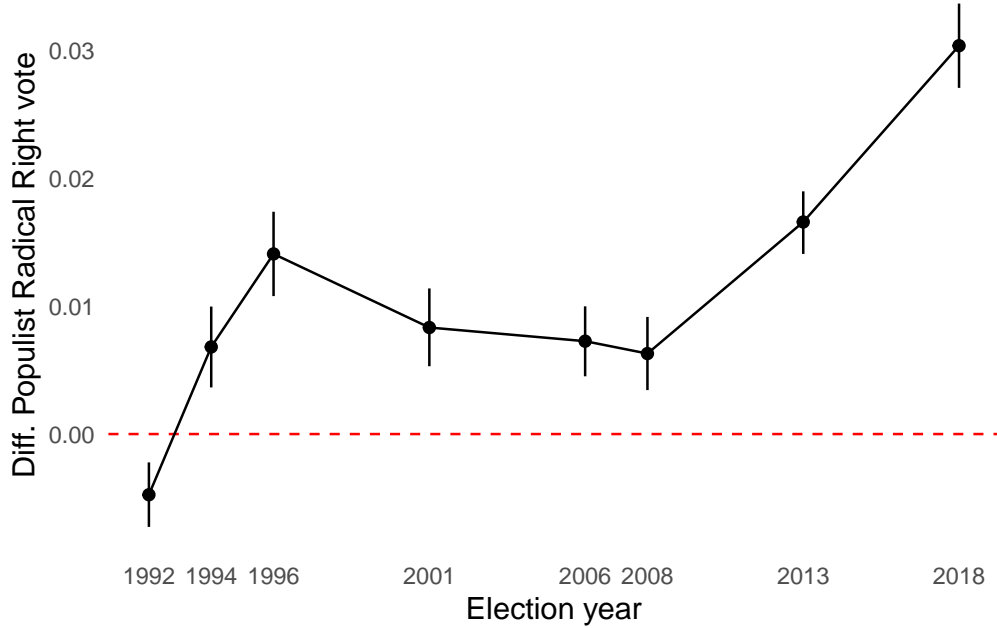
Figure 1: Populist radical right support in rural Italy, 1992–2018

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

inhabitants and density lower than 300 inhabitants per squared kilometre. The results in Figure 1 demonstrate how support for populist radical right parties has been constantly stronger in rural than in urban Italian municipalities since the 1990s. It also shows how the divide has steadily increased since the 2008 economic crisis. Note that the difference between urban and rural municipalities remains robust even when we control for a host of municipal controls tapping into population and economic characteristics.

Second, we repeat the analysis with our new, fine-grained measure of local isolation to better understand geographic pattern in populist radical right support. Rather than relying on differences between urban and rural areas based on population or economic development, we suggest that the accessibility of public services is a powerful lens through which to understand how place-based grievances are translated into political demands

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Distance to Services: Tertiles
2013

Distance Tertiles (Km)
- 0 - 14.7
- 14.7 - 26.3
- 26.3 - 240

Figure 3: Distance from public service hubs, 2014

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

and behaviour. Conceptually, this means that rather than focusing on how distance to cities, population or economic structure may make rural areas different from urban ones, as is often done in research on the urban-rural divide (Broockman 2013; Warshaw and Rodden 2012, Acharya et al. 2016; Cho and Gimpel 2010; Primo and Snyder 2010; Urban and Niebler 2014, Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2020, Scala and Johnson 2017), we focus on local public good provision. So rather than characterising geographical units as either urban or rural based on classical indicators of population size and density as we did above, we build on insights from geography to introduce a fine-grained measure of local isolation, that is to say the low supply and accessibility of public services (Barca 2009, Barca et al. 2012, Rodriguez-Pose 2018).

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

Table 1 further shows the relationship between the urban-rural measure we used in Figure 1 and our local isolation measure. It demonstrates two important points, namely that while low accessibility of public services is definitely a characteristic of rural areas, there is considerable difference in the level of isolation between rural areas. That is to say, not all rural areas are the same. What is more, a substantial share of urban areas (roughly 35 per cent) is quite isolated. This suggests that unpacking the dichotomy of urban versus rural areas is important, and go a step forward to better understanding populist radical right support in both rural and urban areas by accounting for what these local communities have in common.

We explore the relationship between local isolation and support for rad-

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

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

Table 1: Urban-rural communities and local isolation

| | Urban | | Rural | | Total | |
Isolation	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1st tertile	1,652	56.2	1,027	19.9	2,679	33.1
2nd tertile	854	29.1	1,837	35.6	2,691	33.3
3rd tertile	432	14.7	2,290	44.4	2,722	33.6
Total	2,938	100.0	5,154	100.0	8,092	100.0

ical right parties using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses. As shown in Table 2, support for populist radical right parties increases with isolation from local public services. The estimates reported in the Table include national elections held in 2013 and 2018 (i.e., the elections held after that distance from public services was measured). Estimates are robust to the addition of several municipality-level controls collected before 2013, including population size, average altitude, exposure to seismic risk, the difference in employment rate between 2001 and 2011, old-age-dependency ratio, number of public libraries, the difference in population size between 1991 and 2011, share foreigners in 2011, and share of the municipal area covered by forest.

Table 2: Populist radical right support and local isolation

	(1)	(2)
Isolation (ref. $= 1^{st}$ tertile)		
2nd tertile	0.016***	0.010***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
3rd tertile	0.027***	0.013***
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Controls	No	Yes
Year/Province FE	Yes	Yes
N	16,047	16,043
R^2	0.81	0.82

Notes: Controls include mean altitude, seismic risk, diff. employment rate 2001-2011, age dependecy ratio, no. public libraries, diff. population size 1991-2011, share foreigners 2011, share area covered by forest, population size. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

The 2010 Municipal Reform in Italy

In order to identify the causal effect of the reduced accessibility to local public services on populist radical right support, we exploit a 2010 Italian administrative reform that forced small municipalities to manage part of their public services jointly. The reform stemmed from a general effort undertaken by national governments across Europe in the last decade to reduce municipal fragmentation and the burden of administrative costs on state budgets (Swianiewicz et al. 2022 for an overview, see also Bolgherini et al. 2018 for Italy). The reform offers a unique opportunity to study the electoral consequences of the reduced accessibility to local public services. Before turning to the empirical strategy and results, we provide additional details on the case.

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

Over the last three decades, the national government has tried to reduce municipal fragmentation through different legislative initiatives, culminating in the 2010 reform that forced small municipalities to jointly provide and manage basic public services. In 1990, a national law (no. 142/1990) introduced several forms of inter-municipal cooperation aiming at economies of scale in local public services provision. In particular, the 1990 law introduced the possibility to form *municipal unions*, a form of municipal cooperation that has assumed a crucial role in subsequent reforms. Small municipalities (smaller than 5,000 inhabitants) were allowed to form municipal unions within which to share public services. In this initial phase, municipal unions were intended as a first step towards stronger municipal integration; after ten years, member municipalities that had formed a union were forced to merge into a new municipality (a procedure, municipal merg-
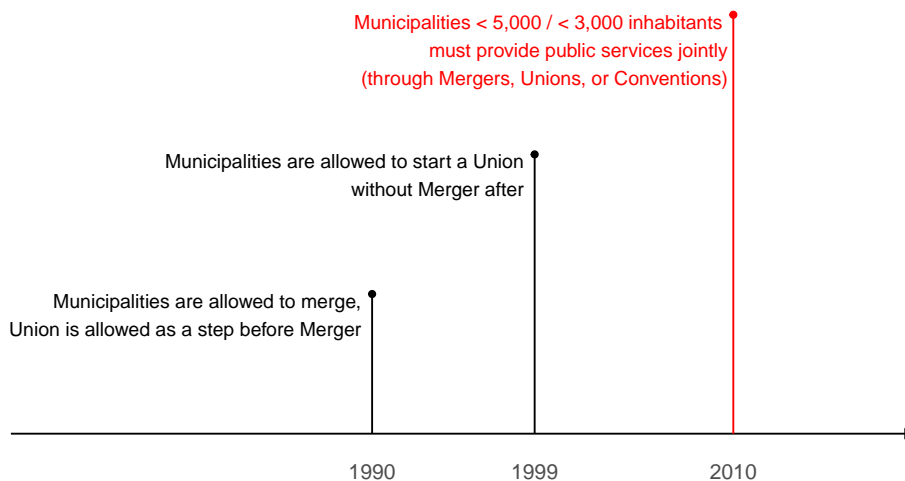
Figure 5: Timeline of intermunicipal-cooperation laws, 1990—2010

ers, that has always been possible in Italy but rarely practiced until recent years).

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

The 2008 financial crisis and the rise of austerity-related cuts to administrative budgets brought new impetus to the process of municipal integration (Bolgherini et al. 2018). In 2010, a new reform introduced the so-called compulsory joint management (*gestione associata obbligatoria*) of basic public services (law no. 78/2010). The law established that municipalities below a certain population threshold had to start jointly managing at least three "fundamental functions" by January 1, 2013; at least three other functions by September 30, 2014; all the remaining functions by December 31, 2014. Fundamental functions include (a) administration,
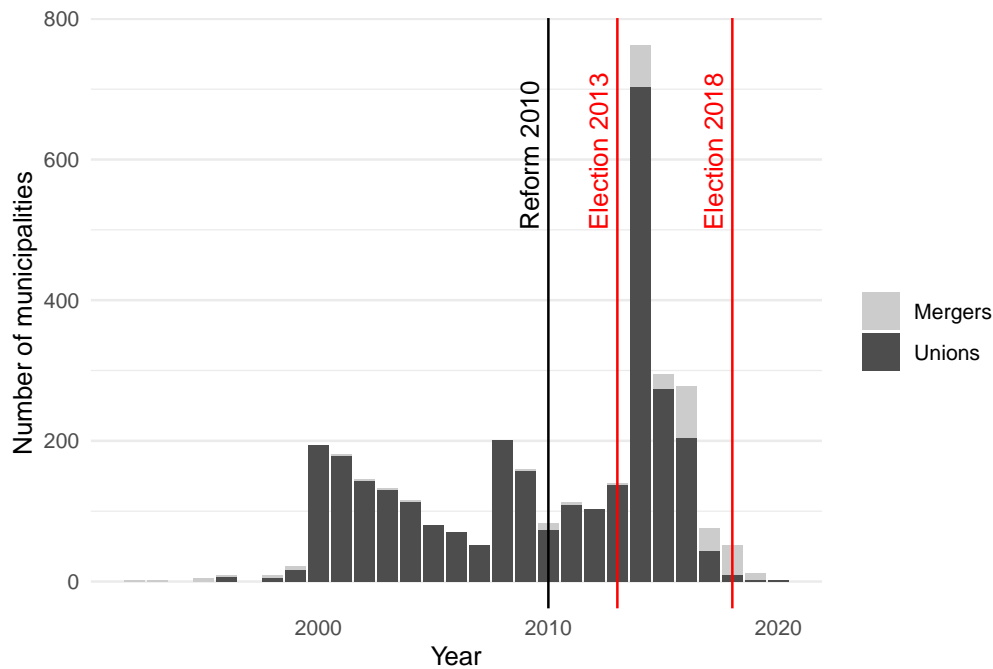
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Figure 6: Creation of municipal unions and mergers, 1992–2020

financial management, and accounting; (b) general interest public services, including municipal public transport services; (c) real estate registry; (d) urban planning and municipal construction; (e) civil protection and first aid; (f) collection and disposal of waste and collection of related taxes; (g) social services; (h) school construction and management; (i) municipal police and local administrative police; (l) electoral, registry, and statistical services, including the maintenance of civil status and population registers. The law used two different thresholds: a general threshold of 5,000 inhabitants and a special threshold of 3,000 inhabitants for municipalities that were part of a "mountain community" (another kind of sovra-municipal institution). Municipalities whose territory extended over one or more islands were exempted from the reform.

Municipalities were let free to choose how to comply with the law. They could merge—dissolving their municipal institutions into a single administrative entity—form a union—creating a sovra-municipal government deputed to the organisation of shared public service provision—or stipulate a convention—stipulating a contract regulating the joint provision of public

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services. Conventions, the most flexible and least demanding form of joint management, had to last minimum three years and meet efficiency and efficacy audits by the government. The process of forming unions and mergers was further simplified by a new law introduced in 2014. Figure 5 shows the timeline of the reform process. Figure 6 presents the progressive uptake of the reform by Italian municipalities. Figure 6 displays how the 2010 and 2014 laws were followed by a marked increase in intermunicipal-cooperation through municipal unions and mergers.[4]

Empirical Strategy and Results

To assess the impact of municipal integration on electoral support for the populist radical right parties, we combine a difference-in-difference design with a regression discontinuity (Hager and Hilbig 2021; Grembi, Nannicini, and Troiano 2016). More precisely, we compare electoral outcomes in elections hold before (2001, 2006, and 2008) and after (2013, and 2018) the 2013 reform deadline in municipalities below the reform population threshold—which were forced to provide public services jointly—and above—which were allowed to remain independent. By restricting the sample to municipalities around the population threshold, we increase the comparability of treatment and control group ensuring that the parallel trends assumption is met.

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

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

where i stands for municipality and t for the election year (2001; 2006; 2008; 2013; 2018). $v_{i,t}$ represents the municipal-level share of votes for the

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[4]45 percent affected municipalities complied with the reform by establishing a municipal union or a merger. The government did not collected systematic data on conventions.

populist radical right parties. The binary indicator t_i estimates the effect of the reform. The vectors of dummies γ_t and μ_i identify year and municipality fixed effects. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.

The identification assumption is that, absent the 2010 reform, municipalities would have evolved the same way in the control and the treatment group. Under this assumption, the main coefficients of interest t_i captures any deviation from a parallel evolution in votes for the populist radical right between the treatment and the control group due to the 2010 law.

For those municipalities merged after the reform, we can only observe the combined vote share of the merged municipalities because electoral records are collected at the municipal level. Given that our estimation strategy is based on each municipality's distance from the population threshold, we need to maintain the municipal structure fixed to the last election before the reform (2008). We thus keep the number of municipalities and their relative population fixed to 2008, but we substitute the municipal vote share of each merged municipality with the weighted average of vote shares within the merger.[5] We exclude from the sample 15 municipalities for which we are unable to assign a population threshold of reference due to lack of information on mountain community membership at the time of the reform. We also drop 12 island municipalities that were exempted from the reform. The final sample includes 8,071 municipalities, 67 percent of which were affected by the reform.

Column 1 of Table 3 reports results from our baseline model. The regression coefficient associated with the binary variable t indicates that exposure to 2010 reform is associated with a small but statistically and electorally significant increase of 0.005 vote share for populist radical right parties. In column 2 of Table 3, we test the parallel trend assumption adding a placebo binary variable taking value 1 for treated municipalities in the year before the reform (2008). The estimated coefficient on the placebo is not statistically different from 0, indicating that vote shares for the populist radical right in control and treated municipalities were not distinguishable before the reform.

We test the robustness of our results to measurement error of the running variable and the eventuality that municipalities strategically manipulate

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

Table 3: Effect of exposure to the 2010 reform on vote for the populist radical right

	(1)	(2)
Exposure to the reform (t)	0.005*	0.008*
	(0.002)	(0.003)
Placebo		0.007
		(0.005)
N	6,195	6,195
R^2	0.57	0.57
h	1,000	1,000

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

population statics to select out of the treatment estimating so-called donut-RD regressions (Eggers et al. 2015). We obtain robust results that we report in the appendix. We also estimate the effect of the reform on turnout and find no effect. We report also these results in the appendix. Overall, our results support the idea that a reduction in accessibility to public services causes an increase in support for radical right parties.

Exploring the Mechanism

Our results illustrate the importance of local public service provision for understanding support for populist radical right parties. Yet, we so far have not provided evidence for our proposed mechanism as to why this happens. Our theoretical argument suggests that low/reduced accessibility of local public services signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community", and that contributing to public goods in general might be futile as remoteness restricts the access to the benefits. Both these signals should fuel the demand for the messages of the populist radical right whose anti-elite rhetoric gives expression to a sense of decline, nostalgia and ethnic belonging (Mudde 2007, Elgenius and Rydgren 2017, Gidron and Hall 2020, Belot 2021). In order to convince readers that this is indeed the case we wish to a) test implications of this argument, and b) conduct a survey experiment. On this part of the paper, we really need your input!

Let us first summarize what we have done this far when it comes to testing the implications of this argument. If it is indeed the case that

Table 4: Support for pro-redistribution parties and local isolation

	(1)	(2)
Isolation (ref. $= 1^{st}$ tertile)		
2nd tertile	−0.022***	−0.016***
	(0.002)	(0.002)
3rd tertile	−0.042***	−0.026***
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Controls	No	Yes
Year/Province FE	Yes	Yes
N	16,047	16,043
R^2	0.60	0.61

Notes: Controls included mean altitude, seismic risk, diff. employment rate 2001-2011, age dependency ratio, no. public libraries, diff. population size 1991-2011, share foreigners 2011, share area covered by forest, population size. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

low/reduced accessibility to local public services makes people more receptive of the right-wing anti-establishment messages of populist radical right parties that center around nostalgia and decline, we should NOT find that a reduction in supply and accessibility in local public services increases support for parties advocating for pro-redistribution messages. If voters would support parties advocating redistribution this would suggest that low/reduced accessibility of local public services fuels demand for more generous public services overall.

To test this implication, we replicate our analyses looking at the electoral performance of *pro-redistribution parties*—namely, left-wing parties and the Five Star Movement in Italy. First, we regress support for pro-redistribution parties in 2013 and 2018 on local isolation. Second, we estimate our two-way fixed effects panel regression using the municipal-level vote share for pro-redistribution parties as outcome variable.

Table 4 and Table 5 report the results of this empirical exercise. Table 4 shows that larger distance from public services, as captured by our local isolation measure, correlates with a lower vote share for pro-redistribution parties. Table 5 shows that the municipalities that were forced to jointly manage public services voted less for pro-redistribution parties after the 2010

Table 5: Effect of exposure to the 2010 reform on vote for pro-redistribution parties

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

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

reform. The negative and statistically significant coefficient associated with the 2008 placebo also shows that these parties were already experiencing a decreasing trend before the reform in treated municipalities. Overall, these results confirm the idea that low/reduced accessibility to public services makes people more receptive of messages of populist right parties rather than pro-redistribution ones.

Next to this analysis, we aim to conduct a survey experiment in which we provide the treatment group with a vignette detailing a hypothetical reduction in the accessibility of local public services while the control group does not receive this vignette, yet both groups receive a set of questions soliciting their views about how much public officials care about people like them and if contributing to public goods (paying taxes) yields any benefits for them.

An alternative strategy would be to conduct focus groups in isolated places in which the accessibility of local public services was reduced to evaluate if people reason about their discontent in terms of their community being abandoned by the state and contributing to public goods not being worth it. First focus groups with elites in Piedmont seem to suggest that this is indeed the case. In a next step, we wish to conduct a coherent set of focus groups in selected municipalities. Any advice on how to choose 2 to 4 municipalities would be much appreciated. Maybe in addition, it would also be worthwhile to show that populist radical right political elites amplify feelings of communities being abandoned by the state more than other elites. Overall, your input on the mechanism part is much appreciated.

Conclusions

This study aims to advance our understanding of the urban-rural divide in politics by theorizing, measuring and estimating the effects of geographical context on the support for populist radical right parties. By developing an argument that highlights the importance of public service provision at the local level, we aim to theoretically and empirically link place to a political expression of grievances. We argue that low/reduced accessibility of public services, which we coin local isolation, increases the programmatic appeal of populist radical right parties that combines anti-establishment sentiment and right-wing nationalism. Low/reduced accessibility to local public goods signals to voters that public officials do not care about "their community", and that contributing to public goods in general might be futile as remoteness restricts the access to the benefits.

By focussing on Italy and relying on an integrative multi-method design, we introduce a fine-grained measure of local isolation and show this helps us to better understand geographical patterns in populist radical right support. In order to examine the link between local public service provision and support for the populist radical right further, we exploit a national reform of Italian municipalities from 2010. This reform allowed us to examine the causal effect of reducing the accessibility of local public good provision on support for populist radical right parties. In a future step, we plan to run a survey experiment in Italian municipalities to uncover the precise mechanism underlying these effect, which we hypothesize is rooted in people's feelings that public officials do not care about "their community", and that contributing to public goods in general is worthless.

Our results illustrate the importance of local public service provision for understanding support for populist radical right parties. What is more, we show that local isolation, that is to say low/reduced accessibility of public services is not only a characteristic of rural areas, but also of a considerable share of urban areas. This may help us to understand the underpinnings of support for populist radical right parties in both urban and rural areas through a parsimonious explanation, without having to resort to a multiple roots argument (see Harteveld et al. 2021). Against this backdrop, we encourage researchers to move beyond the classic dichotomy of urban-rural divides and consider more fine-grained measures of local isolation when examining political outcomes.

Appendix

Table 6: Populist Radical Right Parties in Italian Elections

| Party	Election Year							
	1992	1994	1996	2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
Alleanza Nazionale		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Alternativa Sociale Mussolini					✓			
Azione Sociale Mussolini						✓		
Casapound Italia							✓	✓
Destra Nazionale					✓			
Fiamma Tricolore				✓	✓		✓	
Forza Nuova				✓		✓	✓	
Fratelli d'Italia							✓	✓
Fronte Nazionale				✓				
Futuro e Libertà							✓	
Italia agli Italiani								✓
La Destra							✓	
La Destra - Fiamma Tricolore						✓		
Lega								✓
Lega Lombarda	✓							
Lega Nord		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Movimento Sociale Tricolore			✓					
MSI-DN	✓							
Rifondazione Missina Italiana							✓	
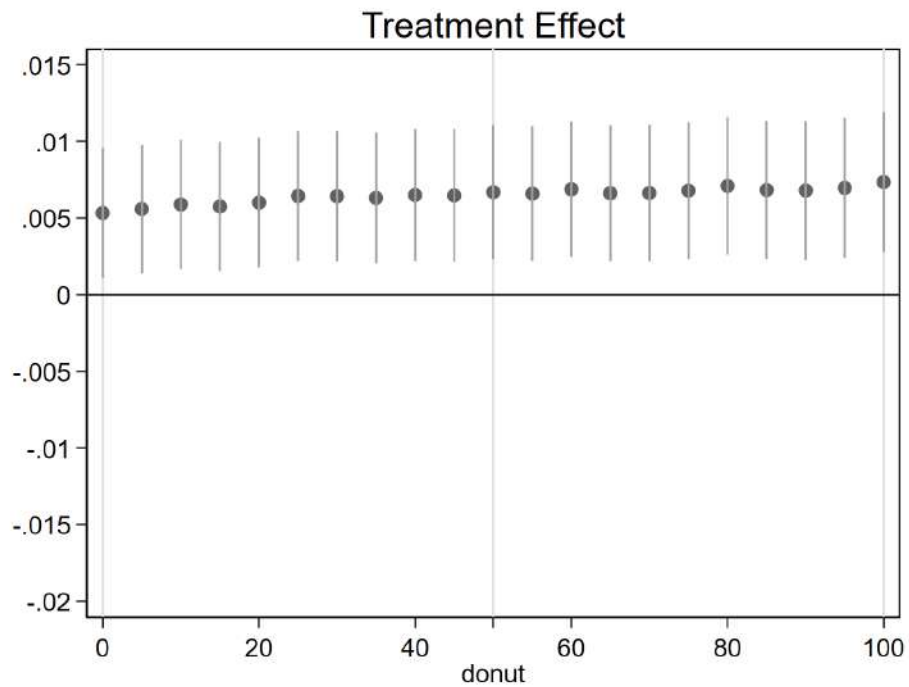
Figure 7: Effect of exposure to the 2010 reform on vote for the populist radical right (donut-hole approach)

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

Table 7: Turnout and local isolation

	(1)	(2)
Isolation (ref. $= 1^{st}$ tertile)		
2nd tertile	-0.024^{***}	-0.014^{***}
	(0.001)	(0.001)
3rd tertile	-0.051^{***}	-0.025^{***}
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Controls	No	Yes
Year/Province FE	Yes	Yes
N	16,047	16,043
R^2	0.61	0.65

Notes: Controls included mean altitude, seismic risk, diff. employment rate 2001-2011, age dependecy ratio, no. public libraries, diff. population size 1991-2011, share foreigners 2011, share area covered by forest, population size. OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 8: Effect of exposure to the 2010 reform on turnout

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

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

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