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## WHEN SCAPEGOATING BACKFIRES: THE PITFALLS OF BLAMING MIGRANTS FOR A CRISIS

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# When scapegoating backfires: The pitfalls of blaming migrants for a crisis

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*Short article*

In times of hardship, politicians often leverage citizens' discontent and scapegoat minorities to obtain political support. This paper tests whether political campaigns scapegoating migrants for a health crisis affect social, political, and economic attitudes and behaviors. Through an online nationally-representative survey experiment in Italy, we analyze the effects of such narratives through information-provision treatments, which include facts also emphasizing the alleged health consequences of ongoing immigration. Results show that narratives associating immigration with health threats do not generate sizeable add-on effects compared to those based on immigration only. If anything, they increase disappointment towards co-nationals, reduce institutional trust, and undermine partisanship among extreme-right supporters. Results are consistent with a theoretical framework where party credibility and support, and institutional trust are influenced by political discourse. Our experiment underpins the prediction that political campaigns based on extreme narratives can be ineffective or socially and politically counterproductive, providing an example of how populism can backfire.

*JEL codes:* D7 | C9 | D91
*Keywords:* Immigration | Pandemic crisis | Survey experiment | Socio-political attitudes | Institutional trust | Anti-immigrant narratives | Informational treatments | Political messaging | Populism

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## I. Introduction

Economic crises can spur social conflict and increase anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviors (Cantoni, Hagemeister and Westcott, 2019; Bursztyn et al., 2022*a*; Huang et al., 2023). Increased frustration, higher perceived inequalities, and lower expected social sanctions are some explanations for the increase in anti-minority behaviors often observed in periods of hardship (Bauer et al., 2016; Bartoš et al., 2021). Out-group hostility can be further fuelled by opportunistic politicians, who often exploit the crisis and scapegoat minority groups representing them as a threat (Bursztyn et al., 2022*b*; Voigtländer and Voth, 2015). By doing so, they aim at increasing political support, being immigration a key topic in the political debate, which becomes so salient in times of elections (Bellucci et al., 2019) to change political outcomes (Barone et al., 2016; Halla, Wagner and Zweimüller, 2017; Mayda, Peri and Steingress, 2022).

Amid the most critical stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, leaders of populist and right-wing parties capitalized on the crisis to further espouse anti-immigrant discourse, strategically aiming to increase political support. Their messages entailed a slanted use of statistics on the divergent disease incidence between Italians and incoming refugees, as well as the unequal treatment of these two groups regarding mobility restrictions and financial support. By blaming migrants for spreading the virus[1] and the government for not defending the country's borders[2], this messaging strategy aimed to increase the perceived threat of immigration further and hence political support for extreme-right parties.

How do these narratives impact important factors for societal success, such as social and institutional trust, social cohesion, and political stability? This paper provides an answer by examining how such an instrumental (mis)use of information affects individuals' socio-political and economic preferences and behaviors in times of profound distress.

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/28/coronavirus-outbreak-migrants-blamed-italy-matteo-salvini-marine-le-pen.
[2] https://time.com/5789666/italy-coronavirus-far-right-salvini.

We assess how socio-political and economic preferences are shifted by information covering not only "standard" immigration statistics (i.e., as before the COVID-19 crisis) but also pandemic-related issues, e.g., the incidence of the disease among incoming immigrants, the contrast between mobility restrictions imposed to Italians and the (alleged) migrants' freedom to move, and the financial costs of immigration during the pandemic.

To this purpose, we conduct an online survey experiment on a nationally-representative sample of Italians (N$\sim$1500). The main outcomes we consider are anti-immigration attitudes and behavior, social and institutional trust, preferences toward redistribution, and voting intentions. These are measured through survey questions and money-incentivized tasks. After priming participants to re-evoke the pandemic experience, we rely on a set of informational treatments to test whether exposure to immigration narratives based on the health risks/costs of immigration generates sizeable *add-on* effects, relative to narratives based on immigration size only.

By evaluating the effect of *joint* exposure to these two informational contents, i.e., immigration and its (alleged) health consequences and costs, this paper fills a gap in the literature that examines the effects of these two aspects separately. Moreover, by rationalizing the experimental findings within a theoretical model, our results go beyond the pandemic context. They shed light on the much broader issue of when populist political messages – potentially perceived as too extreme or unethical – are effective or, rather, backfire.

Our results, overall, lean toward the latter hypothesis. Political narratives associating immigration with health issues do not generate sizeable add-on effects compared to those based on immigration only. If anything, they increase disappointment and punishment towards co-nationals, reduce institutional trust, and undermine partisanship among extreme-right supporters. Hence, political campaigns based on scapegoating are ineffective or, when they do have an effect, they are socially and politically counterproductive. Thus, they offer an example of

how populism ultimately backfires.

## II. Background

### A. *Previous research and hypotheses*

Little evidence is available so far on how individuals react to political narratives scapegoating minorities during crises. During economic hardships, social media become the main platform for sharing political and social discontent, where citizens look for someone to blame (Bauer et al., 2021), and politicians supply anti-minority narratives (Voigtländer and Voth, 2015).

In this regard, a strand of the literature shows that (mis)information about immigration spurs hostility towards foreigners and migrants (Dylong and Uebelmesser, 2022; Conzo et al., 2021; Grigorieff, Roth and Ubfal, 2020; Avdagic and Savage, 2021; Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva, 2022). Other studies, instead, show that priming or informing individuals about the pandemic crisis increases anti-immigrant attitudes and demand for fiscal pressure retrenchment (Daniele et al., 2020*a*,*b*; Bartoš et al., 2021); some papers, however, find no effects (Adida, Dionne and Platas, 2020; Adida et al., 2021). A recent empirical study shows a substantial increase in hate crimes towards Asians at the pandemic onset in Italy (Dipoppa, Grossman and Zonszein, 2023). Yet, how scapegoating minorities can causally affect a broader set of individual preferences, including trust and voting intentions, is still an open question.

The aforementioned papers motivate the conjecture that strategically combining information on immigration and the pandemic might generate a significant interaction, leading to a larger impact on citizens' attitudes and behaviors than informing individuals on one of the two aspects separately. In other terms, scapegoating immigrants for the health crisis might be a more powerful political strategy than just emphasizing either the threat of contagion *or* the threat of immi-

gration[3].

It may, however, happen that citizens, under siege of a shared misfortune, search for political stability and unity, and therefore "rally round the flag", especially when it comes to fighting against a collective threat (Mueller, 1970; Oneal and Bryan, 1995; Schraff, 2021). Consistent with the "rally hypothesis" and the parasite stress (Thornhill and Fincher, 2014) and the terror management (Pyszczynski et al., 2021) theories, recent research has shown that direct exposure to (or recalling the negative effects of) the COVID-19 pandemic increases donations (Grimalda et al., 2021; Adena and Harke, 2022), social (Gambetta and Morisi, 2022; Aassve et al., 2022) and institutional (Esaiasson et al., 2021) trust, and solidarity (Cappelen et al., 2021). If this is the case, scapegoating minorities for an ongoing crisis might be ineffective or even backfire.

Anecdotal evidence seems to support this latter claim. In Italy, the party that mostly scapegoated migrants at the onset of the 2020 pandemic has seen its vote share halve in the 2022 national elections. In the US, a similar defeat was experienced in the 2020 elections by Trump, whose electoral program blamed immigrants and other minority groups[4] for either the economic crisis or spreading the virus (Bursztyn et al., 2022*b*). In another context, when homosexuals became the main scapegoats for AIDS in the early '80s in the US, conservative parties asked for pretesting only "high-risk" groups to which homosexuals were expected to belong. Yet, in the 1988 election, exit pools revealed that Americans cared relatively little about healthcare-related issues (Blendon and Donelan, 1989); moreover, the Democratic party proposing less discriminating policies increased its political consensus (Mansour, Rees and Reeves, 2020).

Thus, based on previous research[5], whether political messaging based on scape-

[3] In line with this prediction, from an evolutionary perspective, perceived pathogen threats and disease avoidance can influence political attitudes: the behavioral immune system might predispose people to prefer policies that reduce the likelihood of contact with (real or imagined) pathogens, especially in prospective interactions with unfamiliar outgroups (e.g., immigrants) (Aarøe, Petersen and Arceneaux, 2017; van Leeuwen and Petersen, 2018; Szymkow, Frankowska and Gałasińska, 2021).

[4] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/22/trump-coronavirus-briefing-black-lives-matter-protests

[5] See also section 2 in SM1 for the outcome-specific background literature and conceptual framework.

goating minorities for a crisis is indeed effective is an empirical issue.

### *B. Immigration and the COVID-19 pandemic*

Through the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, Italian far-right politicians tried to link the spread of the disease to the inflow of migrants and refugees to make the coronavirus outbreak a political issue and create a connection between the migrants and the spread of the virus. Although migrants were never proven to be a primary vehicle of contagion, extreme-right and populist parties scapegoated them for the pandemic crisis, leveraging citizens' fears.

A search for joint salience of the immigration and COVID-19-related issues within the Italian news reports further underlines the strength of the association between these two topics (Fig. A1 in SM1): joint occurrences of words related both to "COVID-19" and "Immigration" surged in the first pandemic wave in 2020, and maintained high levels also over the summer of 2020, when the salience of immigration *per se* largely increased due to the high number of refugee landings, and the salience of COVID *per se* decreased following the seasonal drop in infections.

During the harshest phases of the pandemic, extreme-right politicians tried to exploit the increase in contagion to deem the government responsible for the heightening of the migration crisis along with the inadequate policy responses to the health crisis (Fig. A2 of SM1).

## III. Experimental design

### *A. Treatments*

Across treatment conditions, we manipulate the amount and the content of the information about immigration and its alleged health consequences participants receive. Since the survey was conducted at the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian

war, i.e., when the health crisis lost relevance in public opinion[6], we also prime respondents with COVID-19-related facts and questions to remind participants of the pandemic.

The survey features six treatments (see Fig.1 here and Fig. A3a-c in SM1), designed to expose participants to either (i) only *pandemic* priming (*PAN*), (ii) both *pandemic* priming and information provision about *immigration*-related facts and figures, or (iii) none of the two before they answer the complete set of outcome questions. To disentangle the impact of the different aspects covered by the anti-immigrant narratives during the pandemic, we focus on various immigration-related topics across four (sub-)treatment conditions. We design four *Immigration (MIG)* sub-treatment conditions covering the main immigration-related issues discussed in the news at the time, concerning: (1) the *magnitude (MAG)* of incoming migration flows during the COVID-19 pandemic (2) the severity of the *health threat (HT)* posed by incoming migrants in terms of COVID-19 diffusion; the tension between (3) the strict *mobility (MOB)* constraints imposed on Italians and the migrants' freedom to enter Italian borders during the pandemic, and (4) the lack of proper and timely financial support to Italian workers and the considerable public investments made to support incoming migrants' during the pandemic (*Financial costs (FC)*). Participants are randomly assigned to only one of the six treatment conditions (between-subjects design).

We implement two control conditions: i) a "pure control" (*C1 "NO PAN, NO MIG"*), where the pandemic-related facts/questions and the immigration-size statistics are provided only *after* the outcome measures, and ii) a control condition (*T2 "PAN, NO MIG"*), where participants are exposed to the pandemic priming *before* the outcome measures, while they receive immigration-size statistics only *afterward*. This condition allows us to (test and) control for the effects of the pandemic priming *per se*. Participants assigned to these control conditions are exposed, after outcomes' measurement, to the same statistics on

[6]We deal with this potential concern to the effectiveness of our treatments in Section 3 of SM1.

immigration magnitude (*MAG*) as those shown in either of the four *Immigration (MIG)* sub-treatment conditions [7].

In the first *MIG* sub-treatment (*T3 "PAN – MAG"*), we show a single information sheet reporting only a few figures on the size of refugee inflows in 2020 compared to 2019. In the second *MIG* sub-treatment (*T4 "PAN – MAG & HT"*), we focus on the purported severity of the health threat posed by incoming migratory flows during the pandemic. Participants are exposed to two information sheets: the same reported in *T3*, showing the magnitude of migratory inflows, and another one reporting two key figures about the diffusion of the coronavirus within the immigrants' and Italian populations at the onset of the pandemic.

In the third and fourth *MIG* sub-treatments (*T5 "PAN – MAG & HT & MOB"*; *T6 "PAN – MAG & HT & FC"*), we focus on the perceived unfairness regarding, respectively, the freedom to move and the financial support granted to immigrants, as opposed to the mobility restrictions and delayed (and relatively scarce) economic benefits experienced by the Italians during the pandemic. Participants assigned to any of these two conditions are shown three information sheets in total: the same two reported in *T4*, plus an additional one emphasizing either of the two specific, aforementioned aspects (mobility in *T5* and financial costs in *T6*).

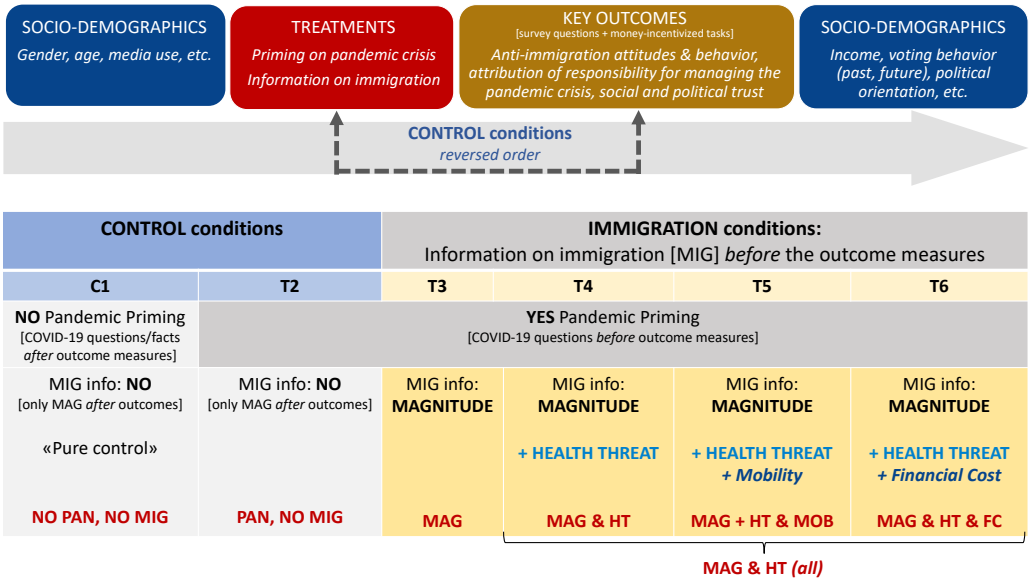
The information on immigration magnitude is common to all the *MIG* sub-treatments: it serves as a benchmark and a helpful starting point to trigger and amplify participants' reactions to the other stimuli, which emphasize other relevant aspects of the alleged immigration threat[8].

Since we are interested in the potential *add-on* effects of the narratives emphasizing the health consequences of immigration, we show and discuss here the *joint* treatment effect of all conditions referring to the health threat information cluster *HT* —pooling *T4, T5*, and *T6*—, which we call "*PAN – MAG & HT (all)*",

[7] See Fig. A3b-c in SM1 for a more detailed, schematic diagram of the experimental design.

[8] Results from the Pre-Validation Test – section III.C below and section 1 in SM2 – confirm that magnitude of immigration is always perceived as salient, irrespective of the content of the specific *MIG* sub-treatment participants are assigned to.

Figure (1) Experimental design (survey flow and conditions)




hereon. We report, however, treatment effects for each condition separately in SM1.

### *B. Outcomes*

Our outcome variables are based on standard survey questions and money-incentivized behavioral tasks (see Table A1B in SM1 for further details). We group our outcome measures into four main blocks.

The first block is "anti-immigrant attitudes and behavior", and includes *i)* the first component of a principal component analysis (PCA) on seven survey items aimed at measuring attitudes toward immigration: "*Against immigration (attitudes)*"; *ii)* the first component of a PCA on six survey items aimed at measuring attitudes toward redistribution: "*Pro-redistribution (attitudes)*"; *iii)* the amount of money sent in a "Charity Dictator Game" (DG): "*Donation (behavior)*"[9]; *iv)*

[9]Participants are endowed with 10€ and asked to choose how much they want to give up and donate to Emergency, an NGO that assists immigrants, to finance a specific medical aid program for migrants who landed in Sicily. We inform participants that donation choices will be implemented only for a randomly selected subset (20% of the sample); selected participants will receive the residual amount of money as

preferences for punishing parsimonious donors in the DG: "*Redistribution (behavior)*"[10].

The second block is "attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis". Participants must allocate 100 "responsibility points" across different political (National government; Local government; International organizations) and non-political (Mass media; Scientists; Big Pharma; China; Italians) targets. We analyze the answers by looking separately at each target and aggregating them through a PCA for institutional and non-institutional actors.

The third block is "trust". Participants must rate how much they trust political (National government; Local government; International organizations) and non-political (Mass media; Scientists; Big Pharma; China; Italians) actors. We analyze their actor-specific choices and aggregate them, as above, through a PCA for institutional and non-institutional actors. We also elicit respondents' level of social trust through three survey questions taken from the World Values Survey and aggregate them into a single measure through a PCA.

The fourth block is "voting". Participants are asked about their voting preferences in the last political elections and their hypothetical voting preferences at the time of the interview. More specifically, about the last outcome measure, we ask: "If you were to vote again next week, would you confirm your vote choice in the last national elections?". Participants then can select whether they would vote for the same party, would not do so, or would not know whom to vote for. In the second case, they could also choose which alternative party they would

additional private earnings. In the second task, participants are asked to guess how much other participants have donated and receive a monetary prize for correct guesses. Through an incentivized beliefs elicitation procedure, we also elicited participants' individual beliefs on the distribution of donations. We ask participants to guess what percentage of all other participants have donated, respectively: nothing (0 Euros - stingy donors' split), between 0.5 and 2.5 Euros, between 3 and 4.5 Euros, half the endowment (5 Euros - equal split), between 5.5 e 7 Euros, between 8 and 9.5 Euros, and the entire endowment (10 Euros – purely altruistic split). Participants who make at least one correct guess about the distribution of donations receive an additional monetary prize of 1 Euro.

[10]In a "Redistribution game" (RG), we ask participants to choose what percentage of the net endowments (after donations have been deducted) from the Charity DG they want to redistribute within the group of donors. A high percentage implies a higher willingness to punish high-net-endowment (i.e., less generous) participants. The redistribution is implemented only within the group of participants selected for payment (20% of the sample), while the "tax rate" to be implemented is randomly selected among the answers of the participants not extracted for payment (the remaining 80% of the sample). Participants do not know whether they belong to the group that will be randomly extracted for payment.

vote for from a list of parties that participated in the political elections before the interview date.

### *C. Selection of the stimuli, survey implementation, and econometric model*

DEMETRA (Italian partner of LUCID) programmed and distributed the survey online to a representative sample of 1696 Italians between February 11 and March 13, 2022. The final dataset counts 1510 observations after data cleaning operations[11]. To increase data quality, we exclude from the overall sample participants that i) fail to answer correctly to all comprehension questions and attention checks (23 obs.), and ii) took an extraordinarily long or short time to complete and submit the online questionnaire, lying outside the [5-95] percentiles' interval in the interview time distribution (167 obs.), excluding 186 observations in total[12].

The choice of COVID-19-related facts and questions to remind participants of the pandemic is based on Daniele et al. (2020*a*,*b*,*c*). The chosen facts recall the economic and health consequences of the crisis induced by the pandemic outbreak. Participants are first exposed to short information sheets, which include easy-to-read charts highlighting the key figures reported in the text. Then, they are asked to answer *i)* a quick comprehension question to verify their understanding of the text and level of attention[13], and *ii)* a few additional questions regarding their personal experience of the pandemic to further reinforce the strength of the pandemic priming.

The choice of immigration-related facts and figures is based on a two-step process. First, we identify the four information clusters that summarize the most relevant immigration-related topics discussed in the news at that time (corresponding to our four *MIG* sub-treatments) and run a keywords-based news search

[11] This sample size allows for about 250 observations per experimental condition, resulting in a Minimum Detectable Effect of 0.25 on standardized outcome measures at $\alpha = 0.05$ and power $\pi = 0.8$; see List, Sadoff and Wagner (2011).

[12] Further details on this procedure is available in SM2, section 2.

[13] We keep participants who fail to respond correctly to avoid selection based on their attention and interest in the topic. These answers, jointly with answers to attention-check questions, are included among controls as a survey-quality measure. See Section 2 of SM2 for details on data cleaning.

on newspaper articles and Twitter data[14]. To avoid any risk of deception, we only retain pieces of news/information that could be traced back to reliable sources per each information cluster[15]. Second, to check the quality of our selection and isolate the best stimulus per cluster, whenever more than one was available, we ran a pre-validation test with students from the University of Turin. We elicit their perceptions of how strongly each candidate stimuli related to and/or evoked their thoughts on the four information clusters of interest. We retain only the "strongest" stimulus per information cluster (see SM2, section 1).

After being exposed to their treatment-specific information sheet(s), participants answer comprehension questions, which allow us to verify their understanding and attention. The facts and figures reported in the information sheets are authentic, although nuancedly negatively framed, and this is common knowledge. Fig. A5A-B in SM1 displays the graphs and text shown to participants in each treatment. Participants have access to all information sources at the end of the survey.

We evaluate treatment effects by estimating the following equation through OLS regressions: $Y_i = \beta_1 + \beta_2 \cdot T_i + \beta_3 \cdot X_i + \varepsilon_i$, where $Y_i$ are the outcomes of interest (probit regressions are used for voting intentions), $T_i$ are the treatment indicators, and $X_i$ is a vector of socio-demographic controls. We use the *C1 "NO PAN, NO MIG"* condition as the omitted benchmark in all the analyses. Summary statistics and a legend of the main variables are available in Tables A1a-b in SM1. All outcome variables are standardized to compare treatment effects. Socio-demographic controls include gender, age, income class, a dummy variable

[14] We downloaded newspapers articles through Factiva in the period July-August 2020.

[15] All the pieces of information shown to participants are true. The information sources are available in SM1 and delivered to participants upon completion of the survey. The framing and the communication style used aim to mimic the communication strategy adopted by politicians at the time. Thus, the experimenter demand effect (EDE) is not a concern here since the equivalent messages in a real situation come from politicians, also perceived as an institutional authority. Information provision in a position of authority that reproduces a real-world setting, where the same type of authority applies, is one of the setups where EDE is justified by external validity purposes (Zizzo, 2010; Tisserand et al., 2022). Furthermore, survey experiments with incentivized tasks or attitudinal outcomes are rarely affected by EDEs (De Quidt, Haushofer and Roth, 2018; Haaland, Roth and Wohlfart, 2023; Mummolo and Peterson, 2019), "suggesting that long-standing concerns over demand effects in survey experiments may be largely exaggerated" (Mummolo and Peterson, 2019, p. 528.)

identifying rightwing respondents, and two survey-quality variables, measuring the length of the interview and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks.

## IV. Results

We summarize here the main results and report in SM1 the rationales of our tests (section 2), jointly with additional analyses (section 3) and full regression tables.

### *A. Anti-immigrant attitudes and behavior*

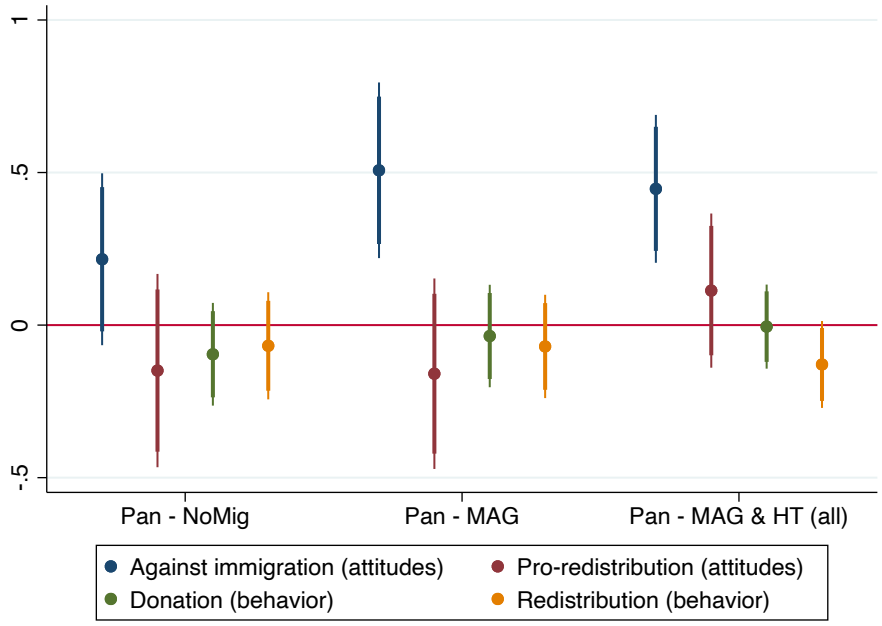
Fig.2 plots the treatment effects against the control condition *C1 - "NO PAN, NO MIG"* obtained from OLS regressions reported in SM1 (Table A2a). Overall, all treatments providing immigration information worsen anti-immigrant attitudes, with no sizeable changes in donation behavior or preferences towards redistribution. An exception is redistribution behavior, which decreases (signaling a lower willingness to punish anti-immigrant behavior) when participants are exposed to information emphasizing both the magnitude and the health threats of immigration. Treatment effects on anti-immigrant attitudes are robust to Romano-Wolf correction (RW) for multiple-hypothesis testing, showing statistically significant differences between the *PAN - MAG* and *PAN - MAG & HT (all)* treatments and the control *NO PAN, NO MIG* (RW p-value = 0.005 and 0.004, respectively). The strongest treatment effect stems from the *PAN - MAG & HT & FC* condition (RW p-value = 0.002): pointing out that both the health and the financial (negative) consequences of immigration moves anti-immigration attitudes in the expected direction (Table A2b in SM1). However, there are no significant differences between the effects of *PAN - MAG* and the other *HT* conditions[16]. Moreover, reminding respondents about the pandemic crisis has a

[16]For each regression hereon, we run Sidak multiple comparisons tests to assess the magnitude and statistical significance of between-treatment differences, with a particular focus on the comparison be-

positive yet not statistically significant effect on anti-immigrant attitudes, while the *PAN - MAG & HT (all)* negative effect on redistribution behavior does not survive the RW correction.

Overall, providing (negatively-framed) information on immigration after reminding the pandemic crisis increases hostility towards immigrants; yet, no add-on effects are triggered by narratives prompting people to think *also* of the negative health consequences of immigration. If anything, such narratives make individuals more likely to punish others' anti-immigrant behavior (i.e. stingy donors in the DG).

Figure (2) Anti-immigrant attitudes & behaviors




*Notes:* Treatment effects on anti-immigrant attitudes & behaviors. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (OLS) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)*. Dependent variables are standardized. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

tween the *PAN - MAG* and *PAN - MAG & HT (all)* conditions, capturing the "add-on" effect of *HT*. Results of these tests are discussed here in the paper, while further details are available upon request.

### B. *Attribution of responsibility*

Priming participants about the pandemic shifts the attribution of responsibility from political institutions to non-political targets, and more specifically, towards "Italians" and "China" (Fig.3a-3b; Table A3a in SM1). These effects, however, do not survive the RW correction for multiple hypotheses testing (RW p-values = 0.149, 0.378, and 0.678 for political institutions, Italians, and China, respectively). The effect of informational treatments pointing out the health threat dimension is, instead, robust to such a correction: when the health threat aspect enters anti-immigration narratives, respondents shift attribution of responsibility from the media to Italians (RW p-values = 0.061 and 0.015 for the *PAN – MAG & HT (all)* treatment). As shown in Table A3b in SM1, the increase in the attribution of responsibility to Italians is mainly driven by the *PAN – MAG & HT* sub-treatment (RW p-value = 0.016).

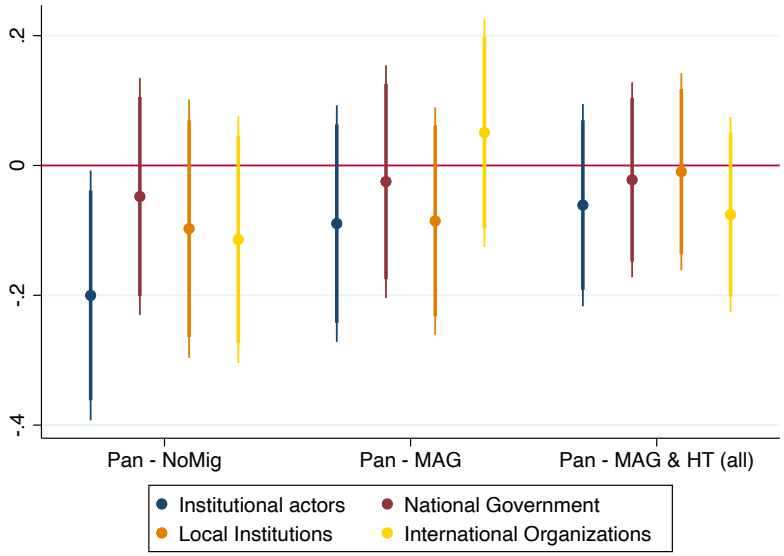
Overall, these results suggest that when the health consequences of ongoing immigration are emphasized, citizens tend to blame their national fellows more than other targets.

### C. *Trust*

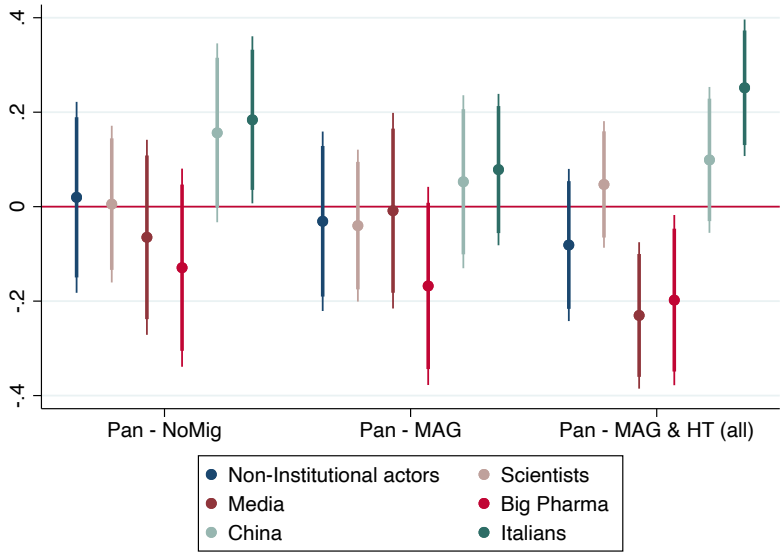
Fig.4a (Table A4a in SM1) displays a negative effect of the *PAN – MAG & HT (all)* condition on institutional trust (RW p-value = 0.096), especially on trust towards international organizations (RW p-value = 0.052). The largest shift is driven by the sub-treatment emphasizing the differences between refugees' and Italians' mobility (Table A4b in SM1): participants exposed to the *PAN – MAG & HT & MOB* condition show lower trust in institutions (Table A4b in SM1), and more specifically, in international organizations, China and the media, yet these effects do not survive the RW correction. No significant treatment effects emerge on interpersonal trust, Fig.4b.

Overall, these findings imply that the strategic association between immigration and health during a crisis is detrimental to trust in institutions.

Figure (3) Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis



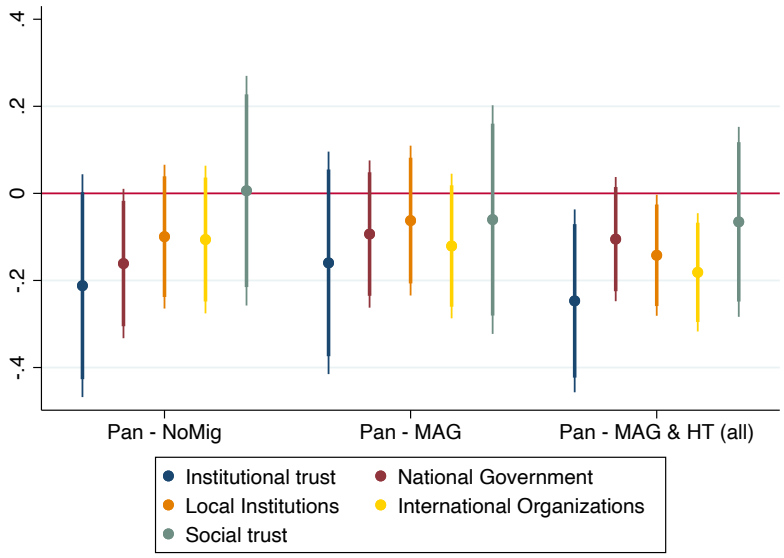

(a) *Institutional actors*



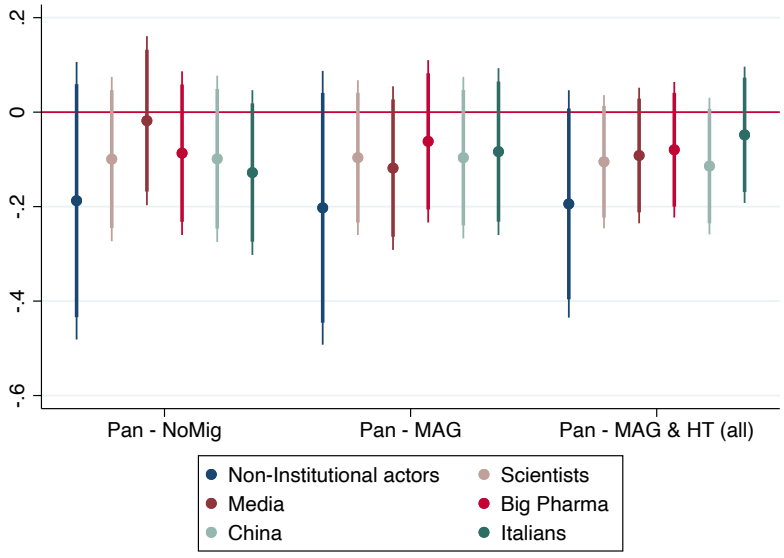

(b) *Non-institutional actors*

*Notes:* Treatment effects on the attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis towards institutional and non-institutional targets. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (OLS) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)*. Dependent variables are standardized. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

Figure (4) Trust




(a) *Institutional actors*




(b) *Non-institutional actors*

*Notes:* Treatment effects on institutional and interpersonal trust. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (OLS) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)*. Dependent variables are standardized. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

### D. *Voting*

Due to some design constraints[17], we analyze how informational treatments affect voting intentions restricting our attention to the treatment effect induced by the *PAN – MAG & HT* conditions, which captures the "add-on" effects of a political narrative linking immigration to health issues, relative to a narrative based on immigration only.

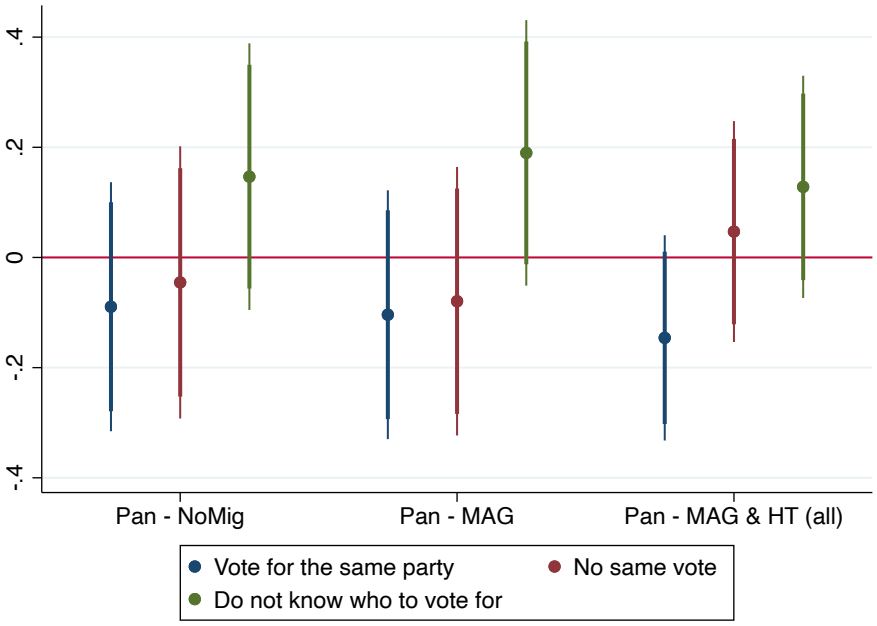
Exposure to the *PAN – MAG & HT* conditions reduces intention to vote for the same party (Fig.5a; Tables A5a-b in SM1), although the effect is not statistically significant (RW p-value = 0.302). This effect turns significant when interacting with dissatisfaction with political institutions: those attributing a great deal of responsibility for the pandemic crisis to political actors are less likely to vote for the same party when exposed to narratives explicitly associating immigration with health risks (Tables A5a-b in SM1). This result suggests that political disappointment amplifies shifting party support when, during a pandemic, immigrants are targeted as political scapegoats amidst the crisis.

Looking at the heterogeneity in re-voting intentions by political affiliation, we find evidence of reduced political partisanship for extreme-right parties[18] due to exposure to the *HT-immigration* narrative (Fig.5b). Given that extreme-right politicians primarily employed this narrative to fuel anti-immigrant policies during the pandemic, this result suggests that scapegoating migrants backfires.

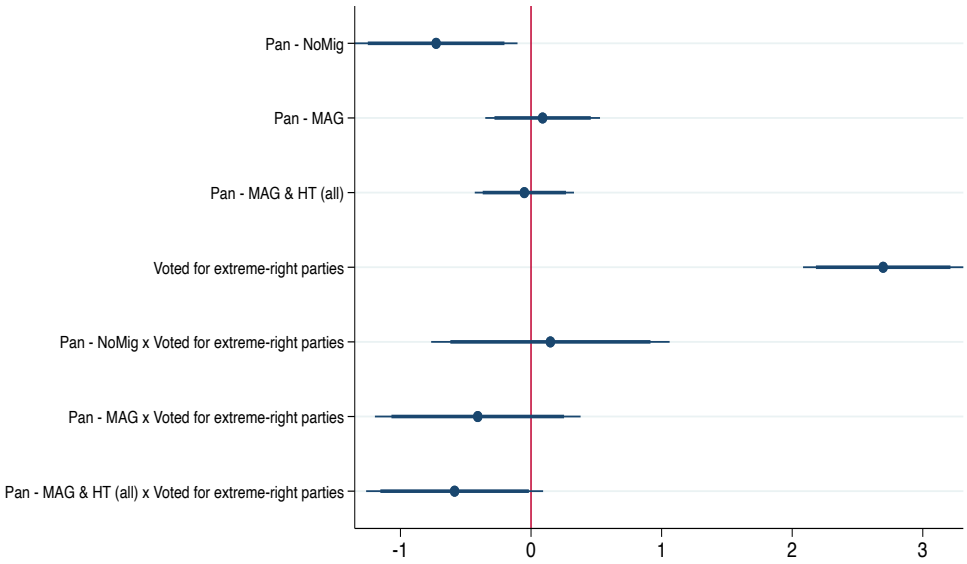
[17]Participants in the two control conditions *No PAN - No Mig* (the benchmark group in our regressions) and *PAN - No Mig* are also exposed to the pandemic priming and the information sheet on immigration magnitude before answering the voting-intentions questions. To avoid contamination of subsequent answers, voting intentions are asked together with other 'more personal' and sensitive questions on income, taxes, and political leaning in the last block of questions in the questionnaire. For this reason, regarding voting intentions only, there is no difference in terms of priming and information provision between the two control conditions (*No PAN - No Mig* and *PAN - No Mig*) and the *PAN – MAG* conditions. If anything, the only difference concerns the moment in which participants are exposed to this information, relative to the moment in which voting intentions are asked (Fig. A3c in SM1). However, no significant difference is detected across these treatment conditions.

[18]This category includes Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, Casapaund.

Figure (5) Voting




(a) *Voting intentions*




(b) *Intentions to vote for the same party by extreme-rightwing voters*

*Notes:* Panel A plots treatment effects on voting intentions; Panel B plots heterogeneous treatment effects on intentions to vote for extreme-right parties by supporters of these parties. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (probit) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)*. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

## V. Treatment heterogeneity

We test for treatment heterogeneity by three main pre-registered dimensions, namely: i) self-declared political orientation, ii) social-media use, and iii) exposure to COVID-19. While active social-media users tend to be more responsive to our treatments, overall, we do not find a consistent pattern of heterogeneity across all outcomes nor significant add-on effects of the $HT$ narrative (see section 4 in SM1). Noticeably, all conditions including the pandemic priming significantly (and almost equally) contribute to reducing interpersonal trust in active social-media users (Table A9 and Figure A4C in SM1; RW p-values $< 0.05$ for all treatments).

## VI. Theoretical framework

To rationalize our result that scapegoating minorities can undermine political trust and support, we develop a theoretical framework where individuals have different policy and party beliefs, both affected by political discourse.

The model examines how this belief heterogeneity shapes political trust and parties' credibility, especially when potentially unnuanced and/or unethical political messages are used to attract votes. This happens, for instance, when immigration becomes a key topic in political competition and is depicted as a threat, putting the success of (social) security or health policies under pressure (as in the health-immigration narrative used in this study). We then derive the conditions under which such a messaging strategy can backfire and erode political trust and/or support.

In what follows, we present a summary of the model and its applications to our experiment; the extended version is, however, available in SM3.

### A. *Summary of the model*

Individuals, acting as voters, are heterogeneous across two dimensions. The first derives from individual beliefs about the effectiveness $E_i(.)$ of an *implemented* policy $\rho$, characterized by a trade-off between perceived benefits $\beta_i(.)$ and costs $c_i(.)$, so that $E_i(\rho, s) = \beta_i(\rho, s(\mathbf{m})) - c_i(\rho, s(\mathbf{m}))$, where $s(\mathbf{m})$ captures policy salience. As in Daniele et al. (2023), voters have different opinions about the "right" policy: because of their different beliefs, they have a different preferred policy level $\rho_i$.

The second stems from individual beliefs about the credibility $C_{ij}$ of party $j$, generating a trade-off between the perceived attractiveness $P_{ij}(.)$ of the party's policy platform and its "normative appeal" $\eta_i(.)$. Both components are affected by the party messaging strategy $m_j$, such that $C_{ij}(m_j) = P_{ij}(m_j) - \eta_i(m_j)$. The higher $m_j$, the more salient, yet also the more "extreme", a political statement regarding the policy because of its unnuanced or unethical nature. The messaging strategy hence affects credibility through both $P'_{ij}(.)$, which denotes the fit between voter $i$, a party $j$ and its message $m_j$, and $\eta'_i(.)$, which captures the normative appeal of the message: as $m_j$ becomes more extreme, it can improve credibility through $P'_{ij}(.)$ yet have a negative impact through $\eta'_i(.)$. The term $s(\mathbf{m}) = \sum_j m_j$ denotes the overall salience of the policy, defined by the messaging vector $\mathbf{m}$.

In equilibrium, the incumbent government implements a policy $\rho^*$ reflecting the *average* belief about policy effectiveness $\frac{\partial E_i}{\partial \rho}$ (policy appreciation), after which all parties maximize political support by choosing their messaging strategy $m_j^*$, accounting both for voters' perceptions of party credibility and voters' political distrust towards the enacted policy. The further away each individually-preferred policy $\rho_i$ is from the implemented $\rho^*$, the higher political distrust. If policy appreciation rises because benefits become more salient than costs via increased messaging, the less (more) appreciative voters gain (lose) trust as their ideal $\rho_i$ approaches (moves away from) the implemented $\rho^*$. Interestingly, the *posi-*

*tive* "rallying" effect driven by voters who were initially less appreciative can be limited: if appreciation continues to rise and more preferred policies $\rho_i$ are increasingly pushed beyond the implemented policy $\rho^*$, the relative weight of this group shrinks, and the rallying effect fades away, resulting in an overall *negative* effect. The latter effect is driven by voters who were initially more appreciative.

Lastly, suppose party $j$ overestimates the goodness of fit and/or underestimates the unethical/extreme content of the messages it shares through the media. Then, its credibility $C_{ij}$ drops for individuals having $m_j^* > \bar{m}_{ij}$, with $\bar{m}_{ij}$ being the threshold where normative appeal starts outweighing goodness of fit. Party support $S_j$ drops too as a result, for given or even decreasing levels of overall distrust.

### *B. Application*

In our experimental setting, let $\rho$ be the set of policies implemented to manage the pandemic crisis, which can vary from loose to strict, and $m_j$ be a measure of how much parties' messaging strategies depict immigration as an add-on contagion risk, hence as a potential threat to the success of these policies. Through $m_j$ a party can gain $P_{ij}$ and support for anti-immigration policies, yet benefits from pandemic policies also become more salient.

Through the lens of our theoretical framework, the $PAN$ condition increases pandemic salience in such a way that the benefits are amplified more than the costs, so that every respondent's policy appreciation goes up. This has a positive (negative) "rallying" effect on political trust for the less (more) appreciative (Fig. 1 in SM3), resulting nonetheless in an overall negative effect (Fig.4a and Fig. 4 in SM3) as the less appreciative group shrinks in relative terms. The less appreciative group is proxied by extreme-right respondents, who are - in general and in our sample - less concerned about the pandemic (hence less appreciative *ex-ante* of any policy level).

The $PAN$ – $MAG$ & $HT$ condition further increases the salience of health

concerns by weaving immigration-related health risks into the narrative. This has a neutral/negative (more negative) effect on trust for the less (more) concerned (Fig. 2-3 in SM3). The less concerned voters no longer gain trust as concern moves them closer to or beyond the actual policy. This dynamic results in a more pronounced overall negative effect as more voters move away from the actual policy.

Such a messaging strategy also triggers a negative effect of *PAN – MAG & HT* on support for parties that lose (moral) credibility by scapegoating migrants. As a result, messaging strategies hinging on immigration-related health risks backfire in two ways: they erode both rallying *and* party credibility, bringing down political support as shown by Fig.5b. This is mostly the case for parties such as Lega, who heavily relied on such strategies (see Fig. 5 in SM3).

## VII. Discussion and concluding remarks

Considering only the empirical evidence surviving multiple-hypotheses corrections, overall, our results suggest that scapegoating immigrants for the crisis can be detrimental to society.

Narratives based on the association between immigration and health risks do not increase anti-immigrant attitudes more than those based on immigration only. Instead, by increasing disappointment towards Italians, decreasing institutional trust (due to increased distance between expected and realized policy), and reducing trust in other people (only for active social-media users), they might fuel social conflict and undermine political stability.

Paradoxically, extreme-right parties tend to lose the most in terms of political support: respondents who vote for these parties are less likely to support them again when exposed to information on both health threats/costs and immigration. This suggests that scapegoating migrants for the health crisis backfires. Political disappointment and loss of credibility can explain why parties strategically linking

the health crisis with immigration end up losing support.

Alternative explanations are excluded by further empirical tests (SM1 - Sections 3 and 5). First, the ineffectiveness of health-immigration narratives is not explained by the habituation of residents in counties ruled by anti-immigrant parties. Second, the pandemic priming *per se* does not implicitly induce the association between immigration and health issues, as done, more explicitly, by our informational treatments. Third, respondents do not seem to update their immigration priors after information exposure, suggesting that they do discount political narratives[19]. In other words, they realize immigration-health messages are either used as a strategic tool to win elections, without reflecting the true views of the party (Fernandez-Vazquez, 2019), or they are considered – especially by self-image-concerned voters – too extreme and/or unethical to be persuasive.

Consistent with the latter mechanism, *explicit* racial appeals have been shown to be rejected by conservative voters, who perceive such messages as a violation of the racial equality norm; as a consequence, they end up moving towards more liberal directions (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings and White, 2002). These previous findings provide support to the non-linear relationship between a party's credibility (and support) and the extreme/unethical messaging strategy hypothesized in our model, suggesting that scapegoating backfires when it is perceived as too explicit.

Finally, null results of the health-immigration narrative for some outcomes might be due to the shift in media attention from the health crisis to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, which was unpredictable when the survey was launched. To exclude this channel, we compare treatment effects by the interview date. When exposed to immigration and health information, participants interviewed *before* war show higher anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviors, lower institutional and

[19] An exception is for donation, for which we observe a monotonic reduction in giving by information provision, for participants who mostly misperceive the size of immigration (see Figure A4, Panel I in SM1). When exposed to the health-immigration narrative, these participants tend to donate less than those with more correct priors on the magnitude of immigration. However, no differential treatment effects by prior beliefs on immigration size are found for the other outcomes measuring immigration attitudes and behavior (see SM1, section 3).

social trust, and less support for extreme-right parties (Figure A5 and section 3 in SM1). Not only does this additional piece of evidence confirm our main results, but it also suggests that the ineffective or backfiring effects of the health-immigration messaging strategy are indeed stronger when the health crisis is a salient issue.

Concluding, political campaigns exploiting citizens' discontent during crises to fuel anti-minorities sentiments are relatively ineffective or, when successful, potentially counterproductive from both social and political perspectives. Such campaigns serve as an example of how populism can ultimately backfire.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS 1

# When scapegoating backfires:

# The pitfalls of blaming migrants for a crisis.

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# Summary

## 1. Salience of Covid-19 and immigration

Through the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussion on whether - and how effectively - the national government and local authorities have tackled the challenges posed by the health and economic crisis has accrued tremendous attention from the media and the public. At the same time, at the national and the European level, the public debate has continued devoting significant attention to issues related to migration management. In several cases, Italian far-right politicians tend to link COVID-19's spread over the Italian territory to the inflow of migrants and refugees in an attempt to make the coronavirus outbreak in the country a political issue and to create a connection between the migrants' movement and the spread of the virus. Indeed, although migrants are never proven to be a primary vehicle of contagion, extreme-right and populist parties often scapegoat them for the pandemic crisis.

Figure A1A shows that the monthly count for joint occurrences of words related to both "COVID-19" and "Immigration" increased in the news reported by traditional and social media since the first pandemic wave in 2020, relative to the total count of all the occurrences for Immigration-related words in a given month. This piece of evidence points to the narrow association between these two topics in the news at the onset of the pandemic, which does not quickly fade after the first wave: most of the immigration-related news reports also cover COVID-19-related topics, with a share ranging between 0.5 and 0.6 over March and April 2020, which never fall below 1/3 over the entire year. Figure A1B shows the trend in the occurrences of immigration-related (only) words in the media, which, after a slight decline at the onset of the pandemic, increases in the spring and peaks in the summer, to decline again after that, following the seasonal trend of refugee arrivals to the Italian coasts. The slight decline in the salience of immigration, in general, at the beginning of the first pandemic wave can explain the jump in the joint occurrences of "COVID-19" and "Immigration" related words in that period. However, the two trends suggest that the relatively fewer media messages on immigration during the first phase of the pandemic are connected to the disease. Noticeably, the trend of joint occurrences of "COVID-19" and "Immigration" is persistent even in the summer, when the salience of immigration (the denominator of the share in Figure A1A) increases[1].

During the harshest phases of the pandemic crisis, the Italian extreme-right politicians have tried to exploit the increase in contagion to deem the government responsible for the heightening of the

[1] Note also that, from January to April, the share of joint occurrences of "COVID-19" and "Immigration" *to their total in 2020* has grown by 34 percentage points The monthly variation in the joint occurrences of words related to both "COVID-19" and "Immigration" relative to their total in 2020 mirrors that of the occurrences of words related only to "Immigration" relative to the total in the same year (data available upon request).

migration crisis along with their inadequate policy responses to the health crisis. The tweets shown in Figure A2 show how the Italian government has been attacked over the migrants' reception and management policy implemented while Italians were living under mandatory lockdown rules restricting ordinary working practices and freedom of movement.

## 2. Motivating literature and pre-registered hypotheses

*Anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviours*

Building on previous studies that focus on the effects of misinformation about immigration, we expect our informational treatments to negatively affect anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviours. Conveying negatively framed pieces of information about immigration and its supposedly controversial role during the COVID-19 pandemic could indeed (further) reinforce individuals' misperceptions and perceived threats, fueling anti-immigrant sentiments in times of socio-economic distress. To test this hypothesis, we explore whether our immigration-focused information treatments: (i) negatively affect anti-immigrant attitudes (measured through standard survey questions); (ii) discourage out-group altruistic behaviour and willingness from punishing greedy behaviours towards migrants (measured through the behavioural tasks); (iii) decrease pro-redistribution attitudes. Regarding the latter, any immigration informational treatment is expected to enhance anti-immigrant attitudes, thereby reducing preferences towards redistribution, provided that immigrants are usually considered a quantitatively relevant low-income group benefiting from public welfare provision (Alesina et al. 2022). The health threat, made *explicitly* salient by providing immigration-related facts jointly with the health consequences of immigration, might amplify the effects of the immigration-information conditions, emphasising the relevance of some trade-offs that are key in shaping policy attitudes (e.g., the trade-off between natives' vs refugees' mobility, or between pro-natives' vs pro-immigrants' health and economic policies in the times of a health shock).

*Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis*

According to our pre-registered hypotheses, the pandemic priming is expected to increase the attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis to institutional actors, especially if those participants who are disappointed with the institutional response to the crisis report have been directly/indirectly exposed to COVID-19. Furthermore, the informational treatments on immigration can amplify the pandemic priming effects, potentially with stronger effects for right-wing voters (who tend to report more anti-immigrant positions); these treatments might induce higher perceived immigration and, in some treatments, also health threats, thereby leading to a higher propensity to blame governmental actors for the spread of COVID-19.

A "rally round the flag" effect could, however, be expected if respondents exposed to the uncertainty and risks stemming from the immigration and the health crises attribute less responsibility to governmental actors (henceforth are more satisfied with their performance). Under siege of a shared misfortune, citizens might look for political stability, unity, and competence and, therefore, "rally round the flag", especially when it comes to fighting against a collective threat (Mueller 1970; Oneal and Bryan 1993).

*Trust in institutions*

Citizens' trust in institutions and politicians in periods of economic hardship might change depending on the perceived performance of state actors. It may decrease if authorities are perceived as responsible for the crisis or policy responses are deemed insufficient (Hetherington & Rudolph 2008; Torcal 2014; Aassve et al. 2022). This effect might be more prominent for participants who experienced COVID-19 and amplified by the health threats associated with immigration.

Similar to the dynamics hypothesised for attribution of responsibility, an alternative hypothesis for institutional trust rests on the "rally round the flag" phenomenon: caught in a shared misfortune, citizens might search for unity and competence; as a result, trust towards institutional actors can increase (Amat et al. 2020; Schraff 2020; Bol et al. 2020).

*Social trust*

Trust in other persons can increase or decrease after massive societal shocks. On the one hand, the health threat could make self-regarding coping strategies more appealing, thereby spurring social isolation or people's clustering into inner circles of known people (Putnam et al. 2004; Bauer et al. 2014). Furthermore, the pandemic may jeopardise individuals' health, financial, and psychological resources, i.e., factors correlated with prosocial behaviour (Putnam 2000; Subramaniam et al. 2002; Knack & Zak 2003; Jen et al. 2010). Studies on post-disaster and post-conflict contexts, on the other hand, show that individuals exhibit empathy with unknown people (Batson et al. 2002; Bethlehem et al. 2017), with a positive effect on social cohesion (Gilligan et al. 2014), fostering cooperation as a recovery strategy (Bauer et al. 2016), and stimulating the search for social support outside one's network of trusted persons (Yamagishi & Yamagishi 1994; Yamagishi et al. 1998; Gambetta & Morisi 2022). Hence, the informational treatments on immigration are not expected to produce large and significant effects on social preferences unless the health consequences of inflows of refugees are emphasized. In facts, the parasite stress theory (Thornhill & Fincher 2014) and terror management theory (Pyszczynski et al. 2021) predict that traumatic events should strengthen in-group favoritism and reinforce cooperation. Consistent with these theories, recent studies find that exposure to or recalling the COVID-19 crisis increased donations (Grimalda et al. 2021; Adena & Harke 2022) and make citizens more willing to prioritize society's problems over their own (Cappelen et al. 2021). However, a reduction in social trust can be observed if respondents exposed to anti-immigrant rhetoric perceive that the "most people" mentioned in the generalized trust questions embed a higher share of immigrants. A similar effect is expected if, threatened by the risks of contagion brought about by other individuals in the society, citizens reduce their level of compassion[2], display aggressive

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html.

behavior toward minority groups (Cohn 2012; Jedwab et al. 2019) and show less trust in others (Aassve et al. 2021).

*Voting intentions*

As a potential consequence of the reduction in trust in institutions, we expect to find changes in voting intentions due to exposure to the health threat; this might occur either through the general recalling of the pandemic or through the provision of information emphasizing the health-related consequences of immigration. The changes in voting intentions might be driven by dissatisfaction about how political leaders managed the COVID-19 crisis and the inflows of refugees during the pandemic. Consequently, as preregistered, we expect those who are more disappointed about the performance of ruling parties, sitting in governmental offices during the first pandemic wave, to be more prone to change their voting intentions (e.g., by declaring not to re-vote for the same party).

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## 3. Additional tests

In this section, we first test treatment heterogeneity based on individuals' giving profiles concerning the expected average giving. In the second behavioral task, participants are asked to guess how much other participants have donated to Emergency (i.e. in the first behavioral task). Through an incentivized beliefs elicitation procedure, we aim to learn about participants' individual beliefs on the distribution of donations. To this purpose, we ask participants to guess what percentage of all other participants have donated, respectively: nothing (0 Euros - stingy donors' split), between 0.5 and 2.5 Euros, between 3 and 4.5 Euros, half the endowment (5 Euros - equal split), between 5.5 e 7 Euros, between 8 and 9.5 Euros, and the entire endowment (10 Euros – purely altruistic split). Participants who make at least one correct guess about the distribution of donations receive an additional monetary prize of 1 Euro. Results show that, in line with previous experimental results on individuals' response to perceived descriptive norms, the distance between participants' giving decisions and the average expected giving (i.e., the perceived giving norm), or just the latter, correlates with participants' decisions in the dictator game (Table A11). Individuals' willingness to conform to what they believe to be the dominant behavior in the group, represented by the strength and direction of such correlation, does not vary by treatment.

We also test whether the effects of our informational treatments on the attribution of responsibility differ by whether the respondent voted for parties that were ruling at the times of the first pandemic wave or not. Supporters of political forces in office during the first wave of the pandemic might be less strict in their judgments and are therefore less likely to attribute great responsibility to governmental actors, as opposed to supporters of non-ruling parties. Results show that the treatment effects on attributing responsibility to political targets do not differ by belonging to any of these groups. In contrast, treatment heterogeneity is found for non-political targets (Figure A4 – Panel G and Table A12). Supporters of political forces in office during the pandemic are more likely to shift blame attribution from China to Italians when exposed to any pandemic priming.

With respect to institutional trust, the analysis of treatment heterogeneity highlights no significant differences by social media activity, political orientation, or exposure to COVID-19 (Tables A8a-c). However, partially consistent with results on the attribution of responsibility, supporters of the political forces in office during the pandemic display higher trust towards China when exposed to any informational treatment on immigration and lower trust in scientists only when reminded of the pandemic (Figure A4 – Panel H and Table A13). The RW correction for multiple hypotheses nevertheless suggests that these effects are not statistically significant: regarding trust in scientists, the RW p-value for the differential effect of *PAN – NO MIG* condition is 0.273; concerning trust

towards China, the RW p-values for the differential effects of *PAN – MAG* and the *PAN – MAG & HT* conditions are 0.088 and 0.167, respectively.

The lack of significant add-on effects of the *PAN – MAG & HT* conditions relative to the *PAN – MAG* condition can be due to possible habituation to HT narratives by respondents living in counties characterized by an anti-immigrant political environment. To test for this channel, we carry out an additional treatment heterogeneity analysis by the political leaning of the county where the respondent resided during the first COVID-19 wave. More specifically, we merge the county where the respondent declared to have resided during the first COVID-19 wave with the information on the political party of that county's major; hence, we classify the respondent's county in four (overlapping) categories depending on the electoral platform of the mayor: Lega, extreme-right, populist, anti-immigrant. While results mirror, overall, the heterogeneous treatment effects by respondents' own political leaning, we do not find significant add-on effects of the HT treatments for any outcome under investigation (results available upon request).

In the survey, we also elicit prior beliefs about participants' perceptions of immigration in Italy across all treatment conditions[3]. Having a pure control group (*C1*) allows us to analyze the heterogeneity of treatment effects by (mis)perception about the size of immigration for all the conditions where immigration-related content is provided. Apart from behavior in the DG, we find no systematic significant heterogeneity in the effects of the *PAN – MAG & HT (all)* condition when comparing individuals who held the most wrong priors about the share of immigrants residing in Italy, compared to those who held priors that are closer to the true figure (Figure A4 – Panels I-L). No systematic add-on effects of the *PAN – MAG & HT (all)* condition relative to the *PAN – MAG* emerge from this comparison: all conditions are equally different by priors on immigration whenever there is a significant treatment heterogeneity (e.g., for social trust). The lack of significant differential treatment effects would suggest that individuals have not updated their beliefs based on the informational content received, suggesting that political polarization does not increase as a result of exposure to immigrant-health political rhetoric.

The lack of significant add-on effects of the health-immigration narratives could also be due to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war during the interview process. Respondents might not have

[3] Across all treatment conditions we ask participants their beliefs about: (1) the current share of immigrants residing in Italy, and (2) the size and the direction of the change in the number of immigrants landed in Italy over the year of the pandemic, with respect to the previous one – if any. In the *Immigration* sub-treatment conditions, we also ask for their perception about the diffusion of the COVID-19 virus within the immigrants' population. In addition, for sub-treatment conditions covering aspects related to immigrants' mobility ad management cost, respectively, we ask for: (i) their belief about direction of the change in immigrants' and Italians' mobility during the pandemic, and (ii) their guess about the share of GDP invested by the Italian Government to cover health and immigration-related expenses.

responded much to the information treatments as their minds could be set more on a new "wave" of refugees *per se* than specific health concerns. Consider, however, that in all information treatments, we reminded participants of the pandemic. To test whether the radical shift in media attention from COVID-19 to the conflict played a role in our survey, we run further heterogeneity analyses for our main estimates, comparing the answers of those interviewed before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, (Feb. 28th, 2022), with those interviewed during the conflict. We have 866 respondents in the first group and 644 in the second, accounting for 57.35% and 42.65% of the sample, respectively.

Results are summarized in Figure A5. Overall, our main treatment effects tend to be driven by participants interviewed *before* the onset of the war. When exposed to immigration and health information treatment, they show higher anti-immigrant attitudes and behaviors, lower institutional and social trust, less trust towards China (though driven by the pandemic priming) and Italians (though the difference is not statistically significant), less willing to vote for populist and extreme-right parties (though the difference is not statistically significant), relative to participants interviewed during the conflict. Moreover, when reminded of the pandemic experience, participants interviewed before the war tend to blame China and Big Pharma for the pandemic crisis more than participants interviewed afterward. Taken together, all these findings confirm our main results and suggest that the ineffective or backfiring effects of the health-immigration messaging strategy are indeed stronger when the health crisis is a salient issue.

## 4. Heterogeneity analyses

*Anti-immigrant attitudes & behaviors*

No heterogeneous treatment effects are found by political leaning or exposure to COVID-19. This includes both direct personal exposure and indirect exposure through participants' networks (Tables A6a and A6c). However, we find significant heterogeneous treatment effects on giving by social-media use. Active social-media users are less generous than their counterparts when exposed to any condition (Figure A4A and Table A6b); yet, when accounting for multiple hypotheses testing, this effect remains statistically significant only for the *PAN – MAG & HT & FC* condition (RW p-values = 0.039).

*Attribution of responsibility*

The shift of responsibility attribution from the media towards China and Italians is driven by less active social-media users (Table A7b) when exposed to the *PAN – MAG* condition; however, this effect is not robust to multiple hypothesis correction (RW p-value = 0.149). The increase in the attribution of responsibility to Italians is, instead, driven by non-rightwing respondents (Figure A4B and Table A7a): when exposed to the *PAN – MAG* condition, rightwing respondents attribute less responsibility to Italians (RW p-value = 0.037).

Finally, no heterogeneous treatment effects are found by exposure to COVID-19 (Table A7c).

*Trust*

No significant heterogeneous treatment effects are found for institutional trust by social-media activity, political orientation, or exposure to COVID-19 (Tables A8a-c). Conversely, all the pandemic priming conditions significantly (and almost equally) contribute to reducing interpersonal trust in active social-media users (Figure A4C and Table A8b; RW p-values $< 0.05$ for all treatments), while no heterogeneous effects are found for political orientation and exposure to COVID-19 (Tables A8a and A8c). Further inspecting which sub-component of social trust is mostly affected (Table A9), we find that, relative to the control condition, the *PAN – MAG & HT* (all) treatment leads active social-media users to believe that most people take advantage of them (RW p-value = 0.032); other significant treatment effects do not survive the RW correction.

*Voting intentions*

No significant heterogeneous treatment effects by self-declared political orientation, exposure to COVID-19, and social-media use are found on the intention to vote for the same party (Tables A10a – panel 1 and A10b-c). However, the re-voting intention is significantly reduced for respondents

who voted for extreme-right parties (Table A10a – panel 2 and Figure A4D) when exposed to the *PAN – MAG & HT (all)* or *PAN – NO MIG* condition (RW p-values = 0.044 and 0.045, respectively). Since the content evoked by these treatments was mainly contained in the extreme-right politicians' narratives, this result suggests that scapegoating migrants for the crisis might be politically counterproductive.

Similarly, this condition also (weakly) increases the share of supporters of extreme-right[4] or populist parties[5] who intend not to vote for these parties again or do not know whom to vote for. Neither of these two effects, however, survive the RW correction for multiple hypotheses testing (RW p-values are 0.545 and 0.532, respectively).

Furthermore, the *PAN – MAG & HT (all)* condition reduces intentions to vote for populist parties among intensive social-media users (Figure A4E and Table A10b). Also exposure to COVID-19 contributes to the reduction in political support for those parties; yet, this effect is counterbalanced by providing information on the magnitude of the health threats associated with immigration (Figure A4F and Table A10c – column 3). However, none of these two results survives the multiple-hypotheses testing adjustment (RW p-values for the *PAN – MAG & HT (all)* condition are 0.139 and 0.347, respectively).

[4] This category includes Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, Casapaund.
[5] This category adds to the previous one M5S and Potere al popolo.

## 5. Additional treatment: *NO PAN - MAG*

The findings from the main experiment revealed the absence of a sizeable add-on effect of providing information that combines immigration with health-threatening claims (HT), relative to the provision of standard statistics on immigration magnitude alone (MAG). In other terms, there are no statistically significant differences between all conditions where participants were informed on immigration-related and health-threatening facts (T4-T6, jointly considered), compared to the condition in which the participants received only general information about immigration statistics (T3); see *Figure A3a* for a summary of all conditions implemented in the main experiment. In all treatments involving the provision of immigration statistics (T3-T6), we have *also* primed respondents with pandemic-related questions, to refresh the past pandemic experience.

The lack of an add-on effect of treatments T4-T6 relative to T3 could be ascribed to a procedural specificity of our experimental design: we do not have information treatments where immigration statistics are shown to participants "in isolation", i.e. *without priming* them first about the pandemic experience. Hence, we cannot exclude that providing the two stimuli together could have, *per se*, induced an *implicit* association between the two topics, evoking thoughts about the potential health threat associated with prospective immigration.

In other words, the combination of the pandemic priming and the provision of information on immigration statistics could have induced participants to implicitly associate the pandemic with immigration, although no direct or explicit reference to this association was provided in T3, as opposed to treatments T4-T6. Such an implicit association between the pandemic and immigration might have led to a level of hostility towards immigration similar to that observed when the connection between the two topics is made more explicit. We do observe, in fact, that both groups of respondents exposed to T3 and T4-T6 (jointly considered) are, on average, less favorable towards immigrants compared to the control group C1, and the treatment effects are *similar in size*.

Hence, given the current design, we cannot exclude that the absence of significant differences between the treatment effects induced by T3 and T4-T6 on our main outcomes (especially anti-immigration attitudes and behavior) may be explained by respondents *implicitly* associating sentiments of fear/threat induced by our pandemic priming with the information on immigration magnitude. Disentangling whether this is the case is important for the interpretation of our results and would enrich our current conclusions. An implicit association between the pandemic and immigration would suggest that providing also *explicit* information on the health consequences of immigration (e.g. publicly scapegoating immigrants for the health crisis) is at most ineffective, if not detrimental (as seen for the other outcomes), compared to the provision of standard information on immigration only.

To exclude that the implicit mechanism lies behind the relative ineffectiveness of treatments T4-T6 compared to T3, in March 2023, we implemented an additional treatment, called *T3bis [NO PAN; MAG]*[6]. In T3bis, we provided participants only with information about immigration statistics, without any pandemic priming. Procedurally, we have simply postponed the block with pandemic-priming questions, showing it after the outcome measurement block. Through the treatment T3bis, we aimed to test the role of information provision about immigration (MAG) *alone*, net of the effect of reminding participants about the pandemic experience (NO PAN). The implementation of this additional treatment may have led to at least two possible scenarios of interest for our research, which we have also preregistered at OSF (https://osf.io/d5yur):

1. The effect of providing information about immigration magnitude (the "MAG effect") is independent of the presence of the pandemic priming, suggesting that there are no (*implicit*) associations between the two topics, hence no interaction effects on anti-immigration attitudes between the pandemic priming (PAN) and the MAG effect. In this scenario, the MAG effect alone would not prove distinguishable from the effect of providing i) information about immigration jointly with the PAN priming (T3), and/or ii) information about immigration jointly with the PAN priming, further augmented by more *explicit* claims on the health threat posit by immigrants (T4-T6). Should this be the case, we would observe T3bis [NO PAN; MAG] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG] ≈ T3 [PAN; MAG] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG], which reduces to *T3bis* ≈ *T3*. Results from the main experiment have already shown that T3 [PAN; MAG] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG] ≈ T4-T6 [PAN; MAG & HT (*all)*] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG], that is, lack of add-on effects of MAG & HT relative to MAG whenever the pandemic has been recalled (*T3* ≈ *T4-T6*); hence, if *T3bis* ≈ *T3* too, we can exclude that the pandemic priming, *per se*, implies an implicit HT-like reaction when participants are exposed only to information on immigration magnitude. This would imply that the lack of add-on effects of treatments T4-T6 relative to T3 is not due to the latter treatment implicitly inducing the same association between immigration and health as that more explicitly induced by the former treatment.

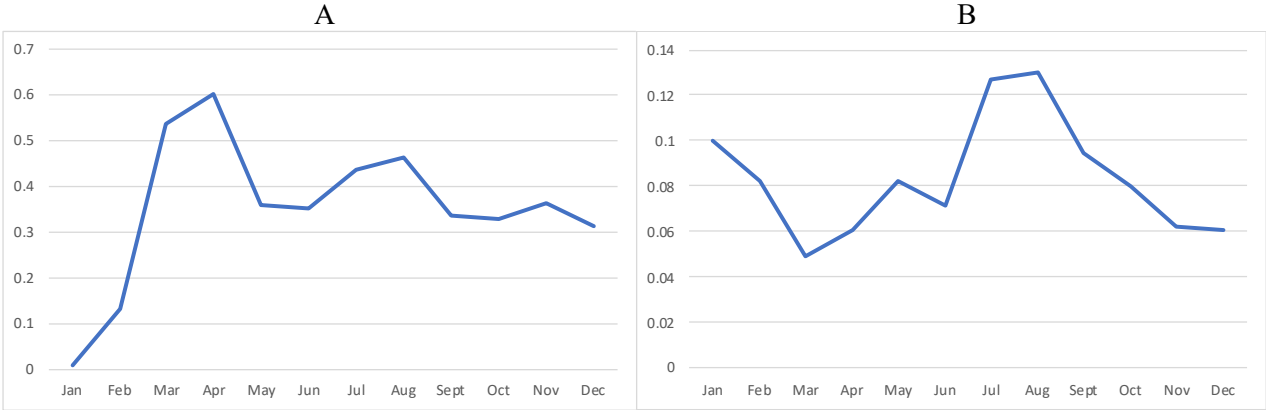
[6] The implementation of the additional treatment condition (T3bis) followed the same procedures used for the main survey experiment conducted in February and March 2022. The survey was programmed and distributed online by the company DEMETRA (Italian partner of LUCID) to a representative sample of approximately 250 Italians in March 2023. To increase data quality, we excluded from the final sample participants that i) fail to answer correctly to all comprehension questions and attention, and ii) take an extraordinarily long or short time to complete and submit the online questionnaire. Participants were exposed to the same exact questionnaire items and monetary incentives as participants who took part in the main survey experiment. Participants recruited for T3bis will be exposed to almost the same survey flow as participants who have been exposed to T3 [PAN; MAG] treatment, with only a few procedural differences, mostly concerning the order in which blocks containing information about immigration and pandemic-priming questions are shown. Differently from T3, participants in T3bis were only exposed to the information about immigration magnitude before answering the set of questions measuring our outcome variables. The questionnaire block containing pandemic-priming information and questions was shown to participants only at the end of the survey.

2. The MAG effect is not independent of the presence of the pandemic priming, suggesting that there might be some (implicit) associations between the two topics, hence interaction effects between the pandemic priming (PAN) and the MAG effect. As a result, the effect of providing information about immigration magnitude jointly with the pandemic priming (PAN; MAG) may overlap with the effect of providing the same information, accompanied by additional claims pointing to a more explicit connection between immigration and the health threat it (supposedly) may induce (PAN; MAG & HT). Should this be the case, we would observe T3bis [NO PAN; MAG] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG] ≠ T3 [PAN; MAG] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG], which reduces to *T3bis ≠T3*. Results from the main experiment show that T3 [PAN; MAG] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG] ≈ T4-T6 [PAN; MAG & HT (*all)*] - C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG], that is, there is no add-on effect of MAG & HT relative to MAG whenever the pandemic has been recalled (*T3 ≈ T4-T6*); hence, if *T3bis ≠ T3* too, we *can't exclude* that the pandemic priming, *per se*, induces an implicit HT-like reaction when participants are exposed only to information on immigration magnitude. This would imply that the lack of add-on effects of treatments T4-T6 relative to T3 might be indeed driven by the latter treatment *implicitly* inducing the same association between immigration and health as that explicitly induced by the former treatment.

Results provide empirical support for the first scenario (Figure A4N). Relative to the control condition C1 (*NO PAN; NO MIG*), the new treatment T3bis (*NO PAN – MAG*) does not influence anti-immigration attitudes differently from how T3 (*PAN – MAG*) or T4 (*PAN – MAG & HT (all)*) do; Sidak-adjusted p-values for differences across these treatment effects are 0.334 (T3bis vs T3) and 0.438 (T3bis vs T4). Similar results are obtained for the behavioral tasks, i.e. donation decision and redistribution choice; Sidak-adjusted p-values are 0.213 and 0.212, respectively, for the donation and 0.803 and 0.205 for the redistribution choice. For attitudes towards redistribution, we find a significant difference across treatments, with T3bis (*NO PAN – MAG*) inducing a higher – yet only marginally significant (p=0.074) – treatment effect than T4 (*PAN – MAG*) (Sidak-adjusted p-value = 0.014), but a similar treatment effect to T4 (*PAN – MAG & HT (all)*) (Sidak-adjusted p-value = 0.347). These findings suggest that providing information about immigration *per se* is the main driver in our information treatments, i.e. no *implicit* HT-like reaction is triggered when participants are exposed both to information on immigration magnitude and pandemic-related questions. Such a result suggests that anti-immigration rhetoric *explicitly* scapegoating migrants for the health crisis does not bring any additional add-on effect compared to the more "traditional" anti-immigration rhetoric focusing on immigration only, which is already powerful *per se*, especially in times of crisis.

## FIGURES

**Figure A1 – The relative popularity of "Immigration & COVID" in the media**




*Note*: Panel A shows the number of newspapers' articles containing both 'Immigration' and 'COVID/Pandemic' related words (joint occurrences) in a month over the total number of all articles containing 'Immigration' related words in that month. Panel B shows the number of newspapers' articles containing 'Immigration' related words in a month over the total number of all articles containing 'Immigration' related words in the year. Both figures show the time trend over the year 2020, monthly counts. Source: *Factiva search over all media sources in Italy in 2020.*

## Figure A2 – Politicians' tweets on immigration during the Covid-19 crisis


Hundreds of illegal immigrants landed in a few hours, it is unacceptable. We wrote to President Draghi and to the Ministers of Health and of the Interior: in addition to controlling flights from high-risk countries, in addition to taking care of Covid and its variants, it is also necessary to stop landings.

…Out of respect for the Italians, their sacrifices, their health and safety. Nothing can be done about it. False. In one year, I have reduced landings by 80% and I am undergoing two trials for defending the Italian borders. And with fewer departures, there are also fewer deaths. Where There's a Will There's a Way.


Are many cases of Covid-19 imported? It is now clear that uncontrolled immigration is not only a health problem but also an economic and social issue. I believe that landings will continue (tripled compared to last year), it is a precise political choice.


Still landings in Sicily, we are close to collapse. In Italy there are too many cases of immigrants, even positive to the covid, who violate the quarantine, as happened today in Palermo. Should we put at risk all the sacrifices we have been making for this government immigration policy?


15,406 landings from the beginning of the year, against 4,261 in the same period a year ago: the failure of this Government is in the statistics, while the Minister Lamorgese boasts of having controlled more than 20 million Italians during the emergency Covid.

Iron fist with citizens, persecutions and fines for those who go to the beach, dance or have an aperitif, while kindness and open


Migrants' arrivals continue as well as escapes from Italian reception centers. We cannot afford a crisis within a crisis and to spend time and resources in the search for fugitives who arrive in Italy and do not respect the quarantine.

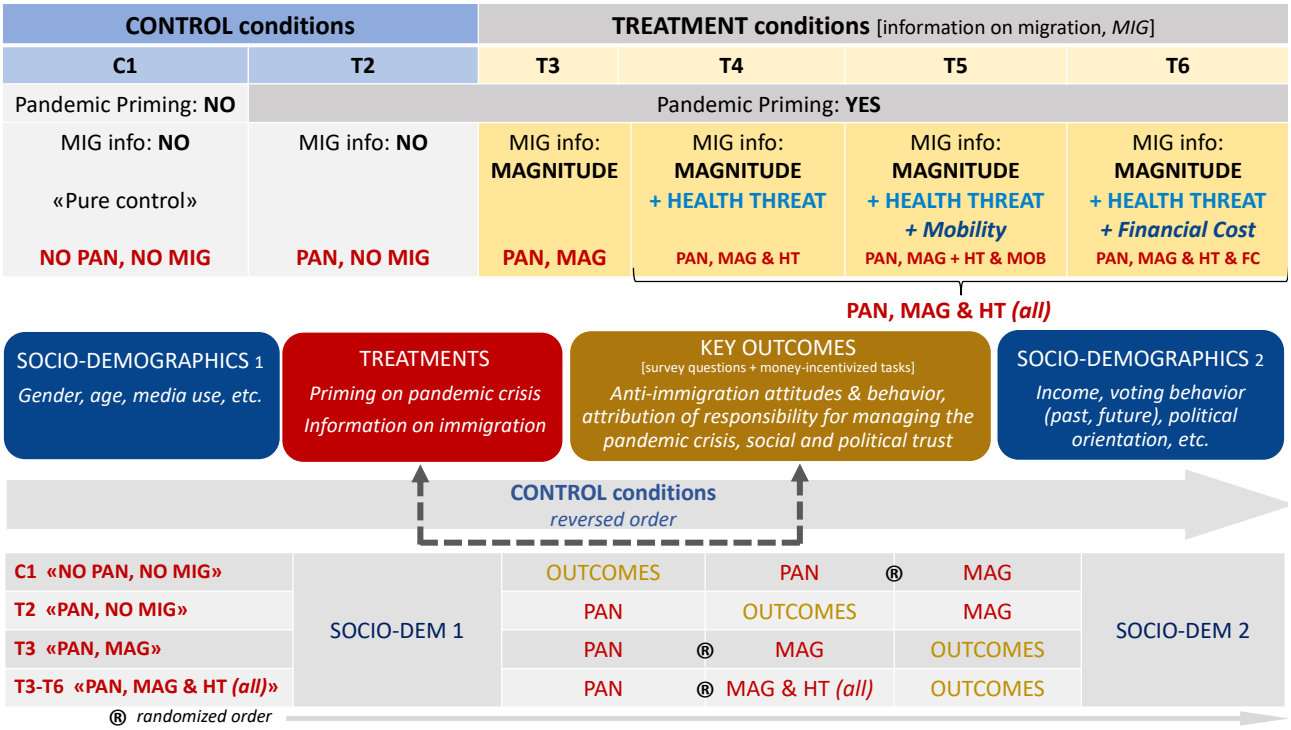
## Figure A3a - Experimental treatments

| Condition | Content |
|---|---|
| *Control conditions* | |
| C1 [NO PAN; NO MIG] | Pandemic priming: NO<br>Information on immigration: NO |
| T2 [PAN; NO MIG] | Pandemic priming: YES<br>Information on immigration: NO |
| *Informational treatments on immigration (MIG)* | |
| T3 [PAN; MAG] | Pandemic priming: YES<br>Information on immigration: *Magnitude* |
| T4 [PAN; MAG + HT] | Pandemic priming: YES<br>Information on immigration: *Magnitude + Health Threat* |
| T5 [PAN; MAG + HT + MOB] | Pandemic priming: YES<br>Information on immigration: *Magnitude + Health Threat + Mobility* |
| T6 [PAN; MAG + HT + FC] | Pandemic priming: YES<br>Information on immigration: *Magnitude + Health Threat + Financial Cost* |

## Figure A3b - Survey Flow across treatment conditions

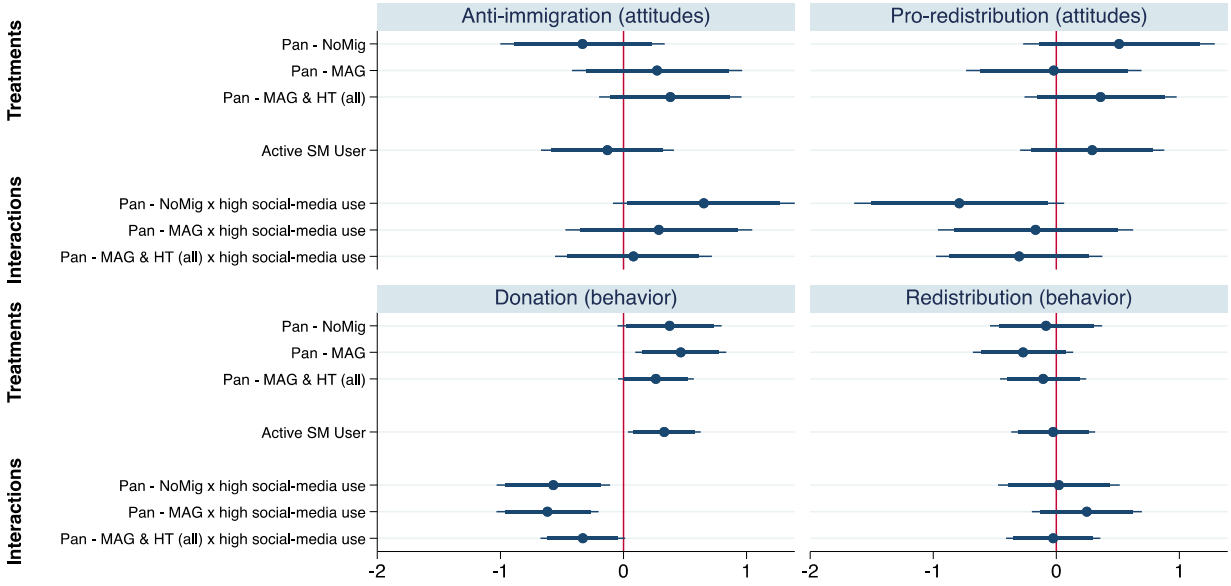
| | **Control condition [C1] "NO Pan, NO Mig"** | **COVID Priming only [T2] "Pan, NO Mig"** | **COVID Priming & IMMIGRATION information [T3-T6] "Pan, Mig – all"** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Socio-demographic questions PT1 | Socio-demographic questions PT1 | Socio-demographic questions PT1 |
| 2 | Outcome questions | COVID Priming | COVID Priming |
| 3 | COVID Priming | Outcome questions | Priors' elicitation + Info provision: IMMIGRATION |
| 4 | Priors' elicitation: IMMIGRATION | Priors' elicitation: IMMIGRATION | Outcome questions |
| 5 | Socio-demographic questions PT2 | Socio-demographic questions PT2 | Socio-demographic questions PT2 |

## Figure A3c – Graphical summary of the experimental design and survey flow

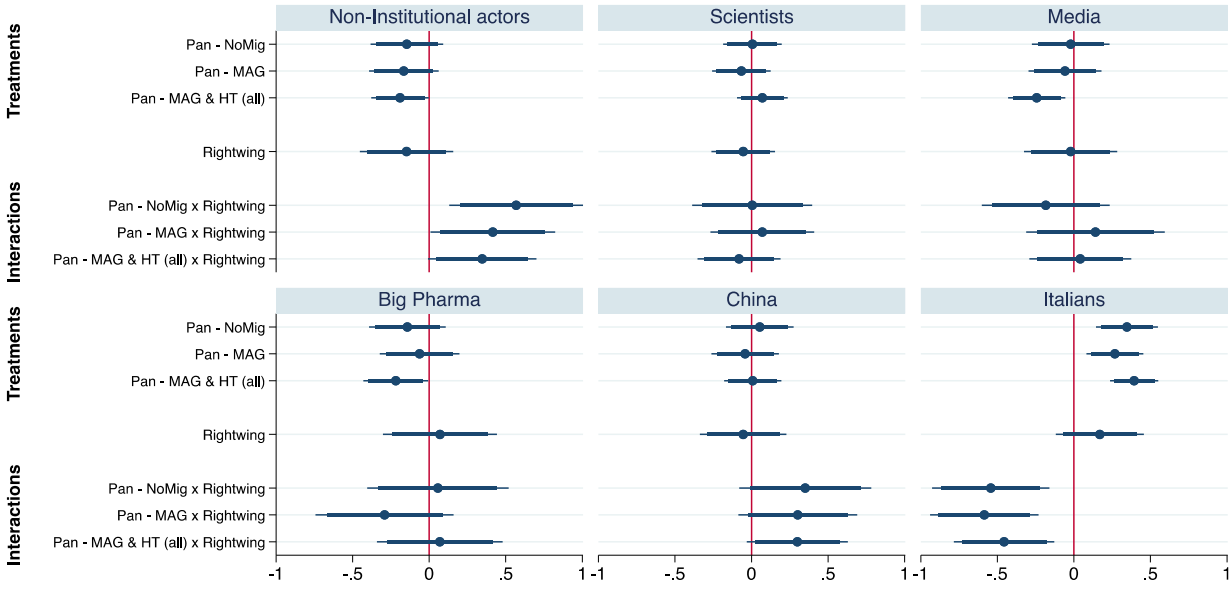


## Figure A4 – Selected checks for treatment heterogeneity

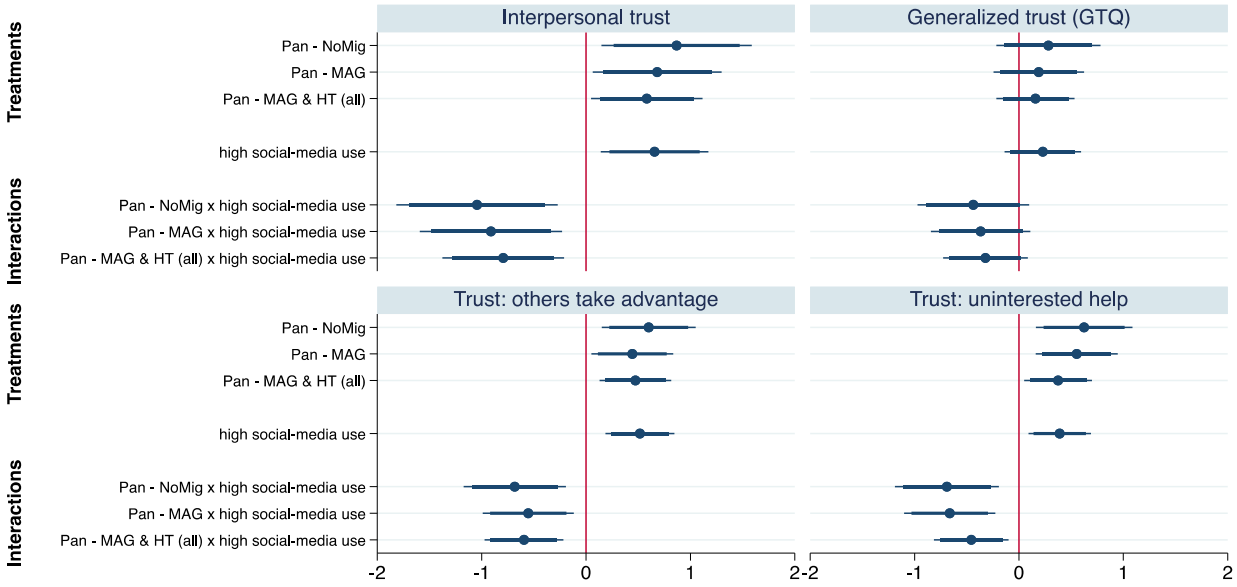
*Panel A – Anti-immigrant attitudes and behavior by social media use*



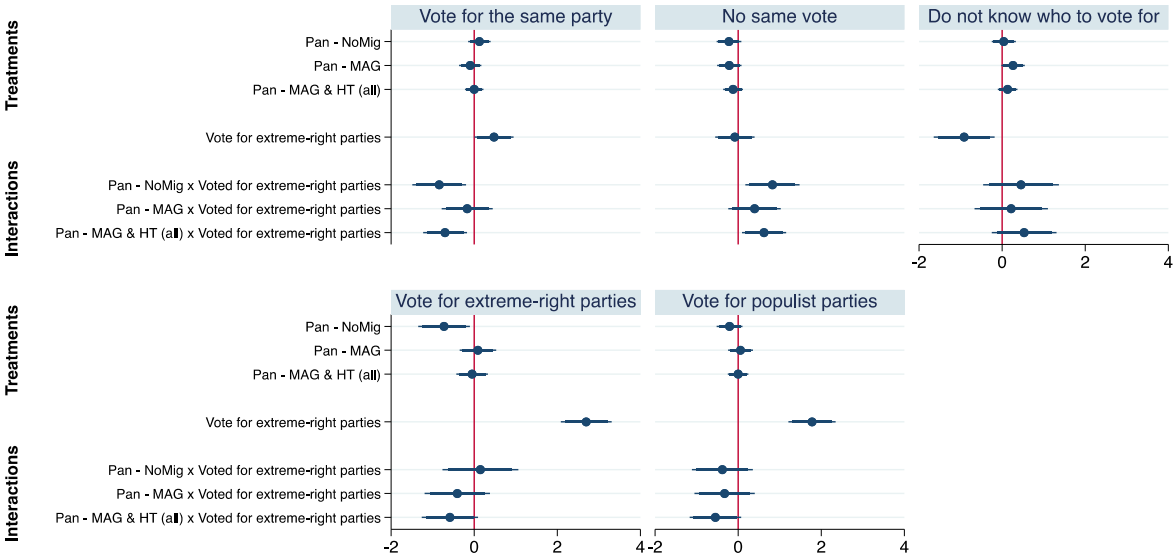

*Panel B – Attribution of responsibility by political leaning*



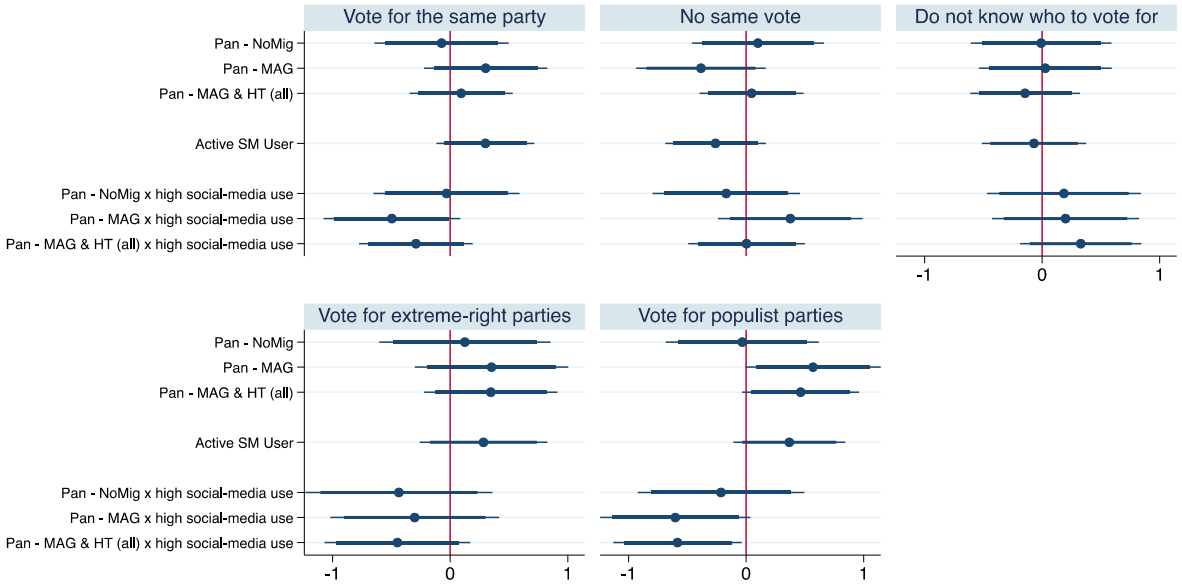
*Panel C – Interpersonal trust (first extracted component and single items) by social media use*



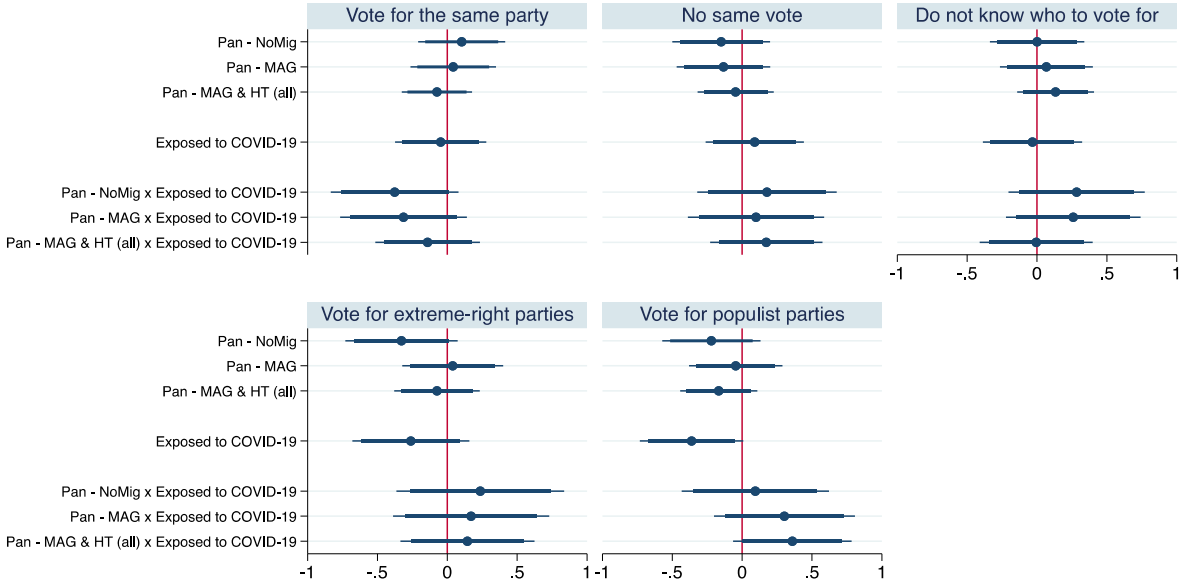

*Panel D – Voting intentions: extreme-right vs. no extreme-right voters*



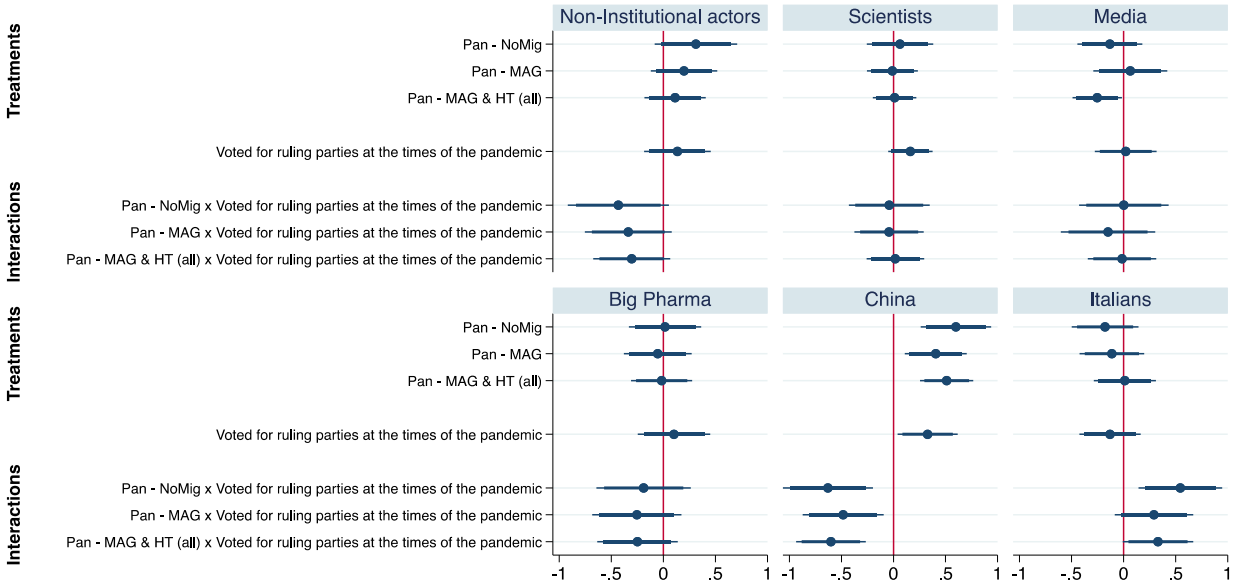
*Panel E – Voting intentions by social media use*



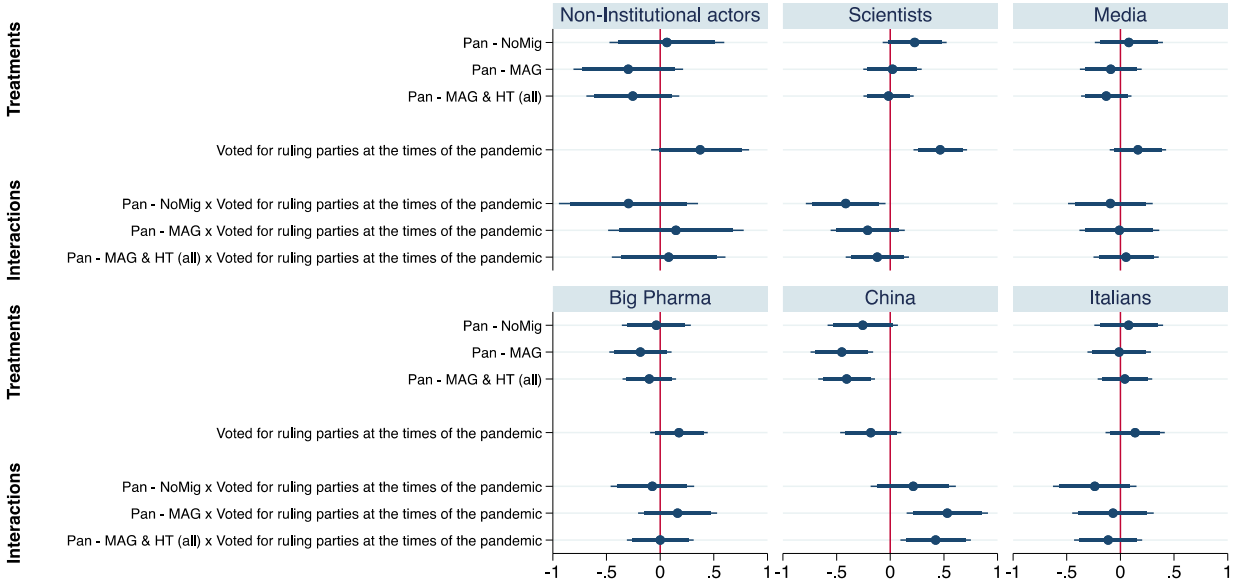

*Panel F – Voting intentions by COVID-19 exposure*



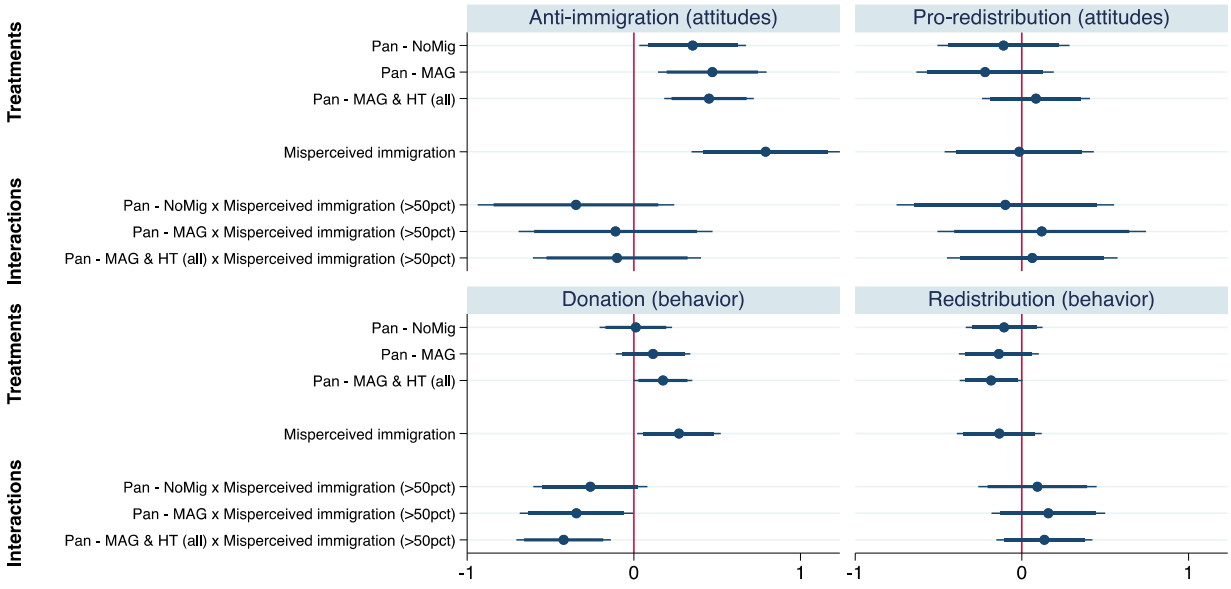
*Panel G – Attribution of responsibility by support for ruling parties during the pandemic*



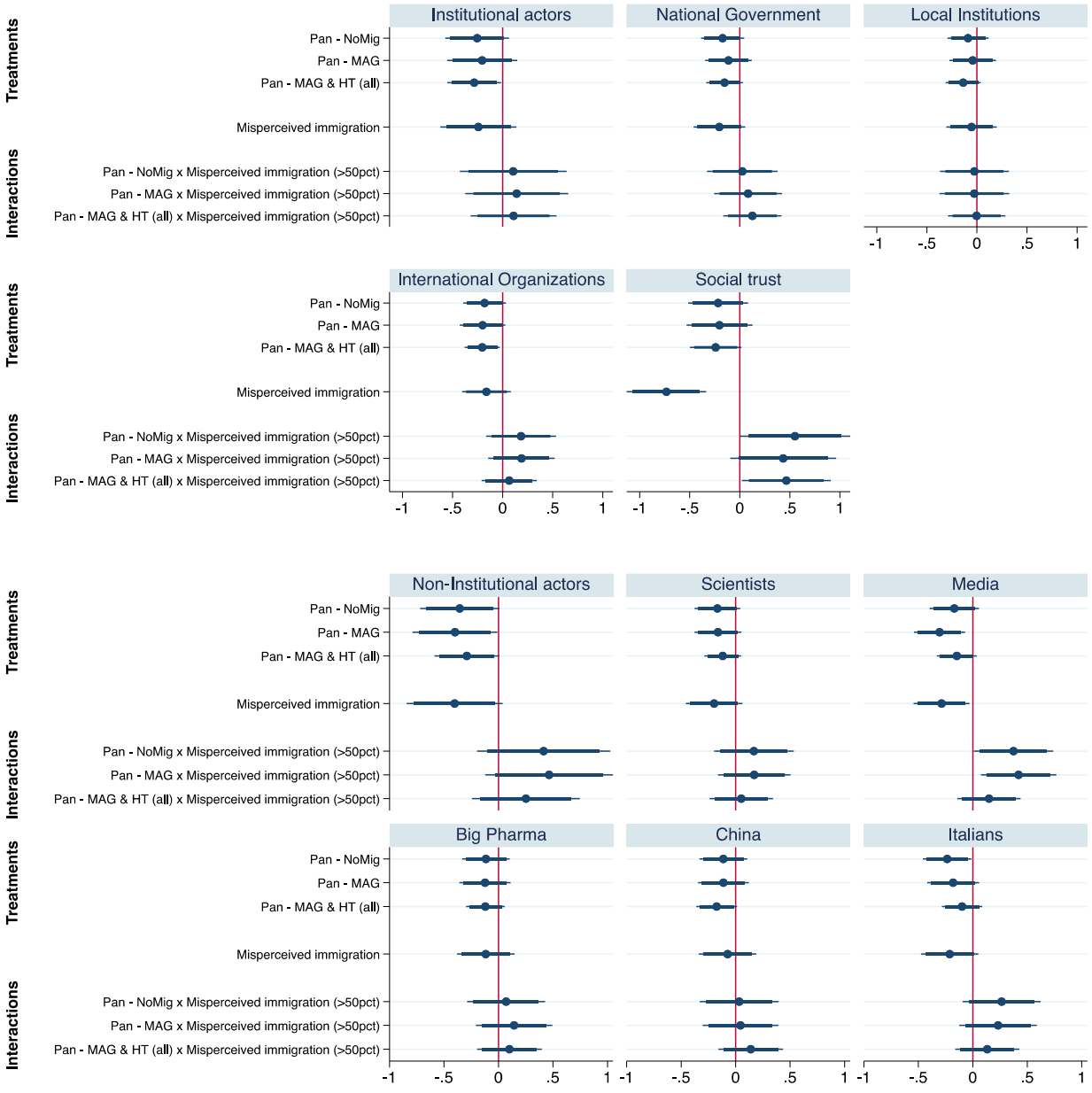

*Panel H – Trust by support for ruling parties during the pandemic*



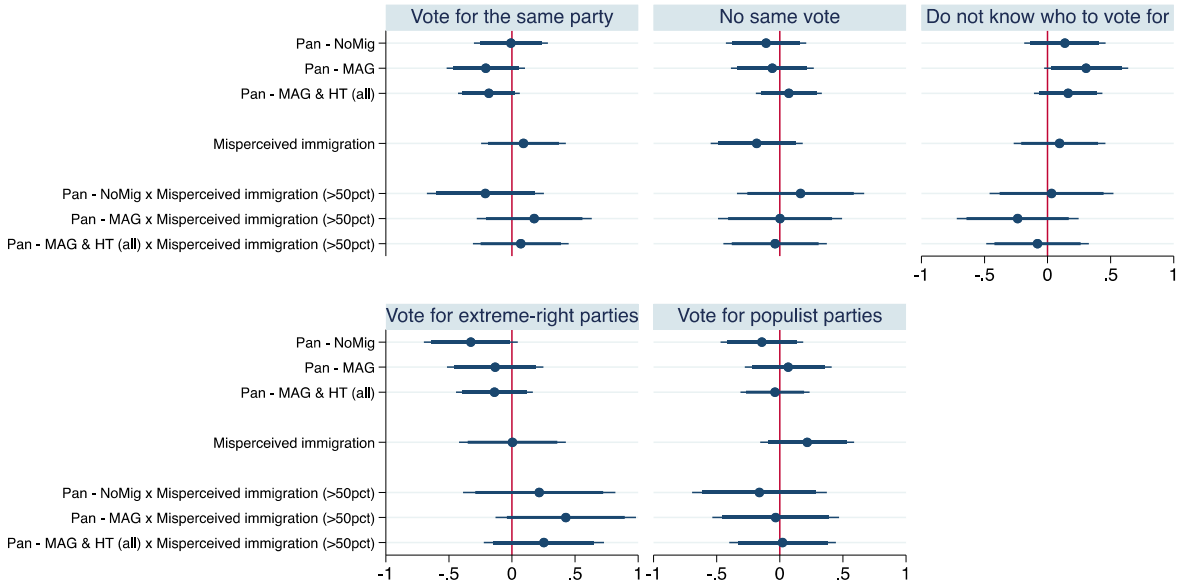
*Panel I – Anti-immigrant attitudes and behavior by misperceived immigration (pre-treatment beliefs)*



*Panel L – Political and social trust by misperceived immigration (pre-treatment beliefs)*



*Panel M – Voting intentions by misperceived immigration (pre-treatment beliefs)*




*Panel N – Anti-immigrant attitudes and behavior (with the NO PAN – MAG additional treatment)*

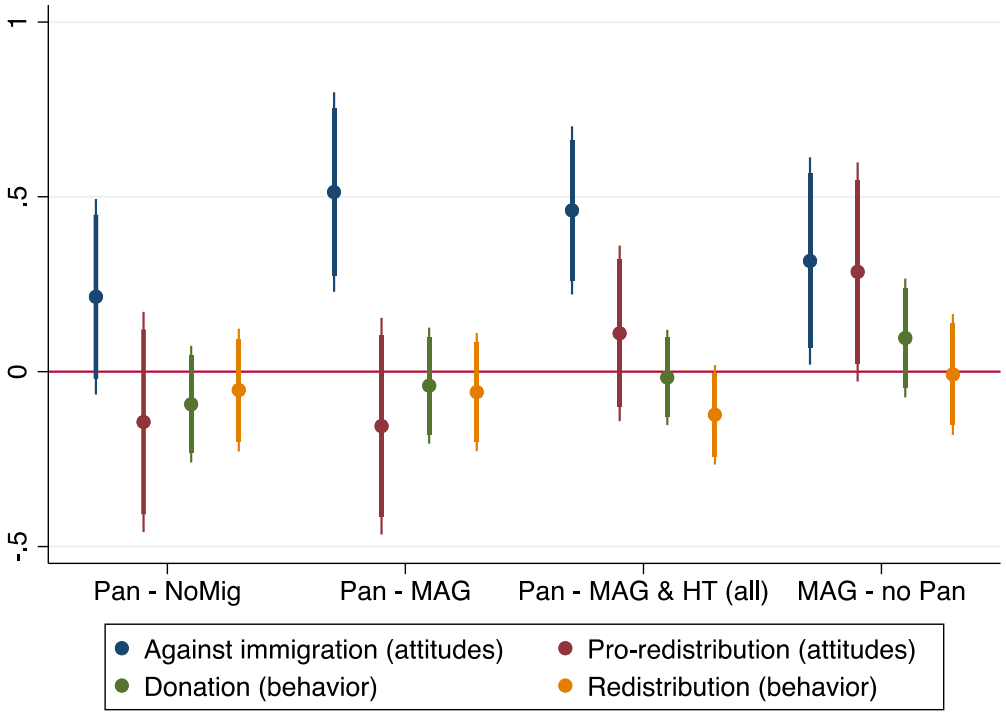
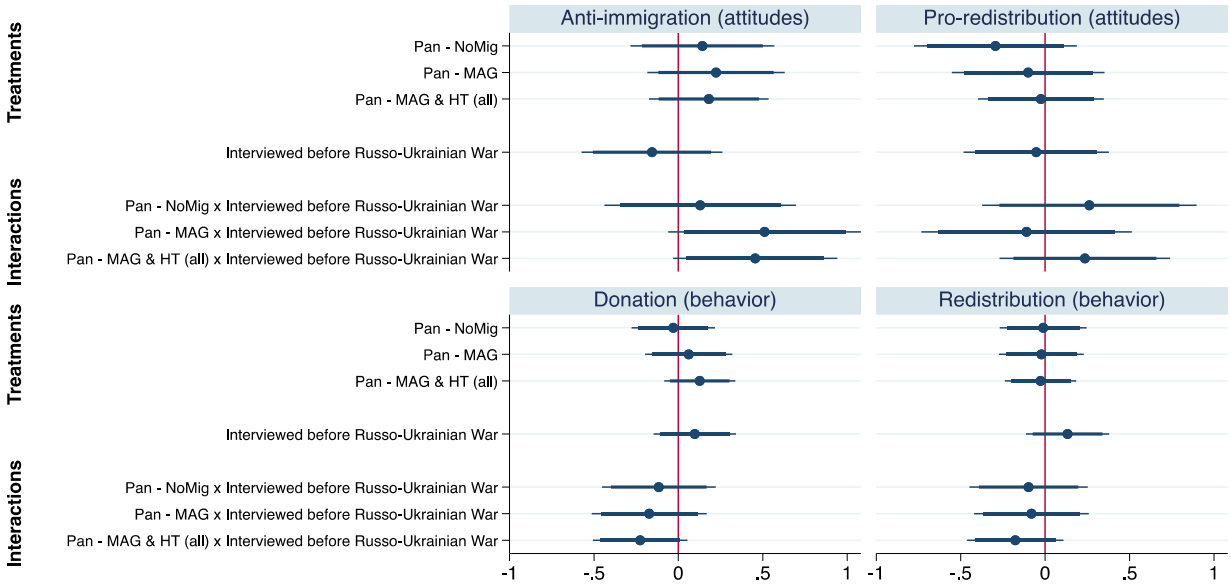
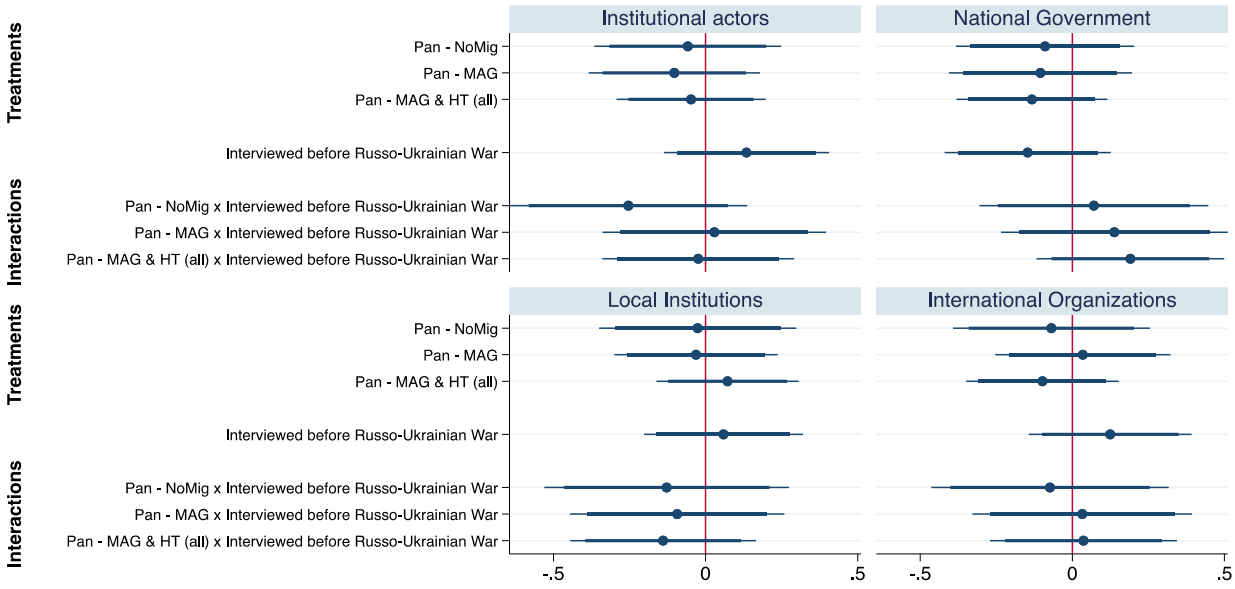


**Figure A5 – Heterogeneity by interview date (before vs. during the Russo-Ukrainian war)**

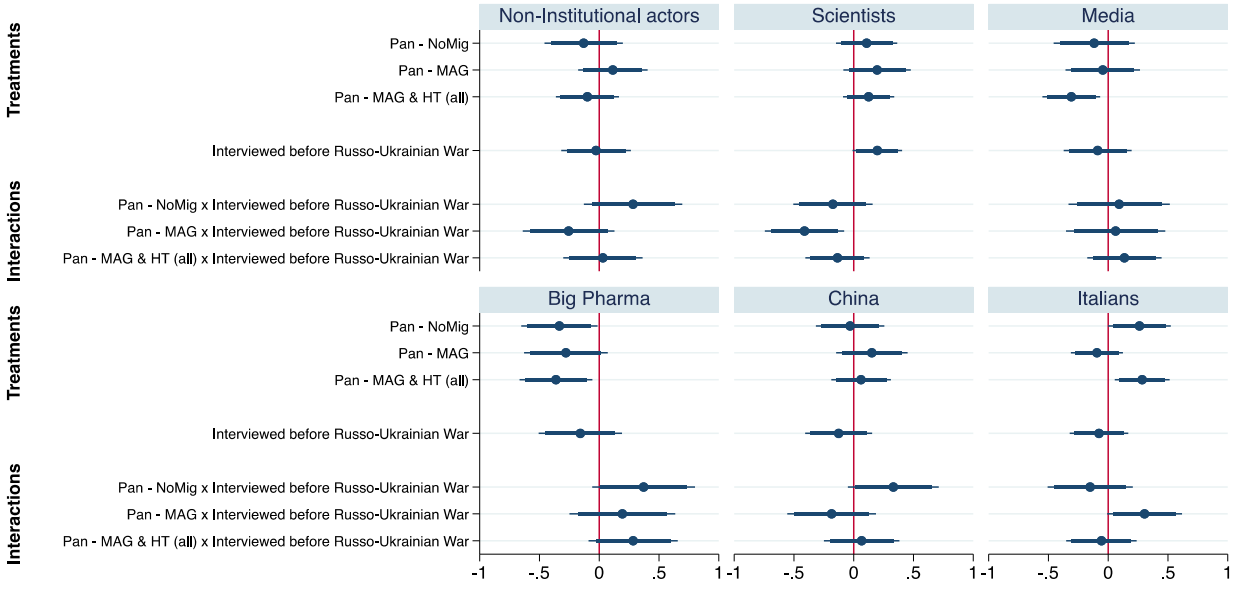
*Panel A – Anti-immigrant attitudes & behaviors*



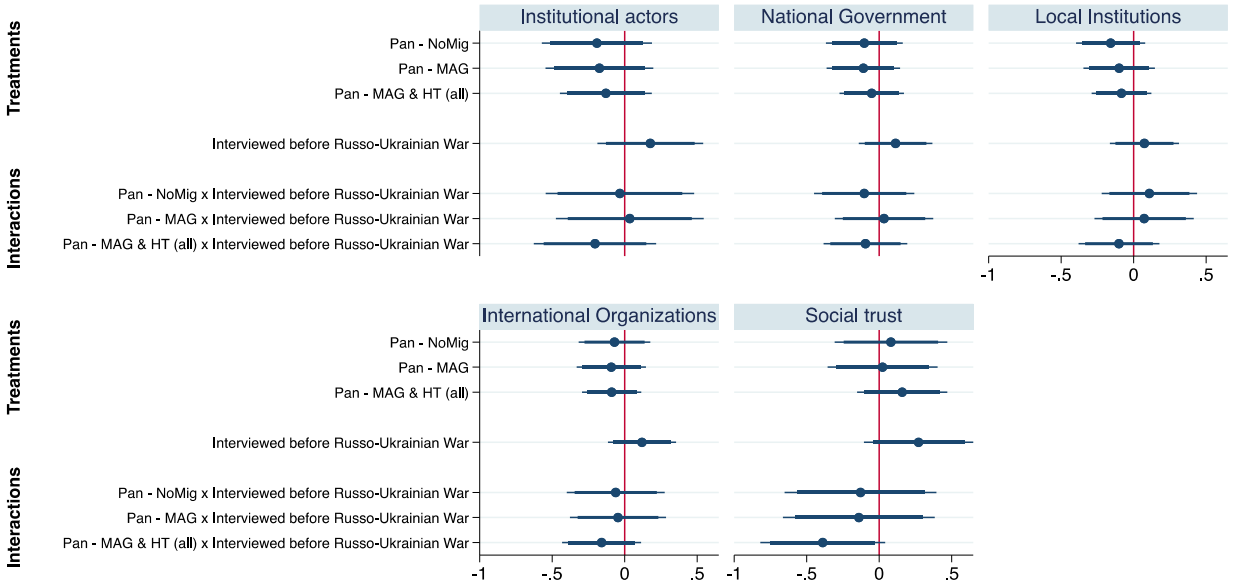
*Panel B – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (institutional actors)*



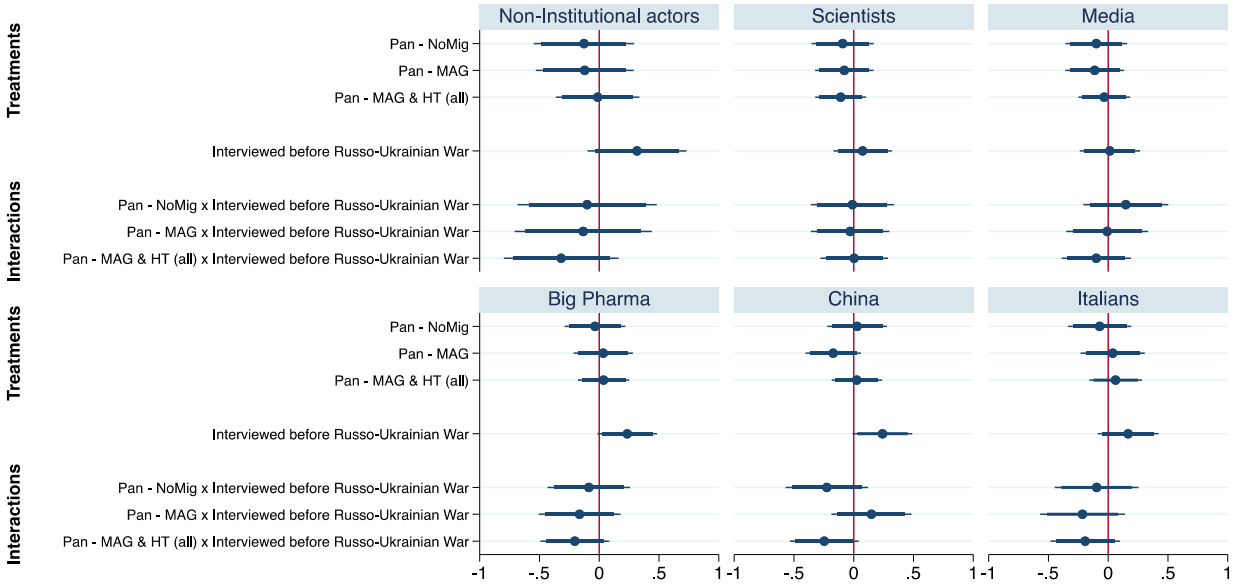

*Panel C – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (non-institutional actors)*



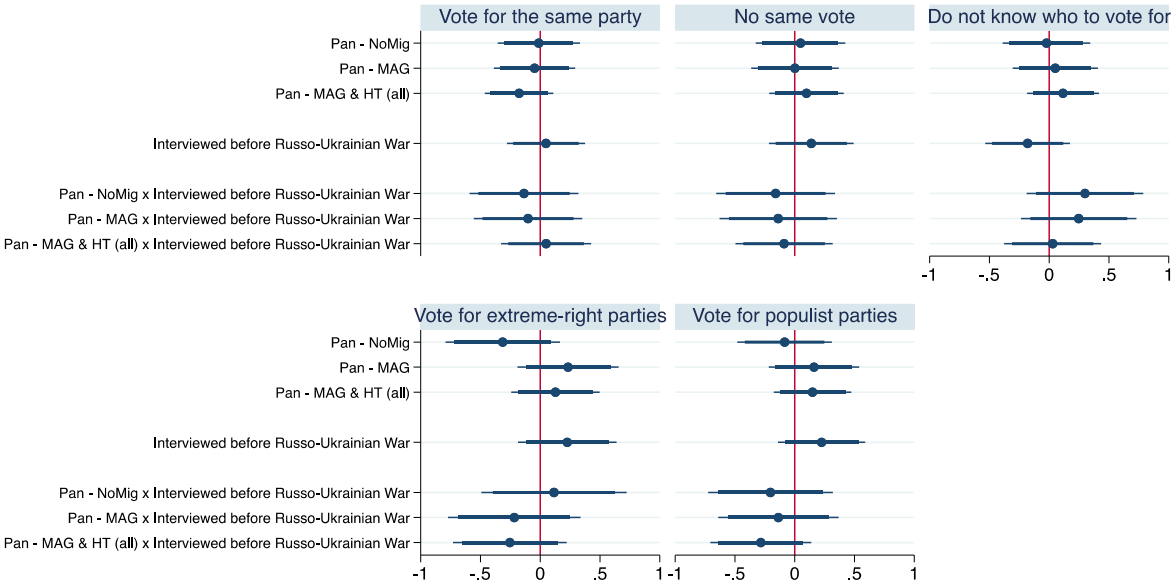
*Panel C – Institutional and social trust*



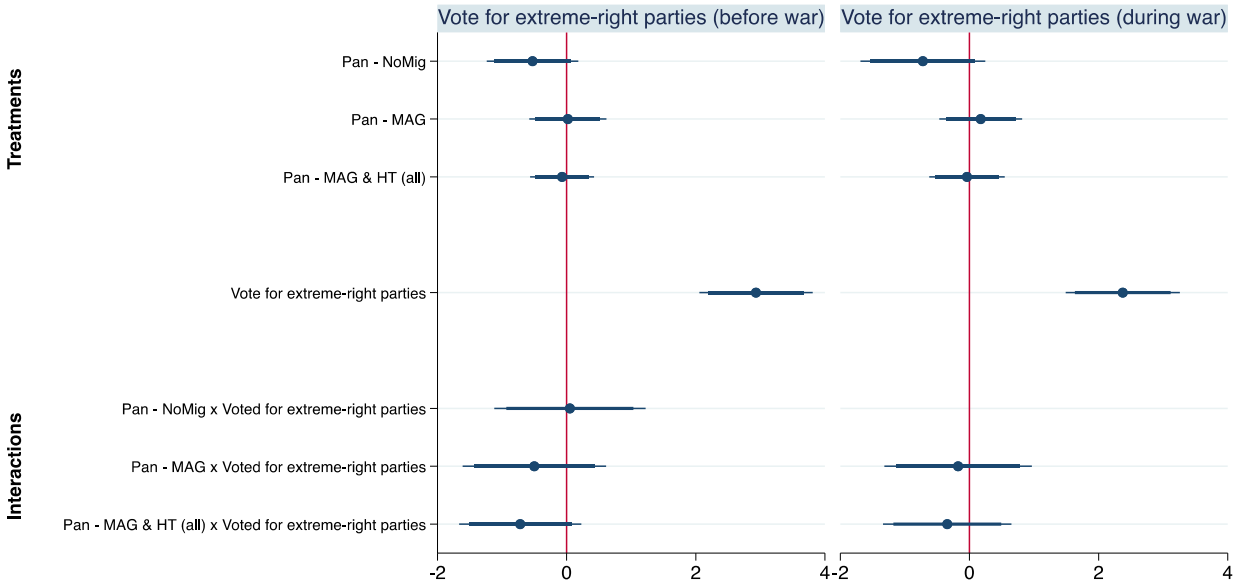

*Panel D – Trust towards non-institutional actors*



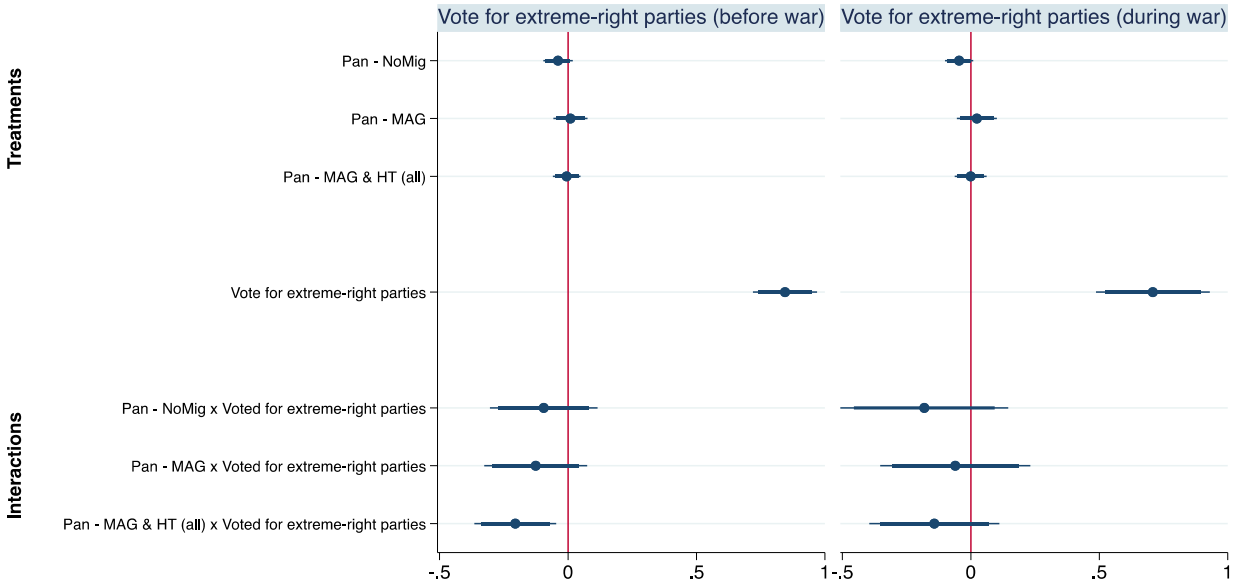
*Panel E – Voting intentions*



*Panel F – Intentions to vote for extreme-right parties (Probit estimates)*




*Panel G – Intentions to vote for extreme-right parties (OLS estimates)*

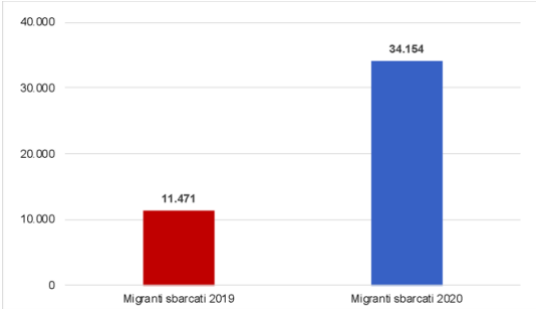


## Figure A5A – Contents of: IMMIGRATION Information treatments

*Panel A: Infosheets (separately by sub-treatment dimension)*

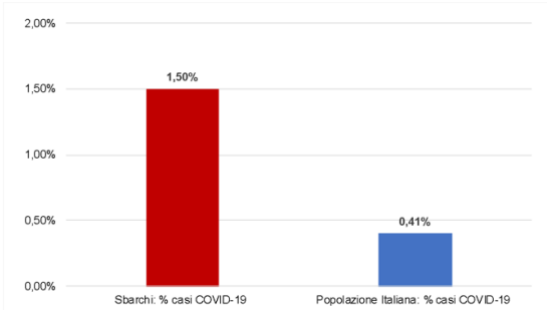
MAG *magnitude of incoming migration flows during the pandemic*

The total number of **migrants disembarked** in Italy in 2020 was 34,154, with an increase of almost 200% compared to 2019 (+ 198%).



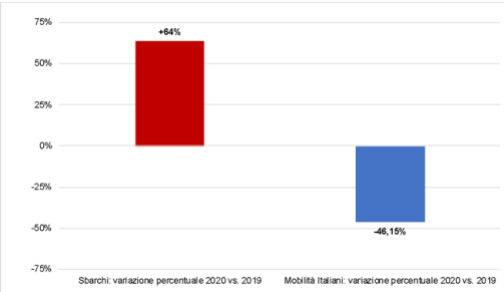

HT *severity of health threat posed by incoming migrants as of COVID-19 diffusion*

The percentage of Covid-19 **positives on the total of migrants landed in Italy between March and mid-July of 2020 was approximately 1.5%**. In the same period, the percentage of Covid-19 **positives out of the total Italian population was approximately 0.41%**.




MOB *tension between mobility constraints imposed on Italians and migrants' freedom to enter Italian borders*

In the first months of the lockdown, between mid-March and April 2020, **the number of migrants disembarked in Italy increased by about 64% compared to the same period in 2019**. In the same period, **the mobility rate of Italians on the national territory**, which measures the frequency of all trips outside the home, **almost halved**




FC *tension between lack of proper and timely financial support to Italian workers and the cost of immigration*

Between May and July 2020, the Government spent about **1 million € for the rental of the Moby Zazà, to be used as a quarantine ship for migrants** landed in Italy and found positive for Covid-19: the ship is equipped to accommodate up to 250 people, with an (estimated) **daily cost of around 70€ per migrant**. In the same period, the Government provided economic support for freelancers, the so-called "**Covid-19 indemnity**", for an amount equal to 1000€ for the month of May 2020, equivalent to a transfer of around **32€ per day per worker**.

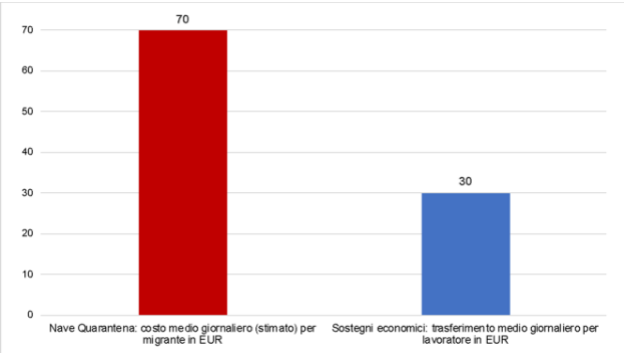
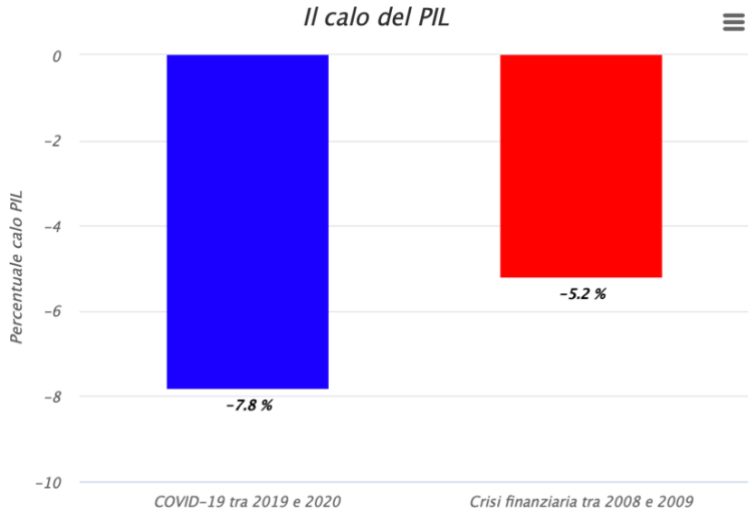


**Figure A5B – Contents of: COVID Priming**

*Panel A1: Economic consequences of the COVID crisis - Facts*

Many organisations and institutes have assessed the socio-economic consequences of the ongoing pandemic. According to estimates by the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), **the pandemic has caused a drop in Italy's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 7.8% in 2020 compared to 2019.** In comparison, the financial crisis is estimated to have caused a 5.2% drop in GDP in 2009 compared to 2008.




*Panel A2: Economic consequences of the COVID crisis – Questions on own experience/perception*

**On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = not at all; 10 = very much), how much do you think the crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic:**

| | **Not at all 1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **Very much 10** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Has created food supply problems in the city/location where you live | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| It will have negative financial consequences for you and your family in the future | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| It will have negative financial consequences for the city/town in which it lives in the future | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**Do you think that the COVID-19 crisis is having/has an impact on your work?**

Choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes, mostly positively
- Yes, mostly negatively
- Not significantly
- I do not have a job

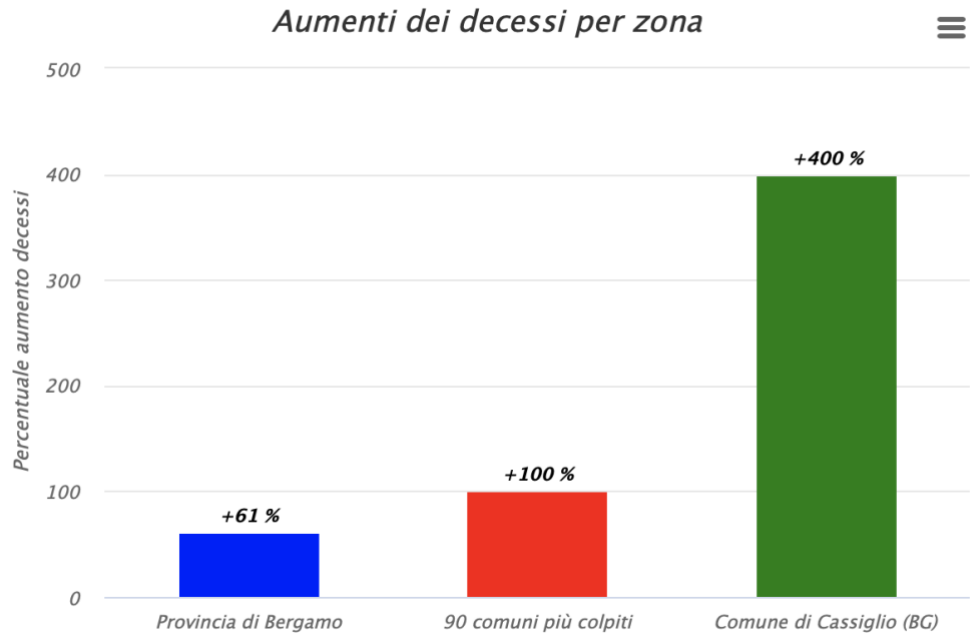
**Do you think that the COVID-19 crisis is having/has an impact on the work of people close to you?**

Choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes, mostly positively
- Yes, mostly negatively
- Not significantly

*Panel B1: Health consequences of the COVID crisis - Facts*

In 2020, the Ministry of Health and ISTAT calculated that in the province of Bergamo the real **number of deaths increased by about 61%** compared to the five-year period 2015-19: out of 243 municipalities, the **number of deaths more than doubled in 90 municipalities** (an increase of more than 100%) and in particular, in the municipality of Cassiglio (BG), the number of deaths increased fivefold (+400%).



*Panel B2: Health consequences of the COVID crisis - Questions on own experience/perception*

**Do you have family members who could be considered at risk if infected with the virus?**

Choose **only one** of the following:

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ I prefer not to answer / I don't know

**Do the following statements apply to your case?**

| | Yes | No | Don't know / Prefer not to answer |
|---|---|---|---|
| I have contracted the virus | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Someone in my family has contracted the virus | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| At least one of my friends/acquaintances contracted the virus | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |

**On a scale of 1 to 10, to what extent are the following sentences about the first lockdown (first phase of the pandemic, March-May 2020) valid in your case?**

| *How much would you be willing to…* | **Not at all 1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **Very much 10** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Living together with my family/cohabitants was difficult | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| I have been worried about my health | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ |
| Not seeing my friends or family was difficult | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | |
| I thought the rules of social isolation were too strict | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | ◯ | |

# TABLES

## Table A1A – Summary statistics

| Variable | Obs. | Mean | SD | Min | Median | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Outcome variables: A) Anti-immigration attitudes and behavior* | | | | | | |
| Anti-immigration *attitudes* (pc) | 1510 | -1.79e-10 | 1.925 | -2.786 | -0.163 | 4.288 |
| Pro-redistribution *attitudes* (pc) | 1510 | 4.85e-09 | 1.882 | -7.139 | 0.199 | 2.403 |
| Donation (behavior) | 1510 | -5.75e-08 | 1.000 | -1.353 | 0.183 | 1.719 |
| Redistribution (behavior) | 1510 | -1.30e-08 | 1.000 | -1.600 | 0.006 | 1.612 |
| *Outcome variables: B) Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis* | | | | | | |
| Institutional actors | 1227 | 4.06e-08 | 1.000 | -2.163 | 0.019 | 3.293 |
| National government | 1419 | 6.01e-08 | 1.000 | -1.300 | -0.096 | 4.719 |
| Local government | 1305 | -2.13e-08 | 1.000 | -1.127 | 0.007 | 10.22 |
| International organizations | 1335 | -2.26e-08 | 1.000 | -1.116 | -0.127 | 8.770 |
| Non-institutional actors | 1182 | 5.26e-08 | 1.000 | -2.624 | -0.048 | 2.528 |
| Mass media | 1324 | 8.89e-09 | 1.000 | -1.066 | -0.163 | 7.958 |
| Scientists | 1318 | -6.50e-09 | 1.000 | -1.080 | -0.187 | 7.848 |
| Big Pharma | 1298 | -2.97e-08 | 1.000 | -0.939 | -0.070 | 7.748 |
| China | 1361 | 1.21e-08 | 1.000 | -0.922 | -0.436 | 3.127 |
| Italians | 1309 | -6.63e-09 | 1.000 | -0.942 | -0.157 | 6.903 |
| *Outcome variables: C) Trust towards institutions* | | | | | | |
| Institutional actors (pc) | 1510 | -3.94e-10 | 1.526 | -2.767 | 0.095 | 3.763 |
| National government | 1510 | 3.54e-08 | 1.000 | -1.406 | 0.070 | 2.287 |
| Local government | 1510 | 1.72e-08 | 1.000 | -1.694 | 0.314 | 2.322 |
| International organizations | 1510 | -5.38e-08 | 1.000 | -1.697 | 0.104 | 1.905 |
| Non-institutional actors (pc) | 1510 | -4.68e-10 | 1.699 | -3.763 | 0.180 | 5.182 |
| Mass media | 1510 | -3.09e-08 | 1.000 | -1.503 | 0.132 | 2.584 |
| Scientists | 1510 | 1.66e-08 | 1.000 | -2.491 | 0.169 | 1.309 |
| Big Pharma | 1510 | 5.10e-08 | 1.000 | -1.636 | 0.215 | 2.066 |
| China | 1510 | -2.13e-08 | 1.000 | -1.029 | -0.114 | 3.542 |
| Italians | 1510 | 8.09e-08 | 1.000 | -1.680 | -0.047 | 2.402 |
| *Outcome variables: D) Trust towards other people* | | | | | | |
| Social trust (pc) | 1510 | 2.84e-10 | 1.496 | -3.096 | 0.199 | 3.939 |
| Generalized trust (GTQ) | 1510 | 3.16e-08 | 1.000 | -1.888 | 0.095 | 2.078 |
| People fairness | 1510 | 8.73e-08 | 1.000 | -1.934 | 0.144 | 2.222 |
| Uninterested help | 1510 | 3.12e-08 | 1.000 | -1.529 | 0.097 | 2.538 |
| Trust towards: Family | 1510 | -4.40e-08 | 1.000 | -4.660 | 0.664 | 0.664 |
| Trust towards: Known people | 1510 | -3.42e-08 | 1.000 | -2.962 | 0.177 | 1.522 |
| Trust towards: Strangers | 1510 | 4.42e-08 | 1.000 | -1.573 | 0.106 | 2.625 |
| *Outcome variables: E) Voting intentions* | | | | | | |
| Vote for the same party | 1480 | 0.428 | 0.495 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| No vote for the same party | 1480 | 0.262 | 0.440 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Do not know whom to vote for | 1480 | 0.309 | 0.462 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| No revote / Do not know | 1480 | 0.572 | 0.495 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Vote for extreme-right parties | 1273 | 0.190 | 0.393 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Vote for populist parties | 1273 | 0.328 | 0.470 | 0 | 0 | 1 |

| Variable | Obs. | Mean | SD | Min | Median | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Experimental conditions and controls* | | | | | | |
| Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG) | 240 | | | | | |
| Baseline 2 (PAN, NO MIG) | 252 | | | | | |
| PAN, MAG | 260 | | | | | |
| PAN, MAG + HT | 241 | | | | | |
| PAN, MAG + HT + MOB | 258 | | | | | |
| PAN, MAG + HT + FC | 259 | | | | | |
| Length of interview (minutes) | 1510 | 23.29 | 8.837 | 11.50 | | 55.68 |
| % correct answers to comprehension questions & attention checks | 1510 | 0.777 | 0.216 | 0.125 | | 1.000 |
| *Socio-economic and demographic characteristics* | | | | | | |
| Income | 1510 | 2.463 | 1.286 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Female | 1510 | 0.507 | 0.500 | 0.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 |
| Age (years) | 1510 | 44.2 | 12.73 | 18 | 45 | 80 |
| Education: has a university degree | 1510 | 0.501 | 0.500 | 0.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 |
| Rightwing | 1510 | 0.305 | 0.460 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 1.000 |
| Exposed to Covid-19 | 1510 | 0.483 | 0.500 | 0.000 | 0.000 | 1.000 |
| High social-media user | 1510 | 0.825 | 0.380 | 0.000 | 1.000 | 1.000 |

## Table A1B – Variable Legend

| Variable | Description |
|---|---|
| *Outcome variables: A) Anti-immigration attitudes and behavior* | |
| Anti-immigration *attitudes* (pc) | Principal Component score, obtained by aggregating participants' answers to the following questionnaire items (measured through a 1-7 Likert scale where 1=Strongly Disagree and 7=Strongly Agree):<br>i) Immigrants take jobs away from the Italians [EVS]<br>ii) Immigrants represent a threat for the Italians in times of a pandemic [our formulation]<br>iii) The overall tax burden is too high [EVS]<br>iv) Immigrants are a strain on a country's welfare system [EVS]<br>v) Immigrants make crime problems worse [EVS]<br>vi) Better if immigrants maintain their distinct customs and traditions [EVS]<br>vii) Public health services should be reserved for Italians [our formulation] |
| Pro-redistribution *attitudes* (pc) | Principal Component score, obtained by aggregating participants' answers to the following questionnaire items (measured through a 1-7 Likert scale where 1=Strongly Disagree and 7=Strongly Agree):<br>i) The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels [ESS]<br>ii) Strengthen income support programmes for the most deprived persons [EES]<br>iii) Ensure adequate insurance against unemployment [EES]<br>iv) Cover adequate health care for those who cannot afford it [EES]<br>v) Public education in poorer areas and neighbourhoods [EES]<br>vi) Providing housing for those who cannot afford it [EES] |
| Donation *behavior* (std) | Amount of the experimental budget (10 Euros) donated to Emergency in the DG Charity game. |
| Redistribution *behavior* (std) | Redistribution rate measured in the DG Charity game. |
| *Outcome variable: B) Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis* | |
| To elicit participants' attitudes in terms of attribution of responsibility for the management of the pandemic crisis, we present them with a list of institutional and non-institutional actors and ask them to rate each actor by assigning a "responsibility score": participants are given a budget of 100 "responsibility scores", which they can freely allocate among actors, as long as the sum of allotted points sums up to 100. | |
| Institutional actors (std) | Total sum of responsibility "scores" accrued by the three institutional actors listed |
| • National government | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: National Government - *std* |
| • Local government | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: Local government - *std* |
| • International organizations | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: International organizations - *std* |
| Non-institutional actors (std) | Total sum of responsibility "scores" accrued by the three non-institutional actors listed |
| • Mass media | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: Mass media - *std* |
| • Scientists | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: Scientists - *std* |
| • Big Pharma | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: Big Pharma - *std* |
| • China | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: China - *std* |
| • Italians | Responsibility "score" given to the actor: Italians - *std* |

| *Outcome variables: C) Trust towards institutions* | |
|---|---|
| Institutional actors (pc) | Principal Component score, obtained by aggregating participants' answers to the questionnaire items, where we ask to rate how much they trust the following actors on a 0-10 scale (0: Absolute lack of trust and 10: Absolute Trust). |
| • National government | Trust rating for the actor: National Government - *std* |
| • Local government | Trust rating for the actor: Local Government - *std* |
| • International organizations | Trust rating for the actor: International organizations - *std* |
| Non-institutional actors (pc) | Principal Component score, obtained by aggregating participants' answers to the questionnaire items, where we ask to rate how much they trust the following actors on a 0-10 scale (0: Absolute lack of trust and 10: Absolute Trust). |
| • Mass media | Trust rating for the actor: Mass Media – *std* |
| • Scientists | Trust rating for the actor: Scientists - *std* |
| • Big Pharma | Trust rating for the actor: Big Pharma - *std* |
| • China | Trust rating for the actor: China - *std* |
| • Italians | Trust rating for the actor: Italians - *std* |

| *Outcome variables: D) Trust towards other people* | |
|---|---|
| Social trust (pc) | Principal Component score, obtained by aggregating participants' answers to the following questionnaire items.<br>- Generalized Trust [WVS] - *std*<br>"Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?" (0: Need to be careful; 10:Most people can be trusted)<br>- People fairness [WVS] - *std*<br>"Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair? (0: People would try to take advantage of you; 10: People would try to be fair)<br>- Uninterested help [WVS] - *std*<br>"Do you think that most people usually try to make themselves useful or do they mainly look after their own individual interest? (0: Look after their interest; 10: Try to make themselves useful) |
| Trust towards: Family | Trust score (0: Absolute lack of trust and 10: Absolute Trust) - *std* |
| Trust towards: Known People | Trust score (0: Absolute lack of trust and 10: Absolute Trust) - *std* |
| Trust towards: Strangers | Trust score (0: Absolute lack of trust and 10: Absolute Trust) - *std* |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Outcome variable: E) Voting intentions* | |
| *"If you were to vote again next week, would you confirm the choice of vote you made in the last national elections?"* | |
| Vote for the same party | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who answer "No" |
| No vote for the same party | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who answer "Yes" |
| Do not know whom to vote for | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who answer "I don't know" |
| No revote / Do not know | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who answer either "No" or "I don't know" |
| Vote for extreme-right parties | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who are willing to vote (either by revoting or by switching their vote in favor of) any of the following parties: Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, Casapound Italia. |
| Vote for populist parties | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who are willing to vote (either by revoting or by switching their vote in favor of) any of the following parties: Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, Casapound Italia, Potere al popolo, Movimento 5 Stelle. |
| *Socio-economic and demographic characteristics* | |
| Income | Categorical variable identifying income quartiles:<br>1st: Monthly (yearly) income up to 1.700 (20.500) €<br>2nd: Monthly (yearly) income above 1.700 (20.500) €, up to 2.400 (29.000) €<br>3rd: Monthly (yearly) income above 2.400 (29.000) €, up to 3.500 (42.500) €<br>4th: Monthly (yearly) income above 3.500 (42.500) € |
| Rightwing | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who position themselves in the right-side of the political orientation scale (values above 5 over a 0-10 scale where 0: Extreme Left; 10: Extreme right) |
| Voted for extreme right parties | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who report they voted for any of the following parties in the last national general elections (March 2018): Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, Casapound Italia. |
| Voted for populist parties | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who report they voted for any of the following parties in the last national general elections (March 2018): Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, Casapound Italia, Potere al popolo, Movimento 5 Stelle. |
| Exposed to Covid-19 | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who report to have been exposed to Covid-19 either directly or indirectly (through any of their family members). |
| High social-media user | Binary variable equal to 1 for those who report to spend on social networks an amount of time above the sample average; Social network use is measured through a categorical variable, where: 1 = "< 30 minutes"; 2 = "from 30 minutes to 1 hour"; 3 = "from 1 hour to 2 hours"; 4 = "above 2 hours" (sample average = 1.92). |

*Notes:* If questionnaire items are taken from well-known surveys, the item source is specified within squared brackets. Abbreviations: "pc" Principal Component; "std" Standardized; "EVS" European Values Surveys; "WVS": World Value Survey.

**Table A2a – Anti-immigration attitudes and behaviors (baseline)**

| | (1) Anti-immigration (attitudes) | (2) Pro-redistribution (attitudes) | (3) Donation (behavior) | (4) Redistribution (behavior) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.960** | -0.836 | -1.859*** | -1.809*** |
| | (0.896) | (0.957) | (0.512) | (0.523) |
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.216 | -0.149 | -0.096 | -0.068 |
| | (0.144) | (0.161) | (0.086) | (0.089) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.507*** | -0.159 | -0.036 | -0.070 |
| | (0.147) | (0.159) | (0.086) | (0.086) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.447*** | 0.113 | -0.005 | -0.129* |
| | (0.124) | (0.129) | (0.070) | (0.073) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.253 | 0.078 | 0.105 | 0.041 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

**Table A2b – Anti-immigration attitudes and behaviors (all treatments)**

| | (1) Anti-immigration (attitudes) | (2) Pro-redistribution (attitudes) | (3) Donation (behavior) | (4) Redistribution (behavior) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 2.019** | -0.815 | -1.895*** | -1.808*** |
| | (0.898) | (0.957) | (0.513) | (0.524) |
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.215 | -0.149 | -0.095 | -0.068 |
| | (0.144) | (0.162) | (0.086) | (0.090) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.506*** | -0.160 | -0.035 | -0.070 |
| | (0.147) | (0.159) | (0.086) | (0.086) |
| PAN, MAG + HT | 0.277* | 0.057 | 0.107 | -0.131 |
| | (0.155) | (0.164) | (0.088) | (0.092) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + MOB | 0.424*** | 0.089 | -0.028 | -0.128 |
| | (0.149) | (0.158) | (0.084) | (0.089) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + FC | 0.626*** | 0.188 | -0.086 | -0.128 |
| | (0.153) | (0.156) | (0.085) | (0.086) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.255 | 0.078 | 0.108 | 0.041 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A3a – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (baseline)

| | (1) Political Institutions (pc) | (2) Non-political Institutions (pc) | (3) National gov. | (4) Local gov. | (5) Int. organizations | (6) Mass media | (7) Scientists | (8) Big pharma | (9) China | (10) Italians |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -1.995*** | 1.414** | -0.796 | -1.020* | -0.338 | 0.811 | 0.648 | 0.101 | 0.239 | 0.497 |
| | (0.599) | (0.639) | (0.580) | (0.548) | (0.539) | (0.640) | (0.580) | (0.626) | (0.569) | (0.655) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.200** | 0.020 | -0.048 | -0.097 | -0.114 | -0.065 | 0.005 | -0.129 | 0.156 | 0.184** |
| | (0.098) | (0.103) | (0.093) | (0.101) | (0.097) | (0.105) | (0.085) | (0.107) | (0.097) | (0.090) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.089 | -0.031 | -0.025 | -0.085 | 0.051 | -0.009 | -0.040 | -0.168 | 0.053 | 0.078 |
| | (0.093) | (0.097) | (0.091) | (0.089) | (0.090) | (0.106) | (0.082) | (0.107) | (0.093) | (0.082) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.061 | -0.081 | -0.022 | -0.010 | -0.076 | -0.230*** | 0.047 | -0.198** | 0.099 | 0.252*** |
| | (0.079) | (0.082) | (0.077) | (0.077) | (0.077) | (0.079) | (0.068) | (0.092) | (0.079) | (0.074) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,227 | 1,182 | 1,419 | 1,305 | 1,335 | 1,324 | 1,318 | 1,298 | 1,361 | 1,309 |
| R-squared | 0.044 | 0.053 | 0.018 | 0.028 | 0.013 | 0.027 | 0.007 | 0.028 | 0.048 | 0.034 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A3b – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (all treatments)

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) Non-political Institutions (pc) | (3) National gov. | (4) Local gov. | (5) Int. organizations | (6) Mass media | (7) Scientists | (8) Big pharma | (9) China | (10) Italians |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -2.006*** | 1.415** | -0.799 | -1.042* | -0.335 | 0.816 | 0.632 | 0.098 | 0.226 | 0.460 |
| | (0.600) | (0.640) | (0.581) | (0.548) | (0.540) | (0.641) | (0.581) | (0.622) | (0.570) | (0.656) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.201** | 0.020 | -0.048 | -0.098 | -0.114 | -0.065 | 0.005 | -0.129 | 0.157 | 0.183** |
| | (0.098) | (0.103) | (0.093) | (0.102) | (0.097) | (0.105) | (0.085) | (0.107) | (0.097) | (0.090) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.090 | -0.030 | -0.025 | -0.085 | 0.051 | -0.009 | -0.040 | -0.168 | 0.053 | 0.078 |
| | (0.093) | (0.097) | (0.091) | (0.089) | (0.090) | (0.106) | (0.082) | (0.107) | (0.093) | (0.082) |
| PAN, MAG + HT | -0.023 | -0.112 | -0.020 | 0.073 | -0.104 | -0.250*** | 0.090 | -0.188* | 0.111 | 0.348*** |
| | (0.097) | (0.099) | (0.092) | (0.096) | (0.084) | (0.089) | (0.086) | (0.111) | (0.094) | (0.100) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + MOB | -0.145 | -0.018 | -0.090 | -0.030 | -0.041 | -0.224** | 0.047 | -0.212** | 0.153 | 0.174* |
| | (0.099) | (0.101) | (0.091) | (0.098) | (0.110) | (0.089) | (0.095) | (0.102) | (0.098) | (0.089) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + FC | -0.015 | -0.117 | 0.044 | -0.064 | -0.084 | -0.218** | 0.008 | -0.193* | 0.036 | 0.239** |
| | (0.098) | (0.100) | (0.096) | (0.090) | (0.087) | (0.095) | (0.092) | (0.103) | (0.092) | (0.095) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,227 | 1,182 | 1,419 | 1,305 | 1,335 | 1,324 | 1,318 | 1,298 | 1,361 | 1,309 |
| R-squared | 0.046 | 0.054 | 0.020 | 0.029 | 0.013 | 0.027 | 0.008 | 0.028 | 0.049 | 0.036 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A4a – Institutional and social trust (baseline)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) | (10) | (11) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Political institutions (pc) | Social trust (pc) | Non-political institutions (pc) | National gov. | Local gov. | Int. organizations | China | Italians | Mass media | Scientists | Big pharma |
| Constant | -2.203*** | -2.476*** | -2.958*** | -1.218** | -1.494*** | -1.102** | -0.864* | -2.475*** | -1.799*** | -1.156** | -0.421 |
| | (0.763) | (0.771) | (0.870) | (0.492) | (0.518) | (0.500) | (0.517) | (0.528) | (0.531) | (0.499) | (0.528) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.212 | 0.006 | -0.187 | -0.161* | -0.099 | -0.106 | -0.099 | -0.128 | -0.018 | -0.099 | -0.087 |
| | (0.130) | (0.134) | (0.150) | (0.087) | (0.084) | (0.086) | (0.090) | (0.089) | (0.091) | (0.089) | (0.088) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.160 | -0.060 | -0.203 | -0.093 | -0.062 | -0.121 | -0.096 | -0.084 | -0.118 | -0.096 | -0.062 |
| | (0.130) | (0.134) | (0.148) | (0.086) | (0.088) | (0.085) | (0.087) | (0.090) | (0.088) | (0.084) | (0.088) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.247** | -0.065 | -0.194 | -0.105 | -0.142** | -0.181*** | -0.114 | -0.048 | -0.092 | -0.105 | -0.080 |
| | (0.107) | (0.111) | (0.123) | (0.073) | (0.071) | (0.069) | (0.074) | (0.074) | (0.073) | (0.072) | (0.073) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.098 | 0.046 | 0.068 | 0.091 | 0.057 | 0.102 | 0.051 | 0.054 | 0.036 | 0.085 | 0.050 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A4b – Institutional and social trust (all treatments)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) | (9) | (10) | (11) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Political institutions (pc) | Social trust (pc) | Non-political institutions (pc) | National gov. | Local gov. | Int. organizations | China | Italians | Mass media | Scientists | Big pharma |
| Constant | -2.202*** | -2.501*** | -2.948*** | -1.214** | -1.494*** | -1.105** | -0.841 | -2.474*** | -1.804*** | -1.151** | -0.418 |
| | (0.763) | (0.770) | (0.869) | (0.492) | (0.518) | (0.499) | (0.518) | (0.527) | (0.529) | (0.499) | (0.527) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.212 | 0.006 | -0.188 | -0.161* | -0.100 | -0.106 | -0.099 | -0.128 | -0.019 | -0.099 | -0.087 |
| | (0.131) | (0.135) | (0.150) | (0.088) | (0.084) | (0.087) | (0.090) | (0.089) | (0.091) | (0.089) | (0.088) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.160 | -0.061 | -0.204 | -0.093 | -0.063 | -0.121 | -0.097 | -0.084 | -0.119 | -0.096 | -0.062 |
| | (0.130) | (0.134) | (0.148) | (0.086) | (0.088) | (0.085) | (0.087) | (0.090) | (0.088) | (0.084) | (0.088) |
| PAN, MAG + HT | -0.243* | 0.040 | -0.194 | -0.125 | -0.130 | -0.166* | -0.177** | -0.033 | -0.055 | -0.117 | -0.070 |
| | (0.129) | (0.134) | (0.149) | (0.086) | (0.087) | (0.085) | (0.089) | (0.089) | (0.089) | (0.087) | (0.089) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + MOB | -0.283** | -0.208 | -0.339** | -0.079 | -0.205** | -0.207** | -0.145 | -0.135 | -0.201** | -0.112 | -0.164* |
| | (0.131) | (0.135) | (0.146) | (0.090) | (0.087) | (0.084) | (0.090) | (0.086) | (0.088) | (0.089) | (0.090) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + FC | -0.216 | -0.022 | -0.051 | -0.113 | -0.091 | -0.170** | -0.026 | 0.024 | -0.018 | -0.087 | -0.005 |
| | (0.132) | (0.133) | (0.152) | (0.088) | (0.088) | (0.086) | (0.090) | (0.091) | (0.090) | (0.088) | (0.088) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.098 | 0.048 | 0.070 | 0.091 | 0.058 | 0.102 | 0.053 | 0.056 | 0.039 | 0.086 | 0.052 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A5a – Voting intentions

| | (1) Re-vote [for the same party] | (2) No re-vote | (3) Do not know whom to vote for | (4) Vote for extreme-right parties | (5) Vote for populist parties | (6) No re-vote |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.280* | -0.756 | -2.063*** | 0.965 | 1.041 | -0.288 |
| | (0.687) | (0.744) | (0.719) | (0.883) | (0.767) | (0.848) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.089 | -0.045 | 0.147 | -0.238 | -0.203 | -0.021 |
| | (0.115) | (0.126) | (0.123) | (0.150) | (0.131) | (0.147) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.104 | -0.079 | 0.190 | 0.102 | 0.078 | -0.020 |
| | (0.115) | (0.124) | (0.123) | (0.140) | (0.127) | (0.142) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.146 | 0.047 | 0.128 | -0.025 | -0.017 | 0.141 |
| | (0.095) | (0.102) | (0.103) | (0.120) | (0.106) | (0.117) |
| Attribution of resp. to political institutions | | | | | | -0.169 |
| | | | | | | (0.105) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.118 |
| | | | | | | (0.143) |
| PAN, MIG * Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.251* |
| | | | | | | (0.148) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) *Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.232** |
| | | | | | | (0.117) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,198 |

*Notes:* Robust standard errors in parentheses from Probit regression model; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, indicator for rightwing respondents (except col. 4 and 5), length of the interview, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A5b – Voting intentions (all treatments)

| | (1) Re-vote [for the same party] | (2) No re-vote | (3) Do not know whom to vote for | (4) Vote for extreme-right parties | (5) Vote for populist parties | (6) No re-vote |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.300* | -0.760 | -2.081*** | 0.946 | 1.025 | -0.285 |
| | (0.688) | (0.744) | (0.720) | (0.879) | (0.766) | (0.849) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.090 | -0.045 | 0.147 | -0.238 | -0.204 | -0.020 |
| | (0.115) | (0.126) | (0.123) | (0.150) | (0.131) | (0.147) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.104 | -0.079 | 0.190 | 0.102 | 0.078 | -0.020 |
| | (0.115) | (0.124) | (0.123) | (0.140) | (0.127) | (0.142) |
| PAN, MAG + HT | -0.192 | 0.036 | 0.191 | 0.052 | 0.025 | 0.130 |
| | (0.117) | (0.126) | (0.124) | (0.146) | (0.132) | (0.144) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + MOB | -0.159 | 0.087 | 0.105 | -0.143 | -0.121 | 0.177 |
| | (0.116) | (0.124) | (0.125) | (0.149) | (0.131) | (0.140) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + FC | -0.090 | 0.017 | 0.090 | 0.010 | 0.041 | 0.116 |
| | (0.115) | (0.123) | (0.125) | (0.144) | (0.128) | (0.140) |
| Attribution of resp. to political institutions | | | | | | -0.169 |
| | | | | | | (0.105) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.118 |
| | | | | | | (0.143) |
| PAN, MAG * Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.252* |
| | | | | | | (0.148) |
| PAN, MAG + HT * Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.251* |
| | | | | | | (0.143) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + MOB *Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.215 |
| | | | | | | (0.137) |
| PAN, MAG + HT + FC * Attribution of resp. | | | | | | 0.236* |
| | | | | | | (0.138) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,198 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses from Probit regression model; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, indicator for rightwing respondents (except col. 4 and 5), length of the interview, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

**Table A6a – Anti-immigration attitudes and behaviors (by political leaning)**

| | (1) Anti-immigration (attitudes) | (2) Pro-redistribution (attitudes) | (3) Donation (behavior) | (4) Redistribution (behavior) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 2.053** | -0.742 | -1.900*** | -1.826*** |
| | (0.900) | (0.958) | (0.514) | (0.527) |
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.116 | -0.246 | -0.061 | -0.045 |
| | (0.171) | (0.181) | (0.101) | (0.106) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.403** | -0.259 | 0.015 | -0.081 |
| | (0.178) | (0.192) | (0.105) | (0.106) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.347** | 0.005 | 0.049 | -0.096 |
| | (0.150) | (0.151) | (0.086) | (0.089) |
| Rightwing | 1.433*** | -1.070*** | -0.413*** | -0.232* |
| | (0.226) | (0.241) | (0.131) | (0.133) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Rightwing | 0.322 | 0.309 | -0.099 | -0.073 |
| | (0.316) | (0.390) | (0.192) | (0.200) |
| PAN, MAG * Rightwing | 0.316 | 0.304 | -0.154 | 0.026 |
| | (0.312) | (0.341) | (0.181) | (0.181) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Rightwing | 0.309 | 0.336 | -0.168 | -0.105 |
| | (0.264) | (0.286) | (0.150) | (0.153) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.253 | 0.078 | 0.105 | 0.042 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A6b – Anti-immigration attitudes and behaviors (by social media use)

| | (1) Anti-immigration (attitudes) | (2) Pro-redistribution (attitudes) | (3) Donation (behavior) | (4) Redistribution (behavior) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 2.035** | -1.039 | -2.070*** | -1.808*** |
| | (0.918) | (0.976) | (0.519) | (0.536) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.333 | 0.509 | 0.375* | -0.084 |
| | (0.341) | (0.397) | (0.216) | (0.232) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.273 | -0.021 | 0.466** | -0.270 |
| | (0.353) | (0.364) | (0.189) | (0.207) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.381 | 0.359 | 0.263* | -0.107 |
| | (0.295) | (0.315) | (0.157) | (0.179) |
| Active SM User | -0.130 | 0.291 | 0.331** | -0.026 |
| | (0.275) | (0.299) | (0.151) | (0.174) |
| PAN, NO MIG *Active SM User | 0.653* | -0.789* | -0.570** | 0.021 |
| | (0.377) | (0.435) | (0.235) | (0.252) |
| PAN, MAG *Active SM User | 0.288 | -0.169 | -0.617*** | 0.247 |
| | (0.387) | (0.404) | (0.212) | (0.228) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Active SM User | 0.081 | -0.302 | -0.330* | -0.026 |
| | (0.325) | (0.344) | (0.175) | (0.195) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.255 | 0.080 | 0.111 | 0.043 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A6c – Anti-immigration attitudes and behaviors (by exposure to COVID-19)

| VARIABLES | (1) Anti-immigration (attitudes) | (2) Pro-redistribution (attitudes) | (3) Donation (behavior) | (4) Redistribution (behavior) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 2.031** | -0.790 | -1.918*** | -1.816*** |
| | (0.912) | (0.962) | (0.516) | (0.528) |
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.272 | -0.253 | -0.118 | -0.090 |
| | (0.202) | (0.224) | (0.124) | (0.123) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.618*** | -0.147 | -0.075 | 0.010 |
| | (0.206) | (0.207) | (0.115) | (0.118) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.508*** | 0.093 | -0.067 | -0.156 |
| | (0.175) | (0.173) | (0.096) | (0.096) |
| Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.115 | 0.002 | 0.087 | 0.053 |
| | (0.213) | (0.223) | (0.123) | (0.128) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.093 | 0.205 | 0.030 | 0.037 |
| | (0.289) | (0.326) | (0.173) | (0.181) |
| PAN, MAG * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.227 | -0.025 | 0.077 | -0.173 |
| | (0.292) | (0.320) | (0.171) | (0.173) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.112 | 0.042 | 0.116 | 0.050 |
| | (0.247) | (0.259) | (0.141) | (0.147) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.256 | 0.078 | 0.112 | 0.044 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

**Table A7a – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (by political leaning)**

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) Non-political Institutions (pc) | (3) National gov. | (4) Local gov. | (5) Int. organizations | (6) Mass media | (7) Scientists | (8) Big pharma | (9) China | (10) Italians |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -2.066*** | 1.584** | -0.863 | -1.075** | -0.376 | 0.804 | 0.645 | 0.112 | 0.352 | 0.315 |
| | (0.599) | (0.637) | (0.579) | (0.546) | (0.552) | (0.644) | (0.582) | (0.637) | (0.570) | (0.654) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.0920 | -0.146 | 0.0421 | -0.0273 | -0.0641 | -0.0206 | 0.00597 | -0.142 | 0.0537 | 0.347*** |
| | (0.117) | (0.121) | (0.106) | (0.126) | (0.118) | (0.129) | (0.0976) | (0.128) | (0.113) | (0.103) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.0481 | -0.166 | 0.0137 | -0.0439 | 0.108 | -0.0580 | -0.0662 | -0.0625 | -0.0417 | 0.268*** |
| | (0.109) | (0.116) | (0.103) | (0.114) | (0.112) | (0.121) | (0.0976) | (0.132) | (0.112) | (0.0947) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.0309 | -0.190** | 0.0220 | 0.0305 | -0.0713 | -0.243** | 0.0705 | -0.218** | 0.00767 | 0.393*** |
| | (0.0927) | (0.0959) | (0.0881) | (0.0951) | (0.0908) | (0.0951) | (0.0844) | (0.108) | (0.0953) | (0.0801) |
| Rightwing | 0.0774 | -0.148 | 0.270* | -0.128 | 0.100 | -0.0209 | -0.0540 | 0.0706 | -0.0545 | 0.169 |
| | (0.151) | (0.156) | (0.153) | (0.138) | (0.137) | (0.155) | (0.106) | (0.190) | (0.144) | (0.147) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Rightwing | -0.398* | 0.568** | -0.322 | -0.249 | -0.186 | -0.183 | 0.00444 | 0.0572 | 0.351 | -0.543*** |
| | (0.208) | (0.223) | (0.221) | (0.193) | (0.207) | (0.213) | (0.200) | (0.236) | (0.220) | (0.195) |
| PAN, MAG * Rightwing | -0.128 | 0.416** | -0.127 | -0.128 | -0.162 | 0.141 | 0.0702 | -0.291 | 0.302 | -0.585*** |
| | (0.205) | (0.208) | (0.207) | (0.180) | (0.186) | (0.231) | (0.173) | (0.230) | (0.198) | (0.181) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Rightwing | -0.0900 | 0.346* | -0.142 | -0.124 | -0.00592 | 0.0417 | -0.0812 | 0.0696 | 0.299* | -0.456*** |
| | (0.178) | (0.180) | (0.176) | (0.162) | (0.169) | (0.170) | (0.138) | (0.209) | (0.168) | (0.167) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,227 | 1,182 | 1,419 | 1,305 | 1,335 | 1,324 | 1,318 | 1,298 | 1,361 | 1,309 |
| R-squared | 0.047 | 0.059 | 0.020 | 0.029 | 0.014 | 0.029 | 0.008 | 0.032 | 0.050 | 0.041 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, an indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A7b – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (by social media use)

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) Non-political Institutions (pc) | (3) National gov. | (4) Local gov. | (5) Int. organizations | (6) Mass media | (7) Scientists | (8) Big pharma | (9) China | (10) Italians |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -1.925*** | 1.266** | -0.814 | -0.834 | -0.536 | 0.931 | 0.722 | 0.307 | 0.0228 | 0.566 |
| | (0.602) | (0.644) | (0.583) | (0.564) | (0.525) | (0.654) | (0.581) | (0.659) | (0.571) | (0.653) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.130 | 0.00904 | -0.0957 | -0.282 | 0.319 | -0.279 | 0.108 | -0.544* | 0.146 | 0.218 |
| | (0.195) | (0.218) | (0.196) | (0.221) | (0.204) | (0.239) | (0.189) | (0.297) | (0.164) | (0.211) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.000841 | 0.147 | 0.0829 | -0.104 | 0.348** | -0.427** | -0.110 | -0.682** | 0.566*** | -0.135 |
| | (0.204) | (0.215) | (0.170) | (0.256) | (0.156) | (0.210) | (0.198) | (0.310) | (0.203) | (0.150) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.201 | 0.0915 | -0.119 | -0.305 | 0.295** | -0.318 | -0.0115 | -0.360 | 0.292** | 0.295* |
| | (0.165) | (0.178) | (0.144) | (0.205) | (0.140) | (0.202) | (0.149) | (0.285) | (0.147) | (0.167) |
| Active SM User | -0.0853 | 0.204 | 0.0838 | -0.259 | 0.256** | -0.220 | -0.100 | -0.367 | 0.378*** | -0.135 |
| | (0.152) | (0.171) | (0.145) | (0.202) | (0.114) | (0.195) | (0.132) | (0.281) | (0.142) | (0.138) |
| PAN, NO MIG *Active SM User | -0.0827 | 0.00627 | 0.0551 | 0.227 | -0.525** | 0.267 | -0.120 | 0.504 | 0.00142 | -0.0366 |
| | (0.224) | (0.246) | (0.223) | (0.247) | (0.231) | (0.267) | (0.212) | (0.318) | (0.199) | (0.234) |
| PAN, MAG *Active SM User | -0.107 | -0.220 | -0.133 | 0.0234 | -0.364* | 0.517** | 0.0879 | 0.630* | -0.632*** | 0.262 |
| | (0.228) | (0.241) | (0.199) | (0.272) | (0.188) | (0.242) | (0.217) | (0.330) | (0.227) | (0.177) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Active SM User | 0.171 | -0.213 | 0.117 | 0.362* | -0.453*** | 0.114 | 0.0730 | 0.204 | -0.240 | -0.0499 |
| | (0.187) | (0.201) | (0.168) | (0.220) | (0.166) | (0.218) | (0.166) | (0.300) | (0.173) | (0.186) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,227 | 1,182 | 1,419 | 1,305 | 1,335 | 1,324 | 1,318 | 1,298 | 1,361 | 1,309 |
| R-squared | 0.047 | 0.055 | 0.022 | 0.031 | 0.019 | 0.031 | 0.009 | 0.035 | 0.057 | 0.038 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, an indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A7c – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (by exposure to COVID-19)

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) Non-political Institutions (pc) | (3) National gov. | (4) Local gov. | (5) Int. organizations | (6) Mass media | (7) Scientists | (8) Big pharma | (9) China | (10) Italians |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -1.915*** | 1.343** | -0.788 | -0.964* | -0.341 | 0.815 | 0.633 | 0.143 | 0.147 | 0.568 |
| | (0.603) | (0.646) | (0.587) | (0.544) | (0.554) | (0.660) | (0.588) | (0.641) | (0.573) | (0.663) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.248* | 0.106 | -0.00102 | -0.123 | -0.0586 | -0.0393 | 0.0889 | -0.143 | 0.247* | 0.163 |
| | (0.136) | (0.143) | (0.132) | (0.157) | (0.160) | (0.165) | (0.130) | (0.165) | (0.129) | (0.135) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.0516 | -0.0869 | 0.134 | -0.136 | -0.0308 | -0.124 | 0.0515 | -0.0124 | 0.0316 | -0.0103 |
| | (0.130) | (0.130) | (0.125) | (0.122) | (0.128) | (0.134) | (0.119) | (0.166) | (0.123) | (0.111) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.152 | -0.00519 | -0.0354 | -0.0845 | -0.146 | -0.203* | 0.0452 | -0.186 | 0.169 | 0.223* |
| | (0.107) | (0.110) | (0.102) | (0.106) | (0.111) | (0.115) | (0.0925) | (0.142) | (0.104) | (0.114) |
| Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.0924 | 0.0431 | 0.0397 | -0.120 | -0.122 | -0.0752 | -0.0286 | 0.00466 | 0.106 | -0.161 |
| | (0.137) | (0.146) | (0.136) | (0.134) | (0.131) | (0.142) | (0.105) | (0.167) | (0.144) | (0.121) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Exposed to COVID-19 | 0.106 | -0.165 | -0.0943 | 0.0680 | -0.0821 | -0.0375 | -0.151 | 0.0257 | -0.190 | 0.0680 |
| | (0.197) | (0.208) | (0.188) | (0.208) | (0.197) | (0.218) | (0.171) | (0.212) | (0.198) | (0.180) |
| PAN, MAG * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.0701 | 0.111 | -0.336* | 0.115 | 0.178 | 0.239 | -0.196 | -0.314 | 0.0376 | 0.197 |
| | (0.184) | (0.194) | (0.184) | (0.179) | (0.177) | (0.210) | (0.160) | (0.210) | (0.188) | (0.159) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Exposed to COVID-19 | 0.191 | -0.156 | 0.0222 | 0.163 | 0.153 | -0.0490 | 0.00702 | -0.0232 | -0.153 | 0.0772 |
| | (0.159) | (0.166) | (0.153) | (0.155) | (0.154) | (0.156) | (0.133) | (0.181) | (0.162) | (0.147) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,227 | 1,182 | 1,419 | 1,305 | 1,335 | 1,324 | 1,318 | 1,298 | 1,361 | 1,309 |
| R-squared | 0.047 | 0.056 | 0.023 | 0.028 | 0.015 | 0.030 | 0.011 | 0.032 | 0.049 | 0.036 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A8a – Institutional and social trust (by political leaning)

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) Social trust (pc) | (3) Non-political institutions (pc) | (4) National gov. | (5) Local gov. | (6) Int. organizations | (7) China | (8) Italians | (9) Mass media | (10) Scientists | (11) Big pharma |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -2.193*** | -2.413*** | -2.963*** | -1.247** | -1.473*** | -1.077** | -0.846 | -2.483*** | -1.792*** | -1.140** | -0.459 |
| | (0.769) | (0.777) | (0.874) | (0.495) | (0.520) | (0.502) | (0.520) | (0.531) | (0.532) | (0.503) | (0.531) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.269* | -0.110 | -0.271 | -0.145 | -0.140 | -0.181* | -0.185* | -0.154 | -0.075 | -0.145 | -0.071 |
| | (0.154) | (0.159) | (0.173) | (0.103) | (0.099) | (0.100) | (0.104) | (0.104) | (0.106) | (0.102) | (0.102) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.138 | -0.055 | -0.066 | -0.064 | -0.071 | -0.104 | -0.039 | -0.014 | -0.056 | -0.062 | 0.020 |
| | (0.157) | (0.166) | (0.176) | (0.105) | (0.105) | (0.101) | (0.110) | (0.110) | (0.109) | (0.097) | (0.106) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.217* | -0.118 | -0.159 | -0.054 | -0.150* | -0.174** | -0.098 | -0.034 | -0.080 | -0.117 | -0.032 |
| | (0.128) | (0.136) | (0.145) | (0.089) | (0.083) | (0.083) | (0.092) | (0.086) | (0.088) | (0.085) | (0.087) |
| Rightwing | -0.580*** | -0.407** | -0.471** | -0.305** | -0.205 | -0.497*** | -0.342** | -0.026 | -0.184 | -0.398*** | -0.125 |
| | (0.203) | (0.205) | (0.238) | (0.135) | (0.137) | (0.132) | (0.134) | (0.143) | (0.139) | (0.137) | (0.140) |
| PAN, NO MIG* Rightwing | 0.238 | 0.425 | 0.362 | -0.032 | 0.153 | 0.296 | 0.352* | 0.120 | 0.237 | 0.175 | -0.027 |
| | (0.290) | (0.303) | (0.344) | (0.196) | (0.187) | (0.199) | (0.205) | (0.202) | (0.206) | (0.206) | (0.202) |
| PAN, MAG * Rightwing | -0.062 | -0.002 | -0.386 | -0.091 | 0.029 | -0.046 | -0.160 | -0.197 | -0.174 | -0.091 | -0.240 |
| | (0.279) | (0.279) | (0.319) | (0.182) | (0.189) | (0.183) | (0.177) | (0.191) | (0.186) | (0.183) | (0.188) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Rightwing | -0.096 | 0.162 | -0.112 | -0.160 | 0.022 | -0.027 | -0.055 | -0.042 | -0.037 | 0.037 | -0.147 |
| | (0.233) | (0.237) | (0.271) | (0.155) | (0.157) | (0.151) | (0.152) | (0.164) | (0.158) | (0.159) | (0.160) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.099 | 0.047 | 0.071 | 0.091 | 0.058 | 0.105 | 0.056 | 0.056 | 0.039 | 0.087 | 0.052 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, an indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A8b – Institutional and social trust (by social media use)

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) Social trust (pc) | (3) Non-political Institutions (pc) | (4) National gov. | (5) Local gov. | (6) Int. organizations | (7) China | (8) Italians | (9) Mass media | (10) Scientists | (11) Big pharma |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -2.259*** | -2.927*** | -3.030*** | -1.334*** | -1.476*** | -1.100** | -1.042** | -2.531*** | -1.825*** | -1.140** | -0.376 |
| | (0.776) | (0.791) | (0.892) | (0.504) | (0.526) | (0.512) | (0.522) | (0.536) | (0.547) | (0.511) | (0.543) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.132 | 0.868** | 0.117 | -0.055 | -0.224 | 0.052 | -0.074 | -0.028 | 0.227 | 0.113 | -0.011 |
| | (0.319) | (0.367) | (0.359) | (0.214) | (0.218) | (0.221) | (0.198) | (0.234) | (0.241) | (0.225) | (0.236) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.164 | 0.681** | -0.181 | -0.012 | -0.175 | -0.098 | 0.035 | -0.149 | -0.196 | 0.026 | -0.100 |
| | (0.278) | (0.315) | (0.330) | (0.183) | (0.203) | (0.189) | (0.179) | (0.202) | (0.211) | (0.194) | (0.212) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.092 | 0.582** | -0.052 | 0.149 | -0.090 | -0.224 | 0.108 | 0.084 | 0.026 | -0.166 | -0.128 |
| | (0.244) | (0.272) | (0.292) | (0.169) | (0.166) | (0.168) | (0.153) | (0.170) | (0.188) | (0.177) | (0.187) |
| Active SM User | 0.049 | 0.656** | 0.082 | 0.130 | -0.058 | 0.011 | 0.258* | 0.050 | -0.000 | 0.000 | -0.068 |
| | (0.232) | (0.263) | (0.278) | (0.161) | (0.157) | (0.159) | (0.145) | (0.165) | (0.179) | (0.168) | (0.178) |
| PAN, NO MIG *Active SM User | -0.097 | -1.044*** | -0.363 | -0.131 | 0.149 | -0.187 | -0.039 | -0.120 | -0.290 | -0.251 | -0.086 |
| | (0.350) | (0.394) | (0.396) | (0.234) | (0.236) | (0.240) | (0.222) | (0.254) | (0.260) | (0.245) | (0.255) |
| PAN, MAG*Active SM User | 0.007 | -0.911*** | -0.025 | -0.100 | 0.139 | -0.028 | -0.162 | 0.081 | 0.097 | -0.150 | 0.047 |
| | (0.315) | (0.348) | (0.369) | (0.207) | (0.226) | (0.212) | (0.205) | (0.225) | (0.232) | (0.214) | (0.232) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Active SM User | -0.188 | -0.794*** | -0.173 | -0.310* | -0.062 | 0.051 | -0.272 | -0.161 | -0.143 | 0.073 | 0.060 |
| | (0.272) | (0.297) | (0.322) | (0.187) | (0.184) | (0.184) | (0.174) | (0.188) | (0.203) | (0.193) | (0.203) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.099 | 0.053 | 0.068 | 0.093 | 0.059 | 0.103 | 0.054 | 0.055 | 0.040 | 0.088 | 0.051 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, an indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A8c – Institutional and social trust (by COVID-19 exposure)

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (5) Social trust (pc) | (1) Non-political institutions (pc) | (2) National gov. | (3) Local gov. | (4) Int. organizations | (2) China | (3) Italians | (4) Mass media | (5) Scientists | (6) Big pharma |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | -2.296*** | -2.546*** | -2.986*** | -1.282*** | -1.530*** | -1.164** | -0.847 | -2.421*** | -1.887*** | -1.151** | -0.456 |
| | (0.772) | (0.787) | (0.878) | (0.496) | (0.526) | (0.505) | (0.523) | (0.533) | (0.535) | (0.505) | (0.533) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.125 | -0.002 | -0.097 | -0.070 | -0.080 | -0.067 | -0.117 | -0.161 | 0.171 | -0.117 | -0.029 |
| | (0.187) | (0.190) | (0.213) | (0.124) | (0.118) | (0.122) | (0.121) | (0.122) | (0.125) | (0.124) | (0.122) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.194 | -0.081 | -0.165 | -0.073 | -0.145 | -0.118 | -0.111 | -0.165 | -0.000 | -0.094 | -0.024 |
| | (0.181) | (0.183) | (0.204) | (0.120) | (0.120) | (0.117) | (0.118) | (0.123) | (0.121) | (0.114) | (0.119) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.165 | -0.082 | -0.133 | -0.031 | -0.158 | -0.097 | -0.189* | -0.142 | -0.015 | -0.034 | 0.039 |
| | (0.149) | (0.153) | (0.168) | (0.102) | (0.097) | (0.096) | (0.100) | (0.099) | (0.101) | (0.096) | (0.099) |
| Exposed to COVID-19 | 0.137 | 0.129 | 0.020 | 0.090 | 0.010 | 0.137 | -0.067 | -0.166 | 0.088 | 0.050 | 0.098 |
| | (0.186) | (0.195) | (0.215) | (0.128) | (0.123) | (0.120) | (0.129) | (0.131) | (0.128) | (0.126) | (0.129) |
| PAN, NO MIG* Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.193 | -0.004 | -0.181 | -0.194 | -0.041 | -0.098 | 0.046 | 0.089 | -0.384** | 0.028 | -0.129 |
| | (0.263) | (0.270) | (0.302) | (0.176) | (0.171) | (0.173) | (0.179) | (0.180) | (0.182) | (0.179) | (0.179) |
| PAN, MAG * Exposed to COVID-19 | 0.064 | 0.036 | -0.081 | -0.049 | 0.174 | -0.014 | 0.035 | 0.183 | -0.259 | -0.007 | -0.086 |
| | (0.259) | (0.266) | (0.295) | (0.171) | (0.175) | (0.169) | (0.175) | (0.180) | (0.176) | (0.167) | (0.176) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.182 | 0.020 | -0.127 | -0.160 | 0.030 | -0.186 | 0.160 | 0.208 | -0.166 | -0.150 | -0.251* |
| | (0.214) | (0.221) | (0.246) | (0.145) | (0.143) | (0.139) | (0.147) | (0.148) | (0.146) | (0.144) | (0.148) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.099 | 0.048 | 0.069 | 0.092 | 0.059 | 0.103 | 0.052 | 0.055 | 0.042 | 0.087 | 0.054 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, an indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

**Table A9 – Interpersonal trust (first extracted component and all items) by social media use**

| | (1) Interpersonal trust (pc) | (2) Generalized trust (GTQ) | (3) Others take advantage | (4) Uninterested help |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.868** | 0.282 | 0.600*** | 0.624*** |
| | (0.367) | (0.254) | (0.230) | (0.236) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.681** | 0.190 | 0.443** | 0.553*** |
| | (0.315) | (0.221) | (0.200) | (0.201) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.582** | 0.158 | 0.473*** | 0.375** |
| | (0.272) | (0.191) | (0.175) | (0.166) |
| Active SM User | 0.656** | 0.229 | 0.516*** | 0.390** |
| | (0.263) | (0.187) | (0.168) | (0.153) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Active SM User | -1.044*** | -0.438 | -0.683*** | -0.691*** |
| | (0.394) | (0.273) | (0.250) | (0.254) |
| PAN, MAG * Active SM User | -0.911*** | -0.367 | -0.554** | -0.663*** |
| | (0.348) | (0.243) | (0.222) | (0.223) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Active SM User | -0.794*** | -0.321 | -0.594*** | -0.457** |
| | (0.297) | (0.207) | (0.193) | (0.183) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 | 1,510 |
| R-squared | 0.053 | 0.061 | 0.056 | 0.023 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

**Table A10a – Panel 1 - Voting intentions (by political leaning)**

| | (1) Re-vote [for the same party] | (2) No re-vote | (3) Do not know whom to vote for | (4) Vote for extreme-right parties | (5) Vote for populist parties |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.264* | -0.721 | -2.076*** | -0.274 | 0.421 |
| | (0.690) | (0.748) | (0.723) | (1.020) | (0.785) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.100 | -0.112 | 0.203 | -0.238 | -0.121 |
| | (0.136) | (0.155) | (0.142) | (0.258) | (0.168) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.079 | -0.189 | 0.234 | -0.173 | 0.095 |
| | (0.141) | (0.163) | (0.147) | (0.277) | (0.168) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.100 | 0.061 | 0.063 | -0.086 | 0.020 |
| | (0.114) | (0.127) | (0.121) | (0.211) | (0.137) |
| Rightwing | -0.098 | 0.407** | -0.325 | 1.563*** | 0.892*** |
| | (0.177) | (0.184) | (0.204) | (0.240) | (0.197) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Rightwing | 0.067 | 0.214 | -0.290 | 0.045 | -0.123 |
| | (0.258) | (0.270) | (0.302) | (0.346) | (0.285) |
| PAN, MAG * Rightwing | -0.074 | 0.263 | -0.137 | 0.232 | -0.154 |
| | (0.243) | (0.256) | (0.274) | (0.345) | (0.270) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Rightwing | -0.148 | -0.049 | 0.232 | 0.145 | -0.044 |
| | (0.206) | (0.213) | (0.231) | (0.277) | (0.229) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,273 | 1,273 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses from Probit regression model; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A10a – Panel 2 - Voting intentions (by support for extreme right parties)

| | (1) Re-vote [for the same party] | (2) No re-vote | (3) Do not know whom to vote for | (4) Vote for extreme-right parties | (5) Vote for populist parties |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.254* | 0.034 | -2.995*** | -0.693 | 0.200 |
| | (0.739) | (0.801) | (0.795) | (1.124) | (0.806) |
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.125 | -0.221 | 0.040 | -0.727** | -0.208 |
| | (0.138) | (0.152) | (0.147) | (0.318) | (0.159) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.096 | -0.214 | 0.262* | 0.089 | 0.056 |
| | (0.138) | (0.150) | (0.144) | (0.224) | (0.153) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.001 | -0.123 | 0.132 | -0.051 | -0.002 |
| | (0.113) | (0.121) | (0.121) | (0.194) | (0.127) |
| Voted for extreme-right parties | 0.478** | -0.080 | -0.915** | 2.697*** | 1.778*** |
| | (0.241) | (0.242) | (0.374) | (0.313) | (0.290) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Voted for extreme-right parties | -0.842** | 0.825** | 0.455 | 0.148 | -0.381 |
| | (0.330) | (0.334) | (0.465) | (0.466) | (0.374) |
| PAN, MAG * Voted for extreme-right parties | -0.168 | 0.395 | 0.217 | -0.408 | -0.327 |
| | (0.313) | (0.322) | (0.451) | (0.402) | (0.370) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Voted for extreme-right parties | -0.703*** | 0.623** | 0.530 | -0.585* | -0.548* |
| | (0.269) | (0.271) | (0.398) | (0.346) | (0.316) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses from Probit regression model; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, indicator for rightwing respondents (except col. 4 and 5), length of the interview, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A10b – Voting intentions (by social media use)

| | (1) Re-vote [for the same party] | (2) No re-vote | (3) Do not know whom to vote for | (4) Vote for extreme-right parties | (5) Vote for populist parties |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.089 | -0.653 | -1.985*** | 0.735 | 0.761 |
| | (0.702) | (0.757) | (0.734) | (0.913) | (0.789) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.073 | 0.100 | -0.008 | 0.125 | -0.033 |
| | (0.291) | (0.287) | (0.305) | (0.372) | (0.332) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.302 | -0.384 | 0.027 | 0.352 | 0.569* |
| | (0.268) | (0.282) | (0.288) | (0.333) | (0.294) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.093 | 0.046 | -0.145 | 0.346 | 0.464* |
| | (0.224) | (0.226) | (0.238) | (0.289) | (0.254) |
| Active SM User | 0.300 | -0.260 | -0.069 | 0.283 | 0.367 |
| | (0.213) | (0.218) | (0.226) | (0.277) | (0.243) |
| PAN, NO MIG *Active SM User | -0.031 | -0.169 | 0.186 | -0.436 | -0.213 |
| | (0.317) | (0.320) | (0.335) | (0.406) | (0.362) |
| PAN, MAG *Active SM User | -0.496* | 0.376 | 0.199 | -0.302 | -0.603* |
| | (0.297) | (0.314) | (0.319) | (0.367) | (0.326) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Active SM User | -0.291 | 0.003 | 0.329 | -0.449 | -0.584** |
| | (0.247) | (0.253) | (0.264) | (0.316) | (0.279) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,273 | 1,273 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses from Probit regression model; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, indicator for rightwing respondents (except col. 4 and 5), length of the interview, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A10c – Voting intentions (by exposure to COVID-19)

| | (1) Re-vote [for the same party] | (2) No re-vote | (3) Do not know whom to vote for | (4) Vote for extreme-right parties | (5) Vote for populist parties |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Constant | 1.261* | -0.822 | -2.001*** | 1.116 | 1.146 |
| | (0.697) | (0.756) | (0.724) | (0.893) | (0.780) |
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.103 | -0.150 | 0.001 | -0.328 | -0.220 |
| | (0.159) | (0.179) | (0.172) | (0.205) | (0.180) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.042 | -0.134 | 0.067 | 0.039 | -0.046 |
| | (0.156) | (0.171) | (0.170) | (0.184) | (0.170) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.074 | -0.047 | 0.133 | -0.074 | -0.168 |
| | (0.128) | (0.139) | (0.140) | (0.156) | (0.141) |
| Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.047 | 0.090 | -0.033 | -0.261 | -0.362* |
| | (0.166) | (0.179) | (0.181) | (0.214) | (0.189) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.377 | 0.177 | 0.284 | 0.236 | 0.094 |
| | (0.233) | (0.254) | (0.249) | (0.306) | (0.269) |
| PAN, MAG * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.313 | 0.099 | 0.259 | 0.171 | 0.302 |
| | (0.231) | (0.249) | (0.246) | (0.285) | (0.257) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Exposed to COVID-19 | -0.141 | 0.173 | -0.006 | 0.144 | 0.359* |
| | (0.191) | (0.205) | (0.206) | (0.245) | (0.216) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,480 | 1,273 | 1,273 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses from Probit regression model; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, indicator for rightwing respondents (except col. 4 and 5), length of the interview, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

## Table A11 – Donation and expected donation

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.135* | -0.136* | -0.121 | -0.122 |
| | (0.080) | (0.080) | (0.085) | (0.085) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.072 | -0.072 | -0.093 | -0.093 |
| | (0.081) | (0.082) | (0.082) | (0.082) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.004 | -0.006 | -0.029 | -0.030 |
| | (0.068) | (0.067) | (0.070) | (0.070) |
| Expected donation | 0.467*** | 0.416*** | | |
| | (0.025) | (0.068) | | |
| PAN, NO MIG * Expected donation | | 0.089 | | |
| | | (0.085) | | |
| PAN, MAG * Expected donation | | 0.084 | | |
| | | (0.097) | | |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Expected donation | | 0.048 | | |
| | | (0.075) | | |
| Deviation from norm (expected – own donation) | | | -0.435*** | -0.382*** |
| | | | (0.023) | (0.054) |
| PAN, NO MIG * Deviation from norm | | | | -0.040 |
| | | | | (0.080) |
| PAN, MAG * Deviation from norm | | | | -0.105 |
| | | | | (0.074) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) * Deviation from norm | | | | -0.056 |
| | | | | (0.063) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,228 | 1,228 | 1,228 | 1,228 |
| R-squared | 0.329 | 0.330 | 0.288 | 0.289 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

**Table A12 – Attribution of responsibility for the pandemic crisis (by support for ruling parties during the pandemic)**

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) Non-political Institutions (pc) | (3) National gov. | (4) Local gov. | (5) Int. organizations | (6) Mass media | (7) Scientists | (8) Big pharma | (9) China | (10) Italians |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.281 | 0.292 | -0.166 | -0.090 | -0.018 | -0.124 | 0.079 | -0.015 | 0.592*** | -0.151 |
| | (0.185) | (0.204) | (0.175) | (0.178) | (0.169) | (0.161) | (0.164) | (0.179) | (0.176) | (0.170) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.194 | 0.172 | -0.154 | -0.085 | 0.045 | 0.049 | -0.011 | -0.102 | 0.408*** | -0.077 |
| | (0.160) | (0.164) | (0.170) | (0.134) | (0.146) | (0.180) | (0.123) | (0.167) | (0.154) | (0.164) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.095 | 0.083 | -0.137 | -0.033 | 0.059 | -0.222* | 0.022 | -0.041 | 0.489*** | 0.059 |
| | (0.146) | (0.153) | (0.142) | (0.130) | (0.132) | (0.126) | (0.105) | (0.153) | (0.135) | (0.160) |
| Voted for ruling parties | -0.039 | 0.138 | -0.230 | 0.139 | 0.125 | 0.026 | 0.193* | 0.087 | 0.339** | -0.130 |
| (on duty during the 1st pandemic wave) | (0.155) | (0.166) | (0.156) | (0.148) | (0.146) | (0.155) | (0.109) | (0.182) | (0.152) | (0.155) |
| PAN, NO MIG | 0.078 | -0.439* | 0.146 | 0.031 | -0.180 | -0.021 | -0.060 | -0.169 | -0.650*** | 0.559*** |
| * Voted for ruling parties | (0.230) | (0.248) | (0.216) | (0.235) | (0.223) | (0.221) | (0.202) | (0.233) | (0.223) | (0.209) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.078 | -0.274 | 0.107 | 0.011 | -0.116 | -0.129 | -0.043 | -0.175 | -0.488** | 0.257 |
| * Voted for ruling parties | (0.203) | (0.216) | (0.208) | (0.195) | (0.192) | (0.230) | (0.171) | (0.224) | (0.202) | (0.197) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.032 | -0.303 | 0.131 | 0.057 | -0.290* | -0.055 | 0.001 | -0.250 | -0.591*** | 0.312* |
| * Voted for ruling parties | (0.182) | (0.191) | (0.178) | (0.173) | (0.171) | (0.172) | (0.143) | (0.201) | (0.175) | (0.180) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,033 | 991 | 1,199 | 1,100 | 1,122 | 1,112 | 1,105 | 1,085 | 1,148 | 1,100 |
| R-squared | 0.048 | 0.059 | 0.023 | 0.022 | 0.017 | 0.028 | 0.015 | 0.033 | 0.057 | 0.037 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, an indicator for rightwing respondents, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

**Table A13 – Trust towards political and non-political institutions (by support for ruling parties during the pandemic)**

| | (1) Political institutions (pc) | (2) National gov. | (3) Local gov. | (4) Int. organizations | (5) Non-political institutions (pc) | (6) China | (7) Italians | (8) Mass media | (9) Scientists | (10) Big pharma |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.104 | -0.164 | -0.070 | 0.056 | 0.111 | -0.265 | 0.105 | 0.105 | 0.258* | -0.009 |
| | (0.236) | (0.166) | (0.150) | (0.162) | (0.276) | (0.170) | (0.165) | (0.164) | (0.156) | (0.166) |
| PAN, MAG | -0.224 | -0.127 | -0.142 | -0.119 | -0.216 | -0.462*** | 0.024 | -0.042 | 0.075 | -0.141 |
| | (0.223) | (0.147) | (0.147) | (0.146) | (0.264) | (0.152) | (0.153) | (0.149) | (0.142) | (0.150) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | -0.331* | -0.166 | -0.230* | -0.177 | -0.213 | -0.404*** | 0.061 | -0.107 | 0.009 | -0.084 |
| | (0.187) | (0.127) | (0.125) | (0.121) | (0.226) | (0.139) | (0.132) | (0.123) | (0.123) | (0.131) |
| Voted for ruling parties | 0.435** | 0.317** | 0.017 | 0.421*** | 0.419* | -0.210 | 0.171 | 0.191 | 0.504*** | 0.204 |
| (on duty during the 1st pandemic wave) | (0.202) | (0.140) | (0.134) | (0.129) | (0.240) | (0.150) | (0.144) | (0.138) | (0.132) | (0.142) |
| PAN, NO MIG | -0.005 | 0.088 | 0.090 | -0.189 | -0.350 | 0.236 | -0.291 | -0.124 | -0.450** | -0.100 |
| * Voted for ruling parties | (0.290) | (0.202) | (0.186) | (0.196) | (0.334) | (0.206) | (0.201) | (0.203) | (0.194) | (0.201) |
| PAN, MAG | 0.058 | 0.015 | 0.117 | -0.031 | 0.024 | 0.560*** | -0.147 | -0.091 | -0.271 | 0.095 |
| * Voted for ruling parties | (0.282) | (0.187) | (0.190) | (0.184) | (0.327) | (0.197) | (0.197) | (0.192) | (0.180) | (0.190) |
| PAN, MAG + HT (all) | 0.184 | 0.130 | 0.171 | 0.016 | 0.032 | 0.437** | -0.143 | 0.023 | -0.150 | -0.024 |
| * Voted for ruling parties | (0.235) | (0.161) | (0.157) | (0.151) | (0.276) | (0.172) | (0.165) | (0.159) | (0.155) | (0.162) |
| Controls | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES | YES |
| Observations | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 | 1,273 |
| R-squared | 0.093 | 0.093 | 0.056 | 0.090 | 0.062 | 0.042 | 0.062 | 0.041 | 0.080 | 0.048 |

*Notes*: Robust standard errors in parentheses; controls include: gender, age, income quartiles, length of the interview, and the percentage of correct answers to all the attention checks; omitted treatment: *Baseline 1 (NO PAN, NO MIG)*; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

# SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS 2

## Section 1 - Pre-validation test

The pre-validation test has been run in May 2021. Survey participants were recruited through the platform ORSEE (Greiner, 2004) from the local pool of students from the University of Turin. The online survey was administered through Qualtrics. We collected a total of 173 answers and participants took approximately 15 minutes[1], on average, to answer the survey[2]. A demo of the survey questionnaire is available here (in Italian):
https://dcps1.fra1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1TdQKGdvTt4a7H0.
Participants did not receive any monetary compensation for their participation in the survey and were informed of the participation terms and the characteristics of the survey upon registration.

The structure of the pre-validation survey questionnaire is the following: all participants answer a small set of questions – eliciting age, gender, self-positioning on the left-right political scale and last elections' voting choice – and then are exposed to a combination of four *stimuli*, one per information-cluster. Each participant is randomly exposed to a single combination of stimuli only (between-subjects design) among all possible 16 combinations[3].
Every time a stimulus, corresponding to the information sheet reporting the selected piece of news, is shown to participants, they are asked to:

- Type the first three words/concepts evoked by the stimulus.
- Rate, on a 0-to-100 scale, how much they believe the content of the stimulus relates to each of the following four thematic areas: (1) The numbers of immigration (2) Immigration and health threat (3) Immigration and mobility restrictions (4) The cost of Immigration.

Both the order in which stimuli on different information-clusters are shown to participants and the order in which the four thematic areas are listed every time participants are called to make their ratings, are randomized across participants.

The results of the pre-validation test confirm that the stimulus selected for the information cluster n.1 regarding "The magnitude of incoming migration flows during the COVID-19 pandemic" is effective in evoking thoughts related to mostly only our target thematic area of interest. The results are reported in Figure SM2.1.1[4], showing average scores and 95-CI for the rating task on the (only) candidate stimulus selected for this information cluster.

[1] Time spent to answer the survey ranges from 4 to 58 minutes, excluding a few cases (7) in which participants took more than one hour to answer, which probably represent cases in which participants started to answer the questionnaire and later caught up to finish entering their answers by re-loading the same page.
[2] Data from the pre-validation test are available upon request.
[3] The list of all candidate stimuli selected (in Italian), per each information-cluster, is available upon request.
[4] *Notes*: Immigration and health threat in blue, the numbers of immigration in red, the cost of immigration in green and immigration and mobility restrictions in yellow.

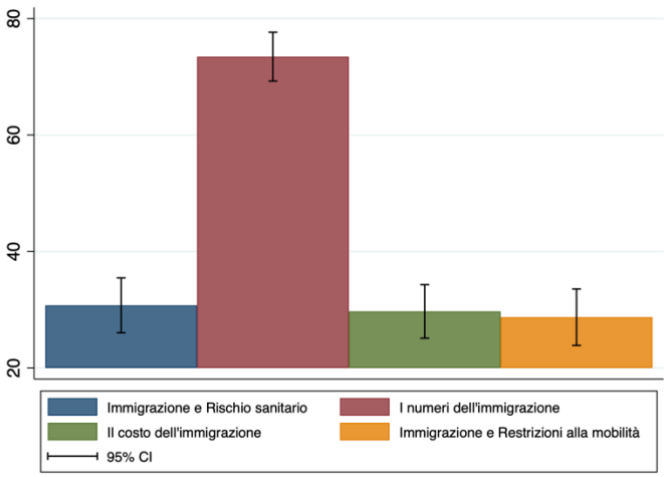



Figure SM2.1.1

The results on candidate stimuli for other information clusters reveal, however, that all our stimuli do evoke concepts related to the topic of immigration numbers. Accordingly, to select the best stimulus – out of all candidate stimuli available per each information cluster – we look for the stimulus that is most effective in evoking thoughts related to our target thematic area of interest with respect to the others, net of area related to immigration's numbers.

The best stimulus selected for the information cluster n.2 regarding "the severity of the health threat posed by incoming migrants in terms of COVID-19 diffusion" is the candidate stimulus B1, see Figure SM2.1.2.

The best stimulus selected for the information cluster n.3, focusing on "the tension between strict mobility constraints imposed on Italians and incoming migrants' freedom to enter Italian borders during the pandemic" is the candidate stimulus A, see Figure SM2.1.3.

The best stimulus selected for the information-cluster n.4, focusing on "the tension between the lack of proper and timely financial support to Italian workers and the cost of immigration during the pandemic" is the candidate stimulus A, see Figure SM2.1.4.

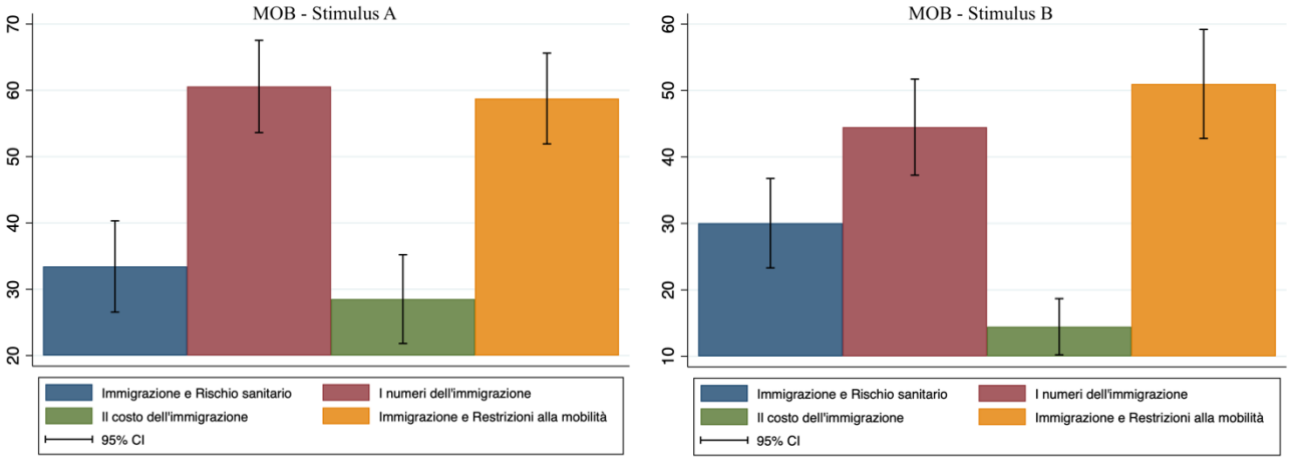



Figure SM2.1.3

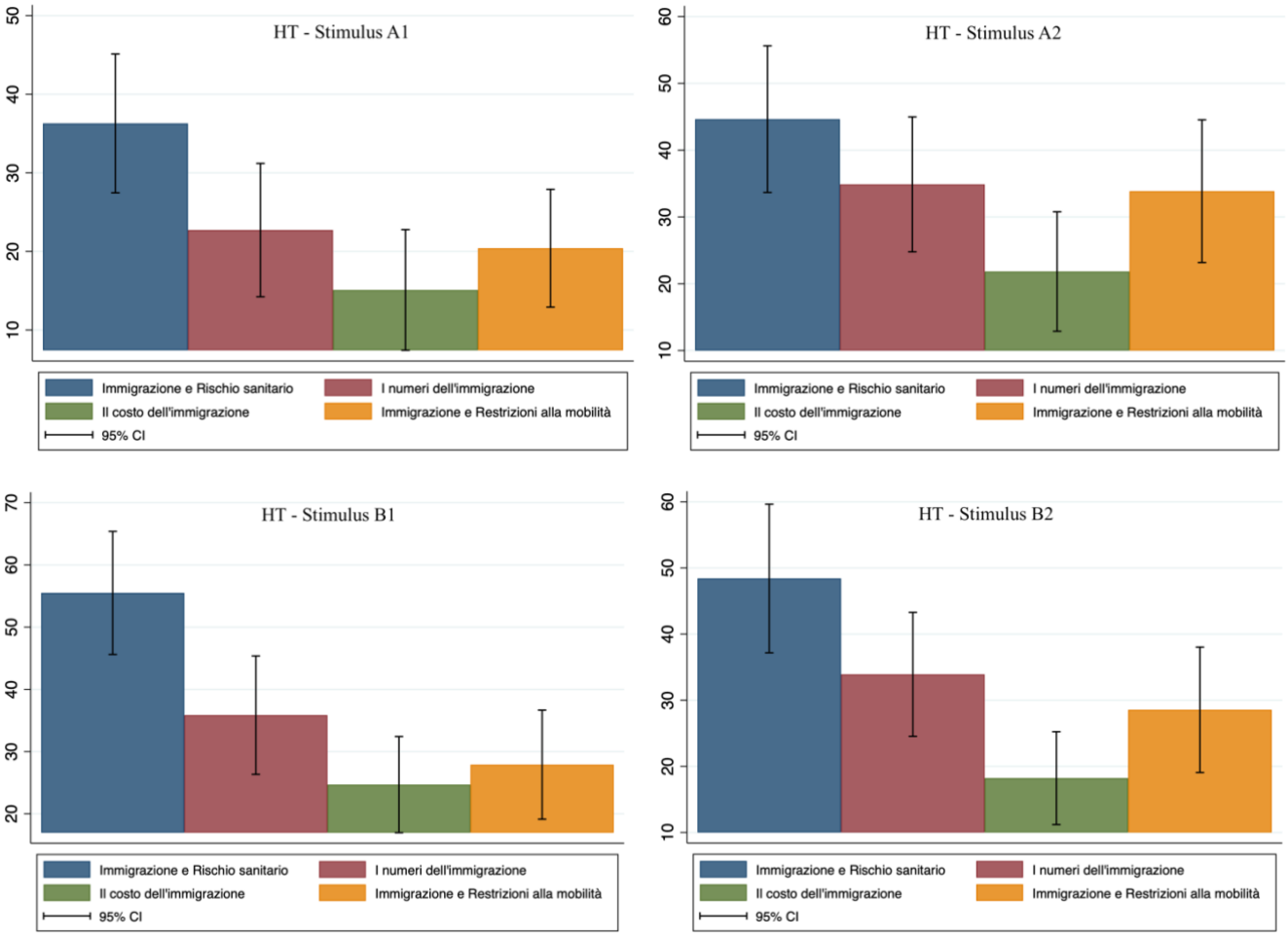



Figure SM2.1.2

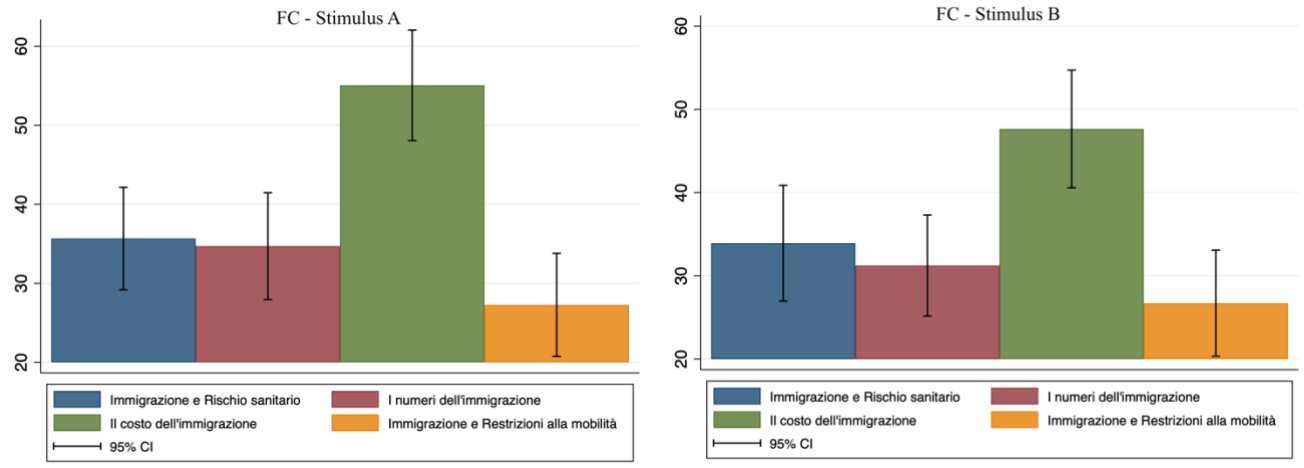



Figure SM2.1.4

**Section 2 – Data cleaning operations**

DEMETRA distributed the online survey to a selected sample of their online panel participants following the company's standard procedures for online surveys. Selected participants receive the invitation to answer the online survey and learn about their fixed payment for completing the survey. Subjects are not given time constraints to submit their answers, after they start, and learn what questions can lead them to accrue additional money prizes online throughout the survey. Since our treatment manipulation relies on the provision of treatment-specific information before outcome questions are shown, we only keep observations from participants who exhibited a decent level of attention and did not take long breaks over the different sections of the survey.

Looking at the distribution of the share of correctly answered questions, we observe that approximately 84% of all respondents manage to answer correctly to at least half of the questions, which include: attention checks, comprehension questions concerning the information provided in the information sheets and comprehension questions about the behavioral task. As the number of information sheets shown to participants varies across treatments, we look at the shares and not pure numbers of correctly answered questions. Excluding respondents who answer wrongly to all questions we drop 23 observations, who count for roughly 1% of the entire sample[5].

Table SM2.1 – Percentage of correctly answered questions (N=1696)

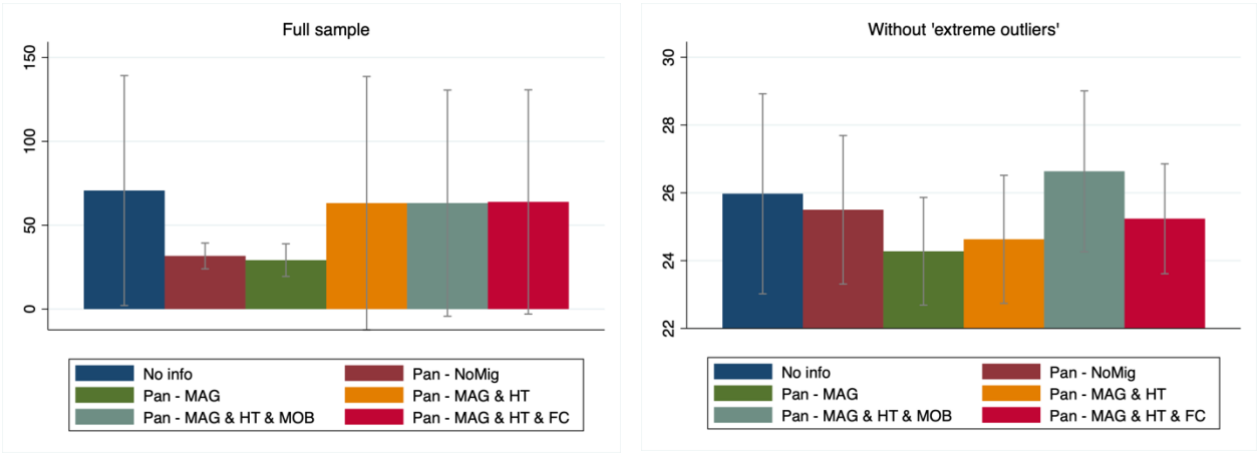
| Percentage of correctly answered questions | Cumulative distribution |
|---|---|
| 0% | 1.36 |
| 25% | 4.89 |
| 50% | 16.21 |
| 75% | 42.63 |
| 100% | 100.00 |

Looking at the interview time distribution, we exclude observations from participants who took an extraordinarily long or short time to complete and submit the online questionnaire, falling within the bottom or top 5 percentiles of the distribution. Since average interview time is not strongly statistically different across treatment conditions, we look at the overall distribution of interview time, pooling all treatment conditions together: excluding observations falling outside the [5-95] percentiles' interval results in dropping 186 observations, roughly balanced across treatment conditions. After dropping outliers, average (median) interview time in the sample is 23.25 (21.27) minutes, with minimum and maximum interview time being equal to 11.5 and 55.68 minutes,

[5] In the Follow-Up study, run in March 2023, we collect observations on additional N=288 participants. Within this sample, approximately 76% of respondents answer correctly to at least half of the questions, and excluding respondents who answer wrongly to all questions we drop 5 observations, who count for roughly 2% of the sample.

respectively[6]. As a result of data cleaning operations and a few overlaps, we drop 186 observations in total and the final sample counts N=1510 observations[7].

Figure SM2.1 – Average interview time across treatments, in minutes (N=1696[8])




*Panel A* *Panel B*

Table SM2.2 – Interview time across treatments, *in minutes* (N=1510)

| Treatment | Avg. | Min | Max | N [N in Full sample] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| T1 | 22.3 | 11.5 | 52.7 | 240 [285] |
| T2 | 23.1 | 11.6 | 54.7 | 252 [285] |
| T3 | 23.7 | 11.5 | 55.7 | 260 [286] |
| T4 | 23.2 | 11.6 | 55.7 | 241 [273] |
| T5 | 23.6 | 11.5 | 52.3 | 258 [282] |
| T6 | 23.8 | 11.6 | 53.1 | 259 [285] |

[6] When the same operation is conducted on the full sample, which also includes data from the Follow-Up study and counts a total of N=1984 observations, excluding interview time outliers results in dropping 191 observations.
[7] Data cleaning operations on the full sample, including also data from the Follow-Up study, cause the exclusion of 219 observations in total; the final sample counts N=1765 observations.
[8] Panel A is obtained on the full sample; Panel B is obtained after excluding 12 observations from "extreme outliers" taking more than 300 minutes (5 hours) to complete the task.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS 3

# When scapegoating backfires: The pitfalls of blaming migrants for a crisis.

## *Theoretical framework*

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# 1 A Model of Political Discourse and (Moral) Credibility

We model a setting where individuals have different policy beliefs as well as party beliefs, both potentially triggered by political messages. The model then studies how messaging can affect political trust and party credibility once a policy is in place.

In our simplified society the population size is normalized to unity, and each individual is assigned a position $i$ on the interval $[0, 1]$ according to a uniform distribution. Importantly, There are two sources of heterogeneity setting these individuals apart: the degree to which they believe policies are useful and effective, and the degree to which they believe a political party is reliable and credible.

The first source of heterogeneity is expressed by Equation (1), where the effectiveness $E_i(.)$ of an *implemented* policy $\rho$ follows from a trade-off between its perceived benefits $\beta_i(.)$ and costs $c_i(.)$, so that

$$E_i(\rho, s) = \beta_i(\rho, s(\mathbf{m})) - c_i(\rho, s(\mathbf{m})), \tag{1}$$

with $\rho \in [0, \infty)$ a policy level across a single dimension, $\beta_i(.)$ concave and increasing, $c_i(.)$ convex and increasing, and $s(\mathbf{m})$ a measure of the salience of the policy dimension in question, to which we return below.[1] We allow for a wide array of individual beliefs about the benefits and costs of a policy, ranging e.g. from the broader value of pandemic policies and its social costs to the private gain of installing a heat pump and its price tag.[2] Importantly, and similar to Daniele et al. (2023), individuals will have different opinions about the 'right' policy because they have different beliefs.[3] They arrive at their preferred policy level $\rho_i$ by maximizing eq. (1), which has an interior solution for each $i$.

The second source of heterogeneity is given by Equation (2), where the perceived credibility of a political party $j$ is the result of a trade-off between the attractiveness $P_{ij}(.)$ of its policy platform and its normative appeal $\eta_i(.)$, both affected by its messaging strategy $m_j \in [0, \infty)$, such that

$$C_{ij}(m_j) = P_{ij}(m_j) - \eta_i(m_j), \tag{2}$$

with $P_{ij}(.)$ concave and increasing and $\eta_i(.)$ convex and increasing. We assume the messaging strategy is (indirectly) related to the implemented policy $\rho$, and captures two dimensions simultaneously: the higher $m_j$, the more salient yet also the more "extreme" a political statement. This can e.g. be due to the unethical nature of the message or its lack of nuance, or both.

[1] For simplicity, we assume all functions are twice differentiable, and set $c_i'(0) \wedge \eta_i'(0) = 0$. We assume a monotonic relationship between types and perceived effectiveness, $\frac{\partial E_i(\rho,s)}{\partial i} > 0$ for any $\rho$ and $s$. We also assume consistency, so that if $E_i'(\rho, s) > E_j'(\rho, s)$ holds for some $\rho$ given $s$ it also holds for all $\rho$.

[2] We refer to Daniele et al. (2023) for a more sophisticated analysis of the effect of policy externalities on institutional and social trust, and their interaction.

[3] As in Daniele et al. (2023), we abstract from the underlying reasons behind belief heterogeneity, as we want to focus on the impact of heterogeneity itself.

The messaging strategy $m_j$ affects individual credibility positively in eq. (2), as it puts the policy platform of a party in the spotlights. This will play out more for certain individuals than for others depending on $P'_{ij}(.) > 0$, which denotes the fit between a certain individual $i$, a party $j$, and its message $m_j$. For example, a narrative blaming immigrants for failing pandemic or social policies to promote an anti-immigration platform will affect individuals with conservative priors more than others holding universalist views. Second, as the narrative becomes more extreme, i.e. less nuanced or ethical, $m_j$ it hurts a party's credibility depending on $\eta'_i(.) > 0$. In this sense, normative appeal $\eta_i(m_j)$ expresses the importance of 'self-image', where individuals want to signal (to themselves) they are morally sound by supporting a party they feel is sufficiently responsible or reliable.

Lastly, we assume the degree of 'extremity' of a message is additive, in the sense that when more parties choose more extreme messaging strategies, the policy dimension becomes more salient. The overall salience level of our policy dimension is then defined by a messaging vector $\mathbf{m}$, so that $s(\mathbf{m}) = \sum_j m_j$.

### 1.1 Political Behavior

Since the aim of our model is to study how political credibility and trust respond to political messaging once a policy is implemented, we abstract from voting and elections here. We assume the incumbent government sets the policy $\rho$ as a first mover, after which all parties $j$ set their messaging strategy $m_j$ to improve their political support.[4]

To decide on its optimal policy, the incumbent government maximizes a standard welfare function

$$W(\rho, s) = \int_0^1 \left(\beta_i\left(\rho, s\right) - c_i(\rho)\right) di, \tag{3}$$

with $\rho^*$ solving the following FOC[5]

$$\int_0^1 \beta'_i(\rho, s) di = \int_0^1 c'_i(\rho) di. \tag{4}$$

For simplicity, we hence assume the government optimizes over individual beliefs rather than some other value,[6] and we abstract from other political distortions.[7]

Once the government's policy $\rho^*$ is set, all parties $j$ set their optimal $m_j^*$ which maximises

[4]This is equivalent to the second stage of a standard political competition model, where in the first stage each party $j$ first decides on its policy proposal $\rho^j$ and only then on its message $m_j$ to 'sell' the policy, and where there is some uncertainty over $P_{ij}$ and $\eta_i$. In the second stage, the election winner then sets its policy which defines political trust, to which parties again respond by setting their message.

[5]By $c'(0) = 0$ it follows that the marginal social policy is always positive, so corner solutions for $\rho^*$ are not an issue. Convexity of all $c_i(.)$ and concavity of all $\beta_i(.)$ ensure that the stationary point is a maximum.

[6]Nothing important relies on this assumption. Qualitatively similar predictions would be obtained as long as the true benefits and costs lie somewhere in the middle of the distribution of individual beliefs.

[7]The model could be extended to include paternalism, elections, lobbies, protests, and other forms of political pressure. They would enter the model by distorting the government's objective function, but are beyond our interest here.

their political support given by

$$S_j(m_j, \rho^*, s) = \int_0^1 S_{ij} di, \tag{5}$$

with individual support captured by

$$S_{ij}(m_j, \rho_i, \rho^*, s) = C_{ij}(m_j) - D_i(\rho_i, \rho^*, s(\mathbf{m})), \tag{6}$$

and with $D_i$ an expression of the distance between the enacted policy $\rho^*$ and the individual bliss point $\rho_i$.[8] This formulation allows us to separate direct policy concerns (via $D_i$) from other (ideological) elements captured by the 'goodness of fit' between party message and platform (via $P_{ij}(.)$ in $C_{ij}(.)$).[9] As in Daniele et al. (2023), moreover, we assume that policy concerns translate into political distrust whenever policy expectations are not met. The idea is that an individual feels entitled to a level of utility corresponding to her preferred policy $\rho_i$. As in Passarelli and Tabellini (2017), this 'counterfactual' utility level $\hat{E}_i(\rho_i, s)$ then serves as a reference point, so that an individual is disappointed and loses trust if the government policy brings about lower utility $E_i(\rho^*, s)$ in comparison. We summarize in Definition 1.

**Definition 1.** *Let $D_i$ denote $i$'s political distrust. We assume it follows from utility loss when adopting $\rho^*$ instead of $\rho_i$, so that, for all $i$*

$$D_i(\rho_i, \rho^*, s) = \hat{E}_i(\rho_i, s) - E_i(\rho^*, s). \tag{7}$$

Equation (6) thus allows us not just to disentangle the difference between party and policy appreciation, but also allows for distrust in the political establishment to play a role in party-specific political support. Lastly, and to the extent that non-institutional players such as the media and scientists are aligned with government policies and even guiding them, Equation (6) may also (at least partially) apply to non-institutional trust.

### 1.2 Political Support, Trust and Credibility in Equilibrium

We are now ready to define and characterize the political equilibrium, to then study it from various angles depending on the comparative static in question.

**Definition 2.** *A political equilibrium consists of:*

[8] We assume that, in setting its own $m_j$, a party can only gauge its own marginal contribution to overall salience s($\mathbf{m}$).

[9] We abstract from credibility spill-overs affecting overall trust levels as well as the support of other parties. The underlying assumption that voters are sufficiently sophisticated to distinguish policy from party, and to judge each party by its own platform and message, comes without much loss of generality. A zero-sum or tug of war game between parties, for example, is consistent with our messaging framework. General trust levels also transcend party positioning in most cases, unless strategic interaction leads to policy deadlock, which we have ruled out here.

*i. A set of preferred policies $\rho_i$, maximizing individual utilities defined by Equation (1).*

*ii. A policy $\rho^*$ which maximizes the social welfare function defined by Equation (3).*

*iii. A set of messaging strategies $m_j^*$, maximizing party support defined by Equation (5).*

Similar to Daniele et al. (2023), and since this equilibrium characterizes a society where the government implements a policy reflecting the *average* belief about policy effectiveness, political distrust can be the result of two distinctive reactions. Individuals who believe in the usefulness of the policy, and hence 'appreciate' it more – i.e. have a higher level of $\frac{\partial E_i}{\partial \rho}$ for all $\rho$ – will distrust the government for implementing a policy $\rho^*$ which they feel falls short of its potential. On the other hand, individuals who believe the policy comes without real benefits distrust the government for setting a policy that is overdoing it in their view. The further away an individual's preferred policy $\rho_i^*$ is from the policy $\rho^*$ enacted by the government, in other words, the higher the distrust. This follows directly from Equation (7).

The question then becomes what happens to distrust when the messaging vector $\mathbf{m}$, itself the result of all party strategies, raises the perceived effectiveness of a policy by making the benefits more salient than the costs. In this case the level of appreciation $|\frac{\partial E_i}{\partial \rho}|$ would increase for all individuals, keeping all else equal. We explore this comparative static in Proposition 1.

**Proposition 1 (Salience).** *If policy appreciation $\frac{\partial E_i}{\partial \rho}$ rises for all individuals because policy benefits become relatively more salient than costs (via $s'(\boldsymbol{m}) > 0$), then, holding the government rule constant and ceteris paribus,*

*i. the less appreciative gain trust as their ideal $\rho_i$ approaches the actual $\rho^*$,*

*ii. the more appreciative lose trust as their ideal $\rho_i$ moves further from the actual $\rho^*$,*

*iii. the overall effect on distrust $\int_0^1 D_i di$ is positive.*

*Proof.* We derive the proof in two steps in what follows.

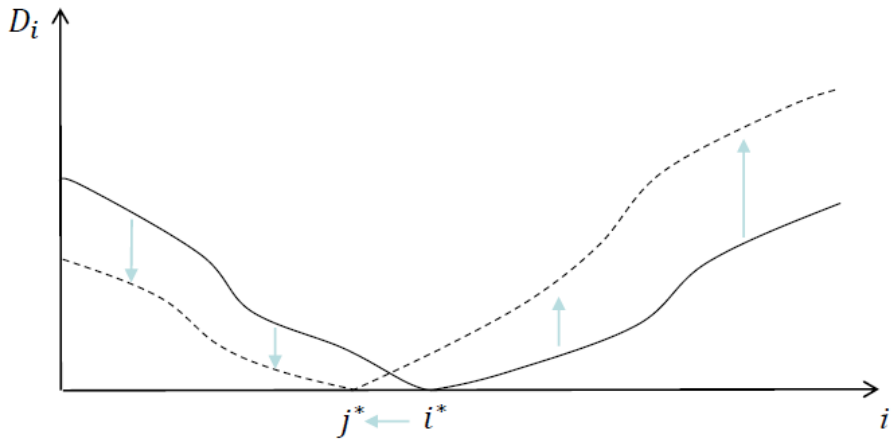
i. Suppose an increase in the salience level $s(\mathbf{m})$ is such that $\frac{\partial B_i(\rho,s)}{\partial \rho} > \frac{\partial c_i(\rho,s)}{\partial \rho}$ for all $\rho$ and $i$, then, by maximizing eq. (1) each individual will have a preferred policy level $\rho_i'$ which is higher than their initial level $\rho_i$. Given the monotonic relationship between types and perceived effectiveness, $\frac{\partial E_i(\rho,s)}{\partial i} > 0$ for any $\rho$ and $s$, and because $E_i'(\rho, s) > E_j'(\rho, s)$ holds for all $\rho$ given $s$, the salience increase amounts to a proportional shift upwards of all preferred policies for all $i$.

ii. By Equation (7), institutional distrust increases in the distance between $i$'s preferred policy and the implemented policy $\rho^*$. We then consider three groups of individuals. A first group whose initially preferred policies $\rho_i$ were higher than the implemented

policy $\rho^*$, so that the overall increase in preferred policies $\rho_i'$ as derived under (i.) leads to a larger distance and hence stronger levels of distrust ($\rho^* < \rho_i < \rho_i'$). A second group consists of less appreciative individuals whose initial preferred policies were considerably lower than $\rho^*$, so that the upwards shift in preferred policies closes the distance and lowers distrust ($\rho_i < \rho_i' < \rho^*$). Individuals in the third group switch position, with distrust no longer rooted in the belief that the policy is too high, but rather that it is too low ($\rho_i \leq \rho^* \leq \rho_i'$). Some of those individuals will have higher levels of distrust compared to the initial situation, some less, so that for well-behaved functional forms the total effect on distrust cancels out. It is hence easy to see how the third group will have a minor effect on total trust levels, whilst the first group will always outpace the second group as it grows in numbers, even for small shifts in preferred policies. We illustrate this graphically below, with $i^*$ the individual for which $\rho^* = \rho_i$, and $j^*$ the individual for which $\rho^* = \rho_j'$, and the dotted line hence showing the individual levels of distrust after the salience shock.

Both points prove the proposition. □

Figure (1) Salience effect on Distrust




Important to note in this comparative statics exercise around the optimal rule $\rho^*$ which is held fixed, is that the level of individual appreciation does not feed into the government's optimization. The interesting finding that, in this case, the less appreciative individuals actually gain institutional trust can then be interpreted as a so-called 'rally around the flag' effect, for rational reasons. Indeed, whilst being less appreciative before, the individual will find existing policies a lot more effective once their benefits become more salient. This rallying effect will have its limits, however, if the levels of appreciation keep rising until preferred policies are increasingly pushed beyond the actual policy. We summarize this last point in Corollary 1.

**Corollary 1.** *If policy appreciation* $\frac{\partial E_i}{\partial \rho}$ *continues to rise alongside salience levels* $s'(\boldsymbol{m}) > 0$,

*then, ceteris paribus and compared to a smaller increase,*

*i. the less appreciative start losing trust as their ideal $\rho_i$ is pushed beyond the actual $\rho^*$,*

*ii. the more appreciative lose more trust as their ideal $\rho_i$ moves even further from $\rho^*$,*

*iii. the effect on overall distrust $\int_0^1 D_i di$ is even more positive.*

Moving to the equilibrium messaging strategies, and as a result of both dynamics described in Equation (2), there will be an individual threshold value $\bar{m}_{ij}$ of the messaging strategy so that for all $m_j < \bar{m}_{ij}$ credibility will rise, whilst for all $m_j > \bar{m}_{ij}$ it will drop. Importantly, then, since each party can only choose one single messaging strategy by maximizing $S_j$ from Equation (5), the optimal party message $m_j^*$ will inevitably overshoot the individual threshold for some individuals for whom $m_j^* > \bar{m}_{ij}$.

Moreover, if the party's perception of the goodness of fit of its messaging strategy is overblown, or if it underestimates the potential backlash of its unethical or unnuanced content, its overall support $S_j$ will drop if its credibility plummets for a large number of individuals. We unpack this last point in Proposition 2.

**Proposition 2** (**Overshooting**). *Suppose a party $j$ can overestimate the goodness of fit $P'_{ij}(.)$ of its messaging strategy and/or underestimate its potential $\eta'_i(.)$ to be seen as unethical or extreme, for each $i$. If this misperception applies to a sufficiently large amount of individuals, then*

*i. party credibility $C_{ij}$ will drop for all individuals for whom $m_j^* > \bar{m}_{ij}$,*

*ii. party support $S_j$ will drop as well, for given or even decreasing levels of overall distrust.*

*Proof.* We derive the proof in two steps in what follows.

i. Suppose party $j$ overestimates the extent to which its platform can convince individual $i$ and underestimates the negative effect of its extreme messaging strategy. Then, and for each $m_j$, the perceived fit $P'_{ij}(m_j)^p$ is larger than the actual fit $P'_{ij}(m_j)$, and the perceived $\eta'_i(m_j)^p$ is smaller than the actual $\eta'_i(m_j)$. If $P'_{ij}(m_j)^p > P'_{ij}(m_j)$ and $\eta'_i(m_j)^p < \eta'_i(m_j)$ for a subset of individuals $\Omega_j$, then $m_j^{p*}$ resulting from maximizing

$$S_j(m_j, \rho^*, s) = \int_0^1 S_{ij} di, \tag{8}$$

with individual support $\forall i \notin \Omega_j$ given by Equation (5) and perceived support $\forall i \in \Omega_j$ given by

$$S_{ij}(m_j, \rho_i, \rho^*, s) = C_{ij}^p(m_j) - D_i(\rho_i, \rho^*, s(\mathbf{m})), \tag{9}$$

with

$$C_{ij}^p(m_j) = P_{ij}^p(m_j) - \eta_i^p(m_j), \tag{10}$$

will be such that $m_j^{p*} > \bar{m}_{ij}\ \forall i \in \Omega_j$, since $\bar{m}_{ij}$ follows from maximising

$$C_{ij}(m_{ij}) = P_{ij}(m_{ij}) - \eta_i(m_{ij}). \tag{11}$$

We can then compare this equilibrium to the counterfactual where there would be no misperception, as defined by optimizing Equation (5), so that $C_{ij}(m_j^*) > C_{ij}(m_j^{p*})$ for all $i \in \Omega_j$.

ii. As the subset $\Omega_j$ defined under (i.) above grows, together with the degree of misperception itself, $C_{ij}(m_j^*) \gg C_{ij}(m_j^{p*})$ for a larger fraction of individuals. The more $\Omega_j$ consists of appreciative individuals, the more the overall effect on political support will be negative since the salience effect as described by proposition 1 (following from $m_j^{p*} > m_j^*$) is outmatched by the growing credibility loss, so that

$$S_j(m_j, \rho^*, s)\ |_{m_j=m_j^*} > S_j(m_j, \rho^*, s)\ |_{m_j=m_j^{p*}}\ . \tag{12}$$

Both points prove the proposition. □

The reasons why parties are misinformed about $P'_{ij}(.)$ are straightforward, and could e.g. be due to imperfect (internal) polling, or overconfidence. Why parties misjudge $\eta'_i(.)$, however, is more subtle and arguably also more likely. Indeed, it is very hard to gauge whether a certain message goes 'too far', and for which subgroup, as such normative dimensions are rarely polled.

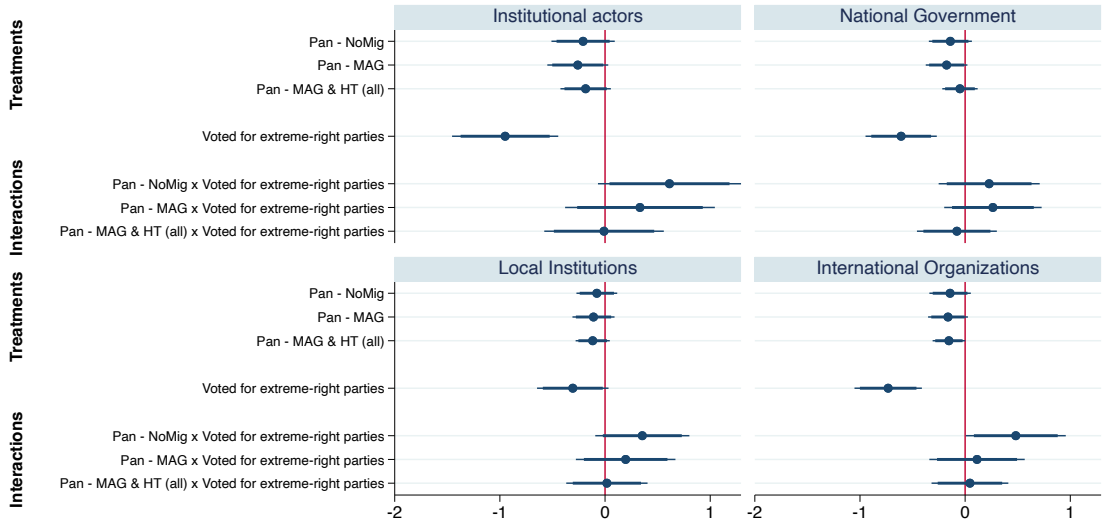
## 2 Application to Experimental Context

We now interpret the findings of our survey experiment through the lens of our theoretical model.

To apply the theory to our experimental setting, let the policy dimension over which $\rho$ is chosen be the set of policies managing the fallout of the Covid-19 epidemic, ranging from loose to strict. The dimension across which the messaging strategy $m_j$ is chosen is related to these pandemic policies and measures the degree to which immigration is depicted as an additional risk that potentially undermines these policies. In that sense, the message fans the flames of crisis concern, by linking infection risk to immigration. By choosing such an unethical and unnuanced messaging strategy, a party will, first of all, want to improve its goodness of fit $P_{ij}$ with certain individuals, hoping to gain more support for its – in this case, nationalist and anti-immigration – policy platform. A side effect would then be that the overall salience of the benefits of pandemic policies also receives a boost.

We can then validate our theoretical predictions, using our treatment conditions as a proxy for policy salience and message extremity.

Figure (2) Treatment effects on trust in institutional actors




*Notes*: Treatment effects on trust towards institutional targets. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (OLS) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)* Dependent variables are standardized. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

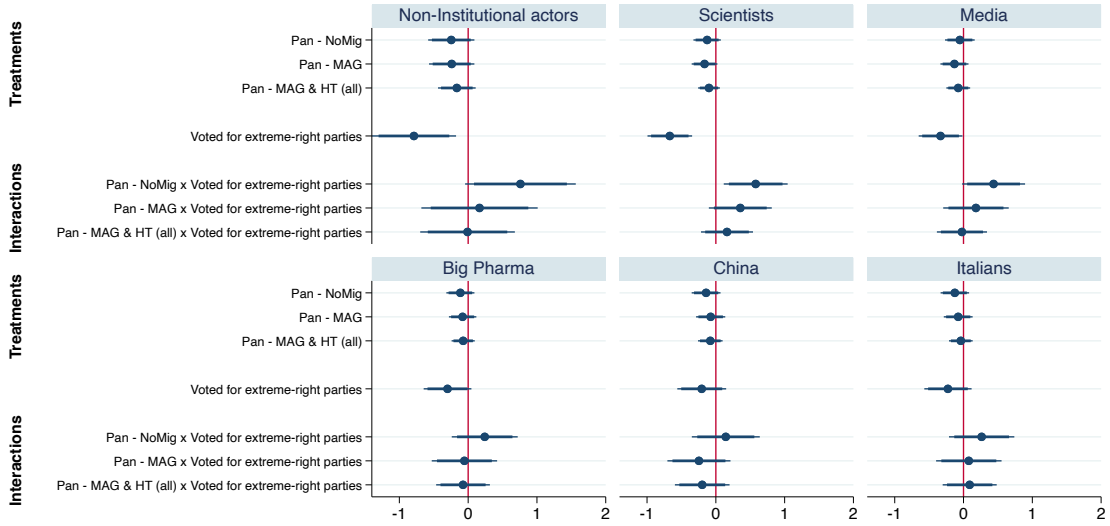
First of all, we interpret the *PAN* condition as making the pandemic threat more salient (even without the immigration risk), which then increases the levels of policy appreciation for all respondents as the benefits are amplified more than the costs. We would then expect, based on the effect of a salience boost described in Proposition 1, that the *PAN* treatment effect on political trust is a) positive for the less appreciative, b) negative for the more appreciative, and that c) the overall effect is negative. While prediction c) is confirmed by Fig 4a in the paper, empirical support to a) and b) is offered by Fig.2 here, where we interpret the extent of support for extreme parties as a proxy for pandemic policy appreciation. The idea here is that voters for extreme right parties were less concerned about the crisis, which we also find in our data[10], and hence have a lower appreciation of the effectiveness of pandemic policies. As the policy benefits become more salient, however, the rallying effect described above kicks in, which boosts their reported trust levels.

Since the local and international levels were largely seen as responsible for pandemic policies in Italy, it is not surprising that trust in the national government is affected less by this process. In fact, looking at trust measures for non-institutional players in Fig.3, we find similar treatment effects. As discussed above, when policies and non-institutional players such as the media and scientists are aligned, trust dynamics can move in tandem.

Next, interpreting the *PAN – MAG & HT* treatment as making the crisis threat even

[10]The mean of the first extracted factor (from a principal component analysis on items) measuring 'pandemic crisis concern' for extreme-right voters is -.336; conversely, for non-extreme right voters the mean of our measure of pandemic crisis concern is .142. The difference is statistically significant ($p<0.01$) under both parametric and non-parametric tests as well as under tests for equality of distributions.

Figure (3) Treatment effects on trust in non-institutional actors



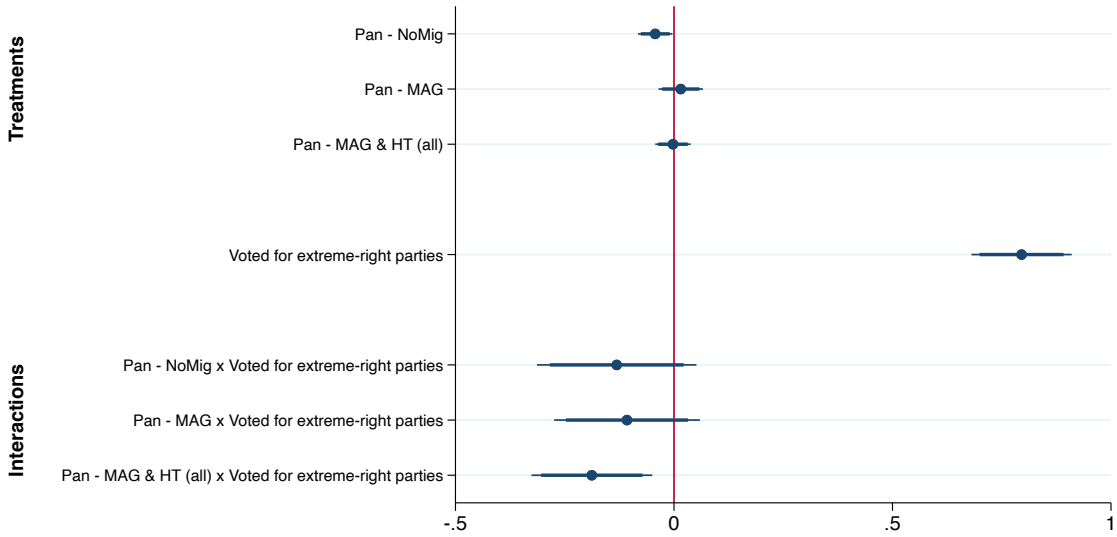

*Notes*: Treatment effects on trust towards non-institutional targets. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (OLS) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)* Dependent variables are standardized. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

more salient by weaving immigration risk into the narrative, what we would expect from Corollary 1 is a neutral/negative treatment effect on trust for the less concerned (less appreciative) voters, and even more negative for the more concerned (more appreciative) ones. This is again what we find, as shown in Fig.2, where the treatment effect of the *PAN – MAG & HT* condition goes to zero when adding messages on immigration-related health risks. The less concerned (proxied by extreme-right voters) now would no longer gain trust: their concern has pushed their ideal policy even closer to (or beyond) the actual policy. However, the overall effect on trust is negative, as shown in Fig. 3a in the paper, as even more voters are pushed even further from the actual policy.

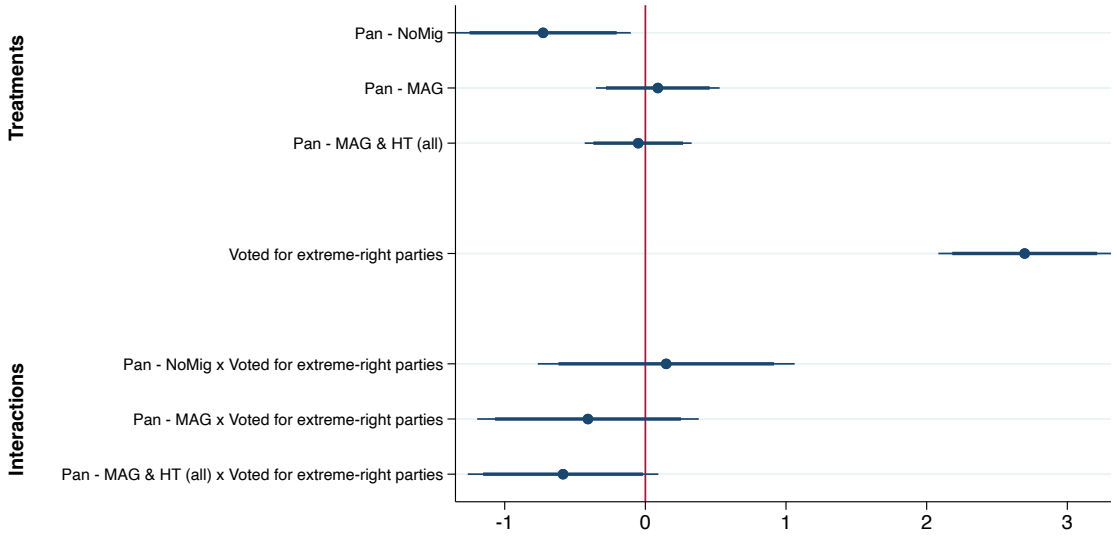
Focusing on the "extreme" side of the *PAN – MAG & HT* treatment (messaging strategy increases), what we would expect from Proposition 2 is a negative treatment effect on political support for parties that have lost (moral) credibility by taking this unethical and certainly unnuanced messaging strategy too far. This explains why extreme right parties who used this strategy lose political support as described by Fig.4 (Fig. 5B in the paper), whilst their previous voters are not necessarily losing political trust (Fig.2-3). Their concern has pushed their ideal policy closer to the actual policy, yet the messaging backfires and pushes party-specific (moral) credibility based on this message further down, to the extent that political support follows suit.

Incidentally, this effect is most pronounced for Lega, which truly pushed this messaging strategy to its extremes compared to other parties on the right with a similar policy agenda, e.g. Fratelli d'Italia (FDI) (Fig.5). FDI is a right-wing party with a stance on immigration,

Figure (4) Treatment effects on intentions to vote for extreme-right parties




(a) Linear probability model (LPM)



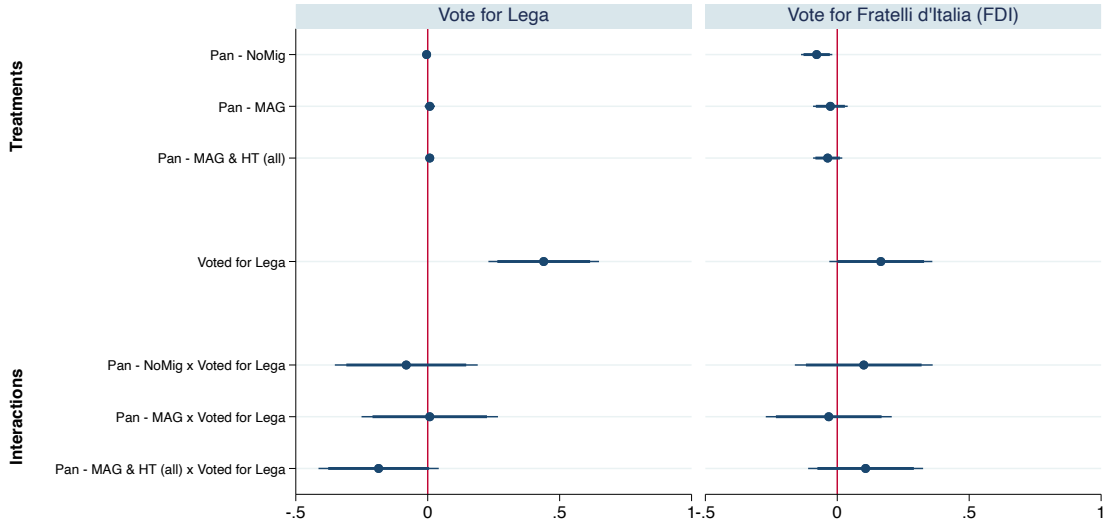

(b) PROBIT model

*Notes*: Treatment effects on voting intentions. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (probit) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)*. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

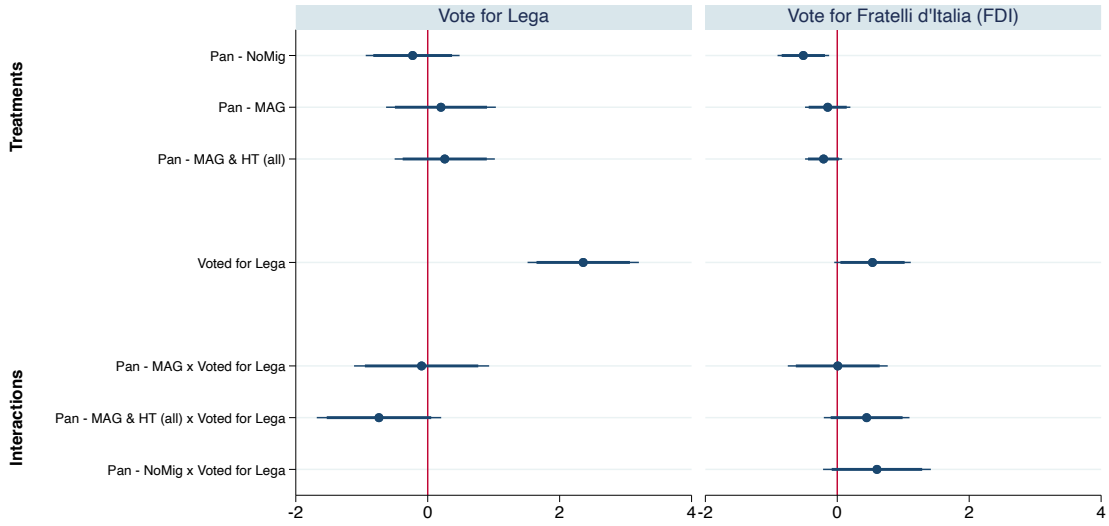
social issues, and criticism of European institutions similar to Lega, yet embracing, at the time of the survey, a more moderate political campaigning, as opposed to Lega and its own past. Despite the declared anti-immigration, nationalistic and far-right orientation, FDI actions appear to be less unyielding, allowing, for instance, the NGOs to offload immigrant children, women, and the elderly before being asked to dock in a different port of call (Jones, 2023). [11] Results in (Fig.5) suggest that when exposed to the "extreme" messaging strategy such as the information provided in our *PAN – MAG & HT* condition, supporters of Lega in the 2018 political elections are less willing to vote for that party again; in fact, they tend to be more inclined to vote for FDI. This additional piece of evidence further highlights how political messaging based on scapegoating can eventually backfire. While during the Covid-19 crisis both Lega and FDI associated illegal immigration with spreading the disease, FDI's anti-immigration rhetoric has been seen as less rigid and more common sense. Voters who supported the party that implemented a very extreme anti-immigrant communication strategy (such as Lega) end up changing their preferences, favoring parties that still reflect their own conservative and right-wing political orientation, yet put less emphasis on immigration in their political agenda; or when doing so, neither rely on hardly credible anti-immigration narratives nor propose extreme policies that might be perceived as blatantly "immoral".

[11] Consistent with this, Giorgia Meloni, leader of FDI, before winning the Italian political elections in 2022, distanced herself from the fascist roots of her party in an attempt to appear as the main conservative force in the political arena and gather the support also of the moderate right-wing electorate.

Figure (5) Treatment effects on intentions to vote for LEGA vs. FDI




(a) Linear probability model (LPM)




(b) PROBIT model

*Notes*: Treatment effects voting intentions. Shown are treatment regression coefficients (LPM in (a) and PROBIT in (b)) relative to the control group *(No Pan – No Mig)*. Thin/thick vertical bars are 95/90% CIs.

## References

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