

Do Incompetent Politicians Breed Populist Voters?

Evidence from Italian Municipalities*

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March 2023

Abstract

Poor performance by the established political class can drive voters towards anti-establishment outsiders. Is the ineffectiveness of incumbent politicians an important driver of the recent rise of populist parties? We provide an empirical test exploiting a sharp discontinuity in the wage of local politicians as a function of population in Italian municipalities. We find that the more skilled local politicians and more effective local government in municipalities above the threshold cause a significant drop in voter support for the populist Five-Star Movement in regional and national elections. Support for incumbent governing parties increases instead.

Keywords: Populism, Government efficiency, Politician quality, Political agency

JEL Classification: D72, D73, H70

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1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, populism has experienced a dramatic rise in recent years. One of its defining features is a strong anti-establishment stance (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Populist politicians present themselves as outsiders intent on sweeping out a discredited ruling class. Witness Donald Trump’s mantra of “draining the swamp” in Washington, DC; or, in Italy, Beppe Grillo’s insistence that the purpose of the Five-Star Movement (M5S, from the Italian *Movimento 5 Stelle*) he founded is to get rid of the “political caste” running the country. Such rhetorical appeals to wholesale political renewal ought to have greater resonance with voters the more ineffective and incompetent incumbent politicians have been. Yet, empirical evidence of such a link has so far proved elusive.

Instead, economists have blamed the rise of populism mainly on two factors (Guriev and Papaioannou 2022). First, rising economic insecurity for the middle class, which may partly reflect failures of domestic policy, but is mostly driven by worldwide macroeconomic trends such as globalization, automation, or the global financial crisis (Algan et al. 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Guiso et al. 2018; Piketty 2018; Pastor and Veronesi 2020; Dal Bó et al. 2022; Sartre and Daniele 2022; Bordignon, Franzoni and Gamalerio 2023). Second, cultural backlash against both immigration—again partly policy-driven—and especially long-run cultural changes that reflect a generational shift in attitudes (Becker and Fetzer 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019).¹

In this paper, we assess empirically the direct impact of incumbent politicians’ skill and effectiveness on voter support for populism. To identify a causal effect, we exploit quasi-experimental variation in the quality of municipal government in Italy, one of the advanced democracies with the strongest populist parties (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

The wage of Italian mayors and other local politicians changes sharply at specified thresholds for municipal population. In particular, at 5,000 residents the mayor’s wage rises by almost a third, while the compensation of other members of the municipal cabinet almost

¹Cultural drivers of populism also include a lack of institutional trust and civic-mindedness, which has been traced to youth exposure to political corruption but also to childhood exposure to entertainment TV (Durante, Pinotti and Tesei 2019; Aassve, Daniele and Le Moglie 2023).

quadruples. Before 2001 and after 2012, this threshold is free from confounding changes in other policy rules. Using data from 1993 to 2001, Gagliarducci and Nannicini (2013) showed that the wage jump at the threshold attracts more educated and skilled politicians into local government. In turn, politicians' higher quality translates into greater government efficiency.

We confirm these results for the more recent period that witnessed the nationwide rise of the populist M5S, using data for all municipal administrations elected from 2013 to 2017. The wage increase at the threshold causes a significant rise both in the quality of local elected officials and in the efficiency of local government, as reflected in measurable performance in waste collection. The share of municipal cabinet members with a college education increases by 5 percentage points (or 10% of the mean). The share of municipal waste that is recycled increases by 4 percentage points (or 6% of the mean), with unchanged expenditure.

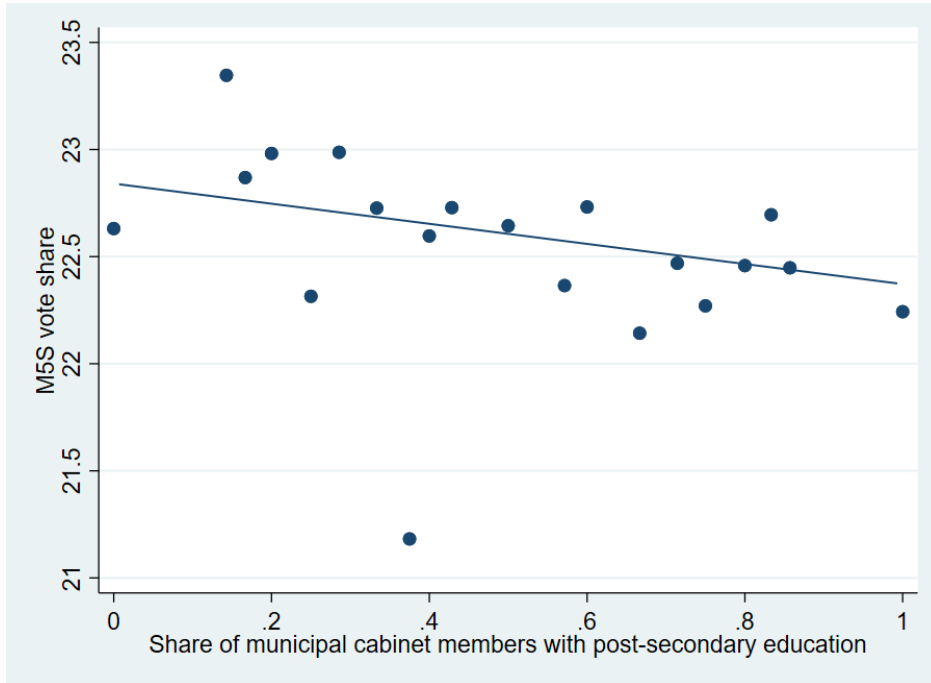
This plausibly exogenous variation in the quality of local government enables us to address our motivating question. Does exposure to lower-quality incumbents cause voters to embrace populist parties that advocate a wholesale replacement of the political establishment?

The outcome we focus on is the municipal vote share of the M5S in regional, national and European elections. By studying elections for higher levels of government, we can identify the impact of local politicians' quality on voters' partisan leanings, aside from their evaluation of individual incumbents. By studying the success of the M5S, we can focus on the dimension of populism that motivates our analysis: anti-politics and anti-establishment rhetoric. This is a defining feature of the M5S, which has stressed its outsider status and its recruitment of non-politicians, adopting internal term limits and formally barring the candidacy of anyone who ever held or ran for elected office outside the party since its founding in 2009. Conversely, while all right-wing parties in Italy have been labeled as populist by at least some scholars, they all have a long track record in government under Silvio Berlusconi (in 1994–95, 2001–06 and 2008–11) and sometimes an indisputable position as the regional political establishment.²

As Figure 1 shows, a higher quality of local office holders does predict lower local support for the anti-establishment M5S in higher-level elections, conditional on a municipality's

²E.g., Forza Italia and the Northern League jointly have an unbroken hold on the regional governments of Lombardy and Veneto since 1995.

Figure 1: Local Politicians' Quality and Support for the M5S



Notes: The figure shows a binned scatterplot of the municipal vote share of the M5S in regional, national and European elections as a function of the share of municipal cabinet members (including mayors) with post-secondary education, after adjusting for other covariates. Each point represents the estimate from canonical least squares binscatter regression across municipalities in the corresponding bin, following Cattaneo et al. (2022). The line represents the global linear regression fit. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d'Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. Regressions control for municipal population (in logarithm), municipal land area (in logarithm), the municipal employment rate at the 2011 census (for residents aged 15 and over), the municipal vote share of the center-left coalition in the 2008 national elections (for the House of Representatives), and province-by-election fixed effects.

demographics and its ideological orientation before the M5S was founded.³ Needless to say, however, such a partial correlation cannot be taken as evidence of causation. The relationship could instead be driven (or conversely attenuated) by unobserved municipal characteristics such as the voters' civic culture.

By exploiting a sharp regression discontinuity design, we can identify the causal effect of local government quality on the local vote share of the M5S. In our preferred specification, at the 5,000-resident threshold the M5S vote share falls by 2 to 3 percentage points, approximately a 10% decline in their vote share relative to its average of 23 percentage points.

³The figure displays the partial correlation as a binned scatterplot. It is also significant ($p < 5\%$) in a multivariate OLS regression with robust standard errors clustered by province.

This finding suggests that voter support for anti-establishment populists responds to the same forces that drive classic rational models of political agency. Just as less skilled and less effective individual incumbents are more vulnerable to challengers, so an entire political class is more vulnerable to a populist challenge when voters have been routinely disappointed by their elected representatives.

In addition to shedding new light on the determinants of voter support for populist politicians, our findings provide new evidence on the links between elections at different levels of government. A large literature on fiscal federalism has studied vertical government interactions in tax setting, public spending, and political accountability (e.g., Besley and Rosen 1998; Alesina, Angeloni and Etro 2005; Berry 2008; Boffa, Piolatto and Ponzetto 2016). Prior work has shown that alignment between local politicians and national parties matters for both the financing and the expenditure choices of municipal governments (Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro 2008; Brollo and Nannicini 2012; Gamalerio 2020). We contribute to this line of research by showing that the quality of local politicians—even in relatively small municipalities—affects higher-level elections and thus national and international political trends such as the rise of anti-establishment populist parties.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 we present the political and institutional environment. Section 3 describes our data and our econometric specification. In Section 4 we report our results, including robustness tests that validate our identification strategy. Section 5 concludes.

2 POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

2.1 ITALIAN POLITICS AND THE RISE OF THE FIVE-STAR MOVEMENT

From the fall of Fascism until the 2018 general election, the Italian political landscape was characterized by the standard pattern of competition between two rival ideological camps, despite the proliferation of minor parties favored by an electoral system dominated by proportional representation.

From 1947 to 1993, the rival blocs were led by the Christian Democrats in the political

center and the Italian Communist Party on the left. At the national level, the Communists were perpetually in opposition, while the Christian Democrats assembled an unbroken series of government coalitions. These coalitions comprised different smaller parties at different times, sometimes leaning to the center-right and sometimes to the center-left. They never extended to the far right—tainted by its enduring links to Fascism—and since 1963 they always included the Italian Socialist Party, the second-largest and more moderate left-wing party.⁴ At the same time, the Communist Party ran several regional governments, almost always in a coalition with the Socialists.

This long-standing party system, which journalists have since dubbed the “First Republic,” collapsed dramatically in the early 1990s. In 1991, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party dissolved, replaced by a mainstream social-democratic party and some unreformed splinters to its left. The following year, the “Mani Pulite” judicial investigation into political bribery detonated a nationwide corruption scandal that engulfed all the parties in the government coalition, quickly leading to their demise.

After 1993, the two old blocs were replaced by two new opposing coalitions. On one side, a center-left coalition led by the main post-communist party, now called the Democratic Party. On the other side, a center-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi and his party, now called Forza Italia. Former Christian Democrats split between the two camps, while the center-right brought into its ruling coalition the far-right party, now called Brothers of Italy. All Berlusconi governments also included the Northern League as a coalition partner. Founded in 1989 as a regionalist Northern Italian party with an agenda of decentralization, in 1995–98 it had a brief and unsuccessful secessionist season advocating the breakup of Italy. After this short spell, it has turned into a nationalist right-wing party whose voter base, though still broader in the North, now extends to the whole country. From 1999 to 2018 it was a stable partner in Mr. Berlusconi’s center-right coalition.

The most notable change between the cold-war decades and this so-called “Second Re-

⁴For one year in 1978-79, the government coalition enjoyed the parliamentary support of Communist MPs as a government of national unity after the kidnapping and murder of the president of the Christian Democratic party, Aldo Moro, by the far-left Red Brigades. Nonetheless, Communists never directly participated in government.

public” was that the two rival coalitions started alternating in power at the national level. Political turnover has been so regular that no incumbent government has won an Italian general election since 1992. Mr. Berlusconi governed in 1994–95, followed by the center-left in 1996–2001, another Berlusconi government in 2001–06, the center-left in 2006–08, yet another Berlusconi government in 2008–11, and again the center-left in 2013–18.⁵

Over the past decade, this stable two-coalition landscape was shaken by the disruptive rise of the Five-Star Movement (M5S). The M5S started in 2005 as a grassroots movement under the leadership of the comedian and activist Beppe Grillo. In 2009 it began fielding candidates for elected office. In the 2013 general election it reaped a striking nationwide success: with 25.6% of the popular vote, it narrowly edged out the Democratic Party as the most voted party. Positioning itself as a third option antithetical to both center-right and center-left, the M5S refused to support any coalition government. After a two-month stalemate, the Democratic Party formed instead an uneasy government coalition with Mr. Berlusconi’s party. The latter split before the end of the year: its leader and most of its MPs rejoined their center-right allies in opposition, while a splinter group of centrists seceded into a short-lived new party within the ruling center-left coalition.

The M5S was even more successful in the 2018 general election. With 32% of the vote, it roundly beat the whole outgoing center-left coalition (23%). The slowest government-formation process in Italian history ensued. After almost three months of gridlock, the M5S formed a coalition government with the Northern League, but without the latter’s traditional center-right allies. The prime ministership went to an outsider: Giuseppe Conte, a law professor with no prior experience in party politics, who subsequently took over the leadership of the M5S. Relations between the coalition partners were rocky from the start. Campaigning for the May 2019 European elections led to escalating tensions, which culminated in the breakup of the coalition in August.

The M5S chose to avoid an early election and formed instead a new government coalition with the Democratic Party and other forces of the center-left, supporting a second govern-

⁵The series is completed by two non-partisan “technocratic” governments led by Lamberto Dini (1995–96) and Mario Monti (2011–13).

ment presided by Mr. Conte. This second coalition proved no less fractious than the first, and it also broke up in January 2021. A government of national unity led by another non-partisan prime minister, former ECB president Mario Draghi, took over until July 2022, when the M5S triggered a government crisis and a snap election.

Following the established pattern of turnover, the 2022 general election saw the decisive victory of the only major party that had supported none of the three governments ruling since 2018: i.e., the right-wing Brothers of Italy, which formed a government in coalition with its long-standing center-right allies—Forza Italia and the Northern League. Just as in 2013 and 2018, the M5S refused to join any pre-electoral alliance and ran alone. While far from its prior successes, it remained the third most voted party, with 15.5% of the vote.

Though forced by parliamentary arithmetic into uneasy, unstable government coalitions, the M5S consistently retained an anti-establishment platform as its main defining feature. The party stresses the contrast between political elites and the people, rather than ideological cleavages between left and right. It has tried to dub the post-2018 political landscape the “Third Republic” to portray its own governments as a clean break with those of the past. It expresses disdain of all other parties, stating in its manifesto that the M5S itself “is not a political party, nor is it meant to become one in the future”—members are accordingly instructed to call the M5S a “movement” and never a party.

The founding narrative of the M5S focuses on political corruption, misuse of public funds by political parties, and the inadequacy of the electoral system. The M5S calls for binding term limits for all elected officials and a ban on people under criminal investigation (or, a fortiori, with criminal convictions) holding elected office. Two seminal M5S initiatives were the V-Day and the V2-Day, held in 2007 and 2008 respectively. These were political rallies—also officially known as “Vaffanculo Days,” i.e., “Fuck-Off Days”—designed for Grillo and his supporters to meet and literally shout abuse at existing political parties and their members.

The M5S has also prominently advocated direct democracy, enabled by the internet, as a replacement for representative democracy, which it portrays as corrupt and obsolete. It uses a blog for supporters and politicians to communicate, and a proprietary online application (the Rousseau Platform) for registered members to vote on selected issues and steer the party’s

platform. The web platform is also used to pick some candidates for all elections through an online primary. The candidate selection process is geared towards finding ordinary people to run for office, and excluding candidates tainted by prior political experience outside the party (Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2015).

Voters made no mistake about the anti-establishment message of the M5S. Post-election surveys from 2013 show that protest voting and anti-establishment attitudes have strong explanatory power in predicting support for M5S candidates (Passarelli and Tuorto 2016). Post-election surveys from 2018 likewise show that M5S voters were motivated by mistrust of political institutions—which Corbetta et al. (2018) label as “political populism.” The M5S also displays many other features characteristic of populist parties, as defined for instance by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). E.g., content analysis of the M5S blog shows that its narrative is highly flexible and adaptable, consistent with the theory of “thin ideology” by populist parties (Manucci and Amsler 2018).

Other Italian political parties also share some populist traits. Every Italian party to the right of the political center has been classified as populist by at least some cross-country studies (Guiso et al. 2018). However, none comes close to the anti-establishment credentials of the M5S. More characteristic of the Brothers of Italy and the Northern League is their tendency to right-wing radicalism and backlash against cultural change (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Corbetta et al. 2018). Far from being an anti-establishment outsider, the Northern League has long been the main establishment party in several regions (Passarelli 2013; Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Its incumbency goes back such a long way that it was already governing some municipalities in coalition with the Christian Democrats before 1993.

2.2 MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT IN ITALY

Italy is subdivided into a large number of mostly small municipalities: a total of 8,092 with an average population of 7,345 at the latest census in 2011. Municipalities around the 5,000-resident threshold are thus remarkably representative. Approximately 70% of municipalities were below this population threshold, and almost 30% have between 3,001 and 10,000 residents. Table 1 presents the entire distribution.

Table 1: Size Distribution of Italian Municipalities

| Population Range | Municipalities | | Total Population | |
|--------------------|----------------|--------|------------------|--------|
| | No. | % | Residents | % |
| Up to 1,000 | 1,951 | 24.11 | 1,062,284 | 1.79 |
| 1,001 to 3,000 | 2,602 | 32.16 | 4,791,028 | 8.06 |
| 3,001 to 5,000 | 1,149 | 14.20 | 4,471,018 | 7.52 |
| 5,001 to 10,000 | 1,186 | 14.66 | 8,390,615 | 14.12 |
| 10,001 to 15,000 | 480 | 5.93 | 5,853,140 | 9.85 |
| 15,001 to 30,000 | 417 | 5.15 | 8,537,223 | 14.36 |
| 30,001 to 50,000 | 166 | 2.05 | 6,341,787 | 10.67 |
| 50,001 to 100,000 | 95 | 1.17 | 6,318,226 | 10.63 |
| 100,001 to 250,000 | 34 | 0.42 | 4,877,881 | 8.21 |
| 250,001 to 500,000 | 6 | 0.07 | 1,853,133 | 3.12 |
| Above 500,000 | 6 | 0.07 | 6,937,409 | 11.67 |
| All municipalities | 8,092 | 100.00 | 59,433,744 | 100.00 |

Notes: Resident population on October 9, 2011. Data from the 2011 census.

The administration of each municipality (*comune*) is entrusted to a directly elected mayor (*sindaco*). Mayors serve five-year terms and are limited to two consecutive terms in office, extended to three for municipalities up to 3,000 residents. They are elected at the same time as the municipal council (*consiglio comunale*) in a single local election. In municipalities up to 15,000 residents, each mayoral candidate runs jointly with a list of candidates for the council in a first-past-the-post election.⁶ The candidate who obtains a plurality of the votes is elected mayor, and the associated list automatically obtains two thirds of the seats on the council; the remainder is allocated proportionally among all other lists.⁷

The mayor appoints a municipal cabinet (*giunta comunale*), one of whose members (*assessori*) serves as deputy mayor. In municipalities up to 15,000 residents, cabinet members are normally selected among municipal councillors.⁸ The municipal cabinet exercises both

⁶Almost all small-town mayors assemble a so-called “civic list” of candidates that is not formally affiliated with a national political party. This choice may reflect either a non-partisan candidacy or the need for a big-tent coalition to contest a first-past-the-post election.

⁷In larger municipalities, the mayor is elected by two-round majority rule. A single mayoral candidate can be supported by several lists of candidates for the municipal council. Moreover, voters are allowed to split their ballot, voting for a mayoral candidate but an opposing list for the council. The council election deviates from proportional representation and tends to produce a majority supporting the elected mayor, but falls short of guaranteeing it.

⁸In small municipalities cabinet members must be selected from the municipal councillors, unless a two

executive and legislative powers. Thus, its members are overwhelmingly responsible for municipal governance, and they are the focus of accountability for their voters. The municipal council approves the municipal budget and supervises the municipal administration. It has the power to dismiss the mayor and cabinet, but only by resigning en masse and triggering an early election.⁹ This option is meant to be a last resort, and in practice it is very rare.

Municipalities provide important public services: notably waste collection and disposal, local public transport, and a local welfare system that includes public daycares, as well as the canteens and building maintenance for public schools (but not their teaching staff). Municipalities are also responsible for urban planning, including building permits and business licences; and for local and traffic police. In addition to receiving intergovernmental transfers and levying fines for infractions and fees for services (including the waste-disposal tax), municipalities can raise revenues by setting property taxes (in a range of 0.2% to 0.6% of the land registry valuation) and a surcharge on the national income tax up to 0.8%.

Accordingly, Italian voters care about municipal government. In turn, there is evidence that local politicians in Italy behave according to the predictions of classic models of political agency: they engage in yardstick competition (Bartolini and Santolini 2012; Bordignon, Grembi and Piazza 2017); they follow an electoral budget cycle, mitigated by voter information and by party monitoring (Cioffi, Messina and Tommasino 2012; Repetto 2018); and they respond to political pressure by tilting public good provision towards more visible outcomes, and conversely tax collection towards more shrouded instruments (Bordignon, Grembi and Piazza 2017; Bracco, Porcelli and Redoano 2019; Lockwood et al. 2022).

thirds majority of councillors approves an ordinance enabling the mayor to select external cabinet members. Conversely, in municipalities above 15,000 residents councillors cannot be cabinet members too.

⁹The early election then takes place at the first subsequent electoral date, most often the following spring. However, the council, mayor and cabinet are all immediately dismissed and replaced by an interim municipal administration, managed by a civil servant (*commissario*) appointed by the provincial representative of the Ministry of the Interior (*prefetto*).

2.3 THE 5,000-RESIDENT THRESHOLD

We identify plausibly exogenous differences in the quality of local government by exploiting a discontinuous change in mayors' compensation. Their wages are set by law as a function of municipal population, with large discrete jumps at legally specified thresholds. Following Gagliarducci and Nannicini (2013), we focus on the 5,000-resident threshold. At this threshold, the mayor's monthly wage rises by 29%, from €1,952 to €2,510. The wages of other members of the municipal cabinet rise even more sharply: from €391 to €1,256 for the deputy mayor, and from €293 to €1,130 for other cabinet members.¹⁰

Local elections and municipal governments in Italy are subject to a wide set of rules that vary discretely as a function of population thresholds. As a consequence, estimates of the treatment effect for one policy risk being confounded by other policies that change simultaneously at the same threshold (Eggers et al. 2018). Table 2 summarizes the relevant threshold rules for the period we consider (2013–18). The main threat to our identification strategy arises from population thresholds governing the enforcement of budget rules imposed at the national level to improve the fiscal discipline of local governments.

From 1999 to 2015, Italy enforced a changing set of budget rules under the Internal Stability Pact. Its enforcement succeeded at improving budgetary discipline, but it had the downside of worsening political selection by dissuading more capable candidates (Grembi, Nannicini and Troiano 2016; Gamalerio and Trombetta 2022). From 2001 to 2012, enforcement of the Pact exempted municipalities up to 5,000 residents; from 2013 to 2015 this exemption threshold was reduced to 1,000 residents.¹¹ To avoid confounding, we restrict our analysis to municipal administrations elected after the exemption threshold was lowered.

Other population thresholds govern electoral rules and the size of the municipal council

¹⁰The reported figures are the baseline wages, determined by DM 119/2000 as modified by L 266/2005, art. 1, cl. 54, which cut by 10% the compensation of all elected local officials. Baseline wages can be increased up to 10%, based on municipal characteristics that include the amount and composition of municipal revenues and expenditures, as well as tourism in the municipal territory. Elected officials in small municipalities can also keep their job outside the municipal government, but if they are employees and do not go on leave their municipal wage is cut by 50%.

¹¹Earlier plans to lower the exemption threshold from 5,000 to 3,000 residents were repeatedly announced but never enacted. Since 2016, the Internal Stability Pact has been replaced by a simpler balanced-budget requirement that applies to all municipalities. The Pact had also been universally applied in 1999 and 2000.

Table 2: Threshold Rules for Italian Municipalities since 2013

| Population | <i>By Current Population</i> | | | | <i>By Latest Census Population</i> | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | Mayor's Wage | Deputy Mayor's Wage | Cabinet Members' Wage | Internal Stability Pact | Electoral Rule | Mayor's Term Limit (since 2014) |
| Up to 1,000 | €1,162 | 15% | 10% | No | Single round | 3 |
| 1,001 to 3,000 | €1,301 | 20% | 15% | Yes | Single round | 3 |
| 3,001 to 5,000 | €1,952 | 20% | 15% | Yes | Single round | 2 |
| 5,001 to 10,000 | €2,510 | 50% | 45% | Yes | Single round | 2 |
| 10,001 to 15,000 | €2,789 | 55% | 45% | Yes | Single round | 2 |
| 15,001 to 30,000 | €2,789 | 55% | 45% | Yes | Two rounds | 2 |
| 30,001 to 50,000 | €3,114 | 55% | 45% | Yes | Two rounds | 2 |
| 50,001 to 100,000 | €3,719 | 75% | 60% | Yes | Two rounds | 2 |
| 100,001 to 250,000 | €4,509 | 75% | 60% | Yes | Two rounds | 2 |
| 250,001 to 500,000 | €5,206 | 75% | 65% | Yes | Two rounds | 2 |
| Above 500,000 | €7,018 | 75% | 65% | Yes | Two rounds | 2 |

| Population | <i>By Latest Census Population</i> | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Cabinet Members (since 2014) | Cabinet Members (2012-13) | Cabinet Gender Quota (since 2014) | Councillors (since 2014) | Councillors (2012-13) | Council Election Gender Quota |
| Up to 1,000 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 6 | No |
| 1,001 to 3,000 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 10 | 6 | No |
| 3,001 to 5,000 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 12 | 7 | No |
| 5,001 to 10,000 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 12 | 10 | Yes |
| 10,001 to 15,000 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 16 | 16 | Yes |
| 15,001 to 30,000 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 16 | 16 | Yes |
| 30,001 to 50,000 | 7 | 7 | 3 | 24 | 24 | Yes |
| 50,001 to 100,000 | 7 | 7 | 3 | 24 | 24 | Yes |
| 100,001 to 250,000 | 9 | 9 | 4 | 32 | 32 | Yes |
| 250,001 to 500,000 | 10 | 10 | 4 | 36 | 36 | Yes |
| Above 500,000 | 11-12 | 11-12 | 5 | 40-64 | 40-64 | Yes |

Notes: Budget rules based on the number of residents measured at the beginning of the year before the budget year. Electoral rules based on the number of residents enumerated at the latest census (October 9, 2011). The mayor's wage is the baseline gross monthly wage. The deputy mayor's and other cabinet members' wages are expressed as a percentage of the mayor's. The enforcement of the Internal Stability Pact is reported for 2013-15; since 2016 the Pact is superseded by a balanced-budget rule for all municipalities. The electoral rule can be a single-round first-past-the-post system that guarantees a two-third majority of council seats for the mayor's supporters; or a two-round majoritarian system with a possibility of divided government. Term limits for mayors are reported since 2014; previously the limit was two terms for all municipalities. The number of cabinet members is the maximum number a mayor can appoint. The cabinet gender quota is reported since 2014, and represents the minimum number of municipal cabinet members (including the mayor) of either gender, computed under the assumption that the mayor appoints the maximum number of cabinet members; in 2013 a weaker quota of at least one board member of either gender applied to all municipalities. The number of councillors is the number of elected members of the municipal council, not counting the mayor. Council election gender quotas require each list of candidates for the municipal council to include no less than one third of candidates of either gender, and allow each voter to cast two preference votes so long as they are for candidates of different genders within the same list.

and cabinet. These thresholds should not pose a risk of confounding because of a crucial rule in Italian law, which so far has not received the attention it deserves. Although both budget rules and electoral rules vary discretely at specified population thresholds, such thresholds are based on two distinct measures of municipal population.

Electoral rules depend on population enumerated at the latest census date (October 9, 2011). Budget rules, including those governing local politicians' wages, depend instead on population measured by the Italian statistical agency—on the basis of administrative records of births, deaths and changes in legal residence—at the beginning of the year before the budget year.¹² Needless to say, the two population measurements are highly correlated. However, a classic regression discontinuity design based on either of them fails to identify the effect of the other, which is only proxied with continuous measurement error (Davezies and Le Barbanchon 2017).¹³

Our forcing variable is population at the beginning of the election year, which determines budget rules for the first budget that elected municipal cabinets are going to enact and for the first full-year compensation they are going to receive. Thus, municipal population in our sample is measured no earlier than January 1, 2013. As a result, it never identifies the effects of electoral rules based on thresholds for 2011 census population.

Beyond this econometric consideration, it is also reassuring that the 5,000-resident threshold is almost entirely devoid of relevance for electoral rules (Gagliarducci and Nannicini 2013).¹⁴ Neither of the two most salient changes in electoral rules occurs at 5,000 residents. At 15,000 residents the election of the mayor switches from a first-past-the-post to a two-round electoral system, with an accompanying increase in the proportionality of the electoral

¹²The statutory definition of population applicable to electoral rules is provided by DLgs 267/2000, art. 37, cl. 4; the statutory definition applicable to budget rules is provided by DLgs 267/2000, art. 156, cl. 2. Binding interpretations by the Ministry of the Interior and the Court of Audit have consistently determined that the latter definition applies to the compensation of local officials (e.g., Court of Audit deliberation n. 7/SEZAUT/2010/QMIG). Its annual update on the basis of yearly population measurements had already been expressly provided for by DL 8/1993, art. 8-bis.

¹³This consideration appears to have been widely overlooked. Eggers et al. (2018) seem to assume instead that all threshold rules in Italy depend on population at the latest census date. So do all the studies of Italian fiscal rules and politicians' wages cited in their meta-analysis (Gagliarducci and Nannicini 2013; Grembi, Nannicini and Troiano 2016; De Benedetto and De Paola 2017).

¹⁴Gagliarducci and Nannicini (2013) noted that the 50,000-resident threshold would be even more precisely free of confounds, but it cannot be exploited because too few municipalities are so large.

rule for the municipal council.¹⁵ Since 2014, term limits for mayors are lengthened from two to three consecutive five-year terms for municipalities up to 3,000 residents.¹⁶

Several population thresholds govern the size of the municipal government, raising in lockstep the number of council and cabinet members.¹⁷ However, the number of municipal officials does not normally change at 5,000 residents. It did so exceptionally only for municipal administrations elected in 2012 and 2013, as a result of nationwide austerity measures.¹⁸

One electoral rule does change at 5,000 residents. Since 2013, in municipalities above this census population each list of candidates for the municipal council must include at least one third of candidates of either gender. Moreover, voters can cast two preference votes as long as they are for candidates of different genders. Instead, in municipalities with a census population below 5,000 candidate lists are unconstrained and voters can cast a single preference vote. This rule successfully induced a discontinuous increase in women’s representation on the municipal council (Baltrunaite et al. 2019).¹⁹

Consistent with econometric theory, Table A.5 in the Appendix confirms that this discontinuity does not confound our identification strategy. We find no significant increase in the share of female municipal councillors at our 5,000-resident threshold, measured by current population at the beginning of the election year.²⁰

A last potential confound was initially legislated, but eventually never enforced. In theory, L 122/2010 stipulated that all municipalities up to 5,000 residents would have to join

¹⁵Introducing a runoff election promotes moderation and weakens extremism in municipal politics (Bordignon, Nannicini and Tabellini 2016). It also attracts more educated politicians and induces greater fiscal discipline (Barone and de Blasio 2013).

¹⁶Tighter term limits should be expected to worsen screening and reduce the equilibrium competence of politicians, as they do for U.S. governors (Alt, Bueno de Mesquita and Rose 2011).

¹⁷Theoretically, their number could affect local public-good provision, although empirical studies have yielded conflicting results. In Bavaria larger councils spend more (Egger and Koethenbuerger 2010). In Finland and Sweden they spend less (Pettersson-Lidbom 2012).

¹⁸Our results are robust to excluding mayors elected in 2013, which comprise only one tenth of our sample.

¹⁹On the other hand, evidence from similar gender-balance policies in Spain shows that greater representation of women on municipal councils does not translate into differences in fiscal policy, nor in the likelihood that women reach more powerful political positions (Bagues and Campa 2021).

²⁰A separate gender-equality policy applies to municipal cabinets. Since 2013, both genders are required to be represented on each municipal cabinet. Since 2014, in municipalities above 3,000 residents each gender must be represented by at least 40% of the cabinet, rounding to the nearest integer. Recalling that the number of cabinet members exceptionally changed at 5,000 residents in 2013, but no longer since 2014, there has never been a jump in gender quotas for municipal cabinets at 5,000 residents.

an intermunicipal union, which would take over the exercise of the “fundamental functions” of public-good provision statutorily assigned to its constituent municipalities. In practice, the date for this requirement to become binding kept being deferred. In 2019 the Constitutional Court ruled the provision unconstitutional, citing the unclear cost-saving benefits that could be expected from its application.²¹ Table A.1 in the Appendix confirms that there is no discontinuity at 5,000 residents in the likelihood of membership of intermunicipal unions.

Finally, five regions of Italy—the two islands of Sardinia and Sicily, and the border regions of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige and Valle d’Aosta—have special statutes of autonomy that empower them to vary the rules governing local elections and local politicians’ wages in their own municipalities. However, actual departures from the default national rules are modest. For the compensation of municipal cabinet members, in particular, Sardinia follows the default rules, as does Sicily since 2015. Valle d’Aosta sets its own pay scales, but these share the default discontinuity at 5,000 residents based on annual population measurement.²² Exceptionally, Friuli-Venezia Giulia bases its discontinuity at 5,000 residents on population enumerated at the latest census, as did Sicily up to 2014; while Trentino-Alto Adige sets wages individually for each municipality.²³ Accordingly, we use 2011 census population throughout for Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and for municipal administrations elected in Sicily in 2013–14; while we exclude Trentino-Alto Adige from our analysis.

²¹Membership of intermunicipal unions has negligible effects on local-government efficiency (Manestra, Messina and Peta 2018; Luca and Modrego 2021).

²²In Valle d’Aosta, wages rise by 38% at the threshold: from €2,200 to €3,030 for the mayor, from €1210 to €1667 for the deputy mayor and from €880 to €1,212 for other cabinet members (LR 4/2015). This threshold rule was introduced before the 2015 elections: the first in our sample, since the region held no municipal elections in 2013 and 2014.

²³In Friuli-Venezia Giulia wages rise by 15% at the threshold: from €2,283 to €2,626 for the mayor, from €913 to €1,050 for the deputy mayor and from €684 to €788 for other cabinet members (DGR 58/2003, cl. 25; DGR 1193/2011). In Sicily, up to 2014 wages used to rise by 28% at the threshold: from €2,221 to €2,841 for the mayor, from €1,221 to €1,562 for the deputy mayor and from €99 to €1,278 for other cabinet members (DPReg 19/2001); since 2015, the default national rules apply instead (LR 11/2015, art. 2).

3 DATA AND ECONOMETRIC SPECIFICATION

3.1 DATA ON MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

The Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior provides individual-level data on politicians holding elected office at the municipal level: mayors, other members of the municipal cabinet, and councillors. The dataset contains information about politicians' age, gender, and their self-reported educational attainment and previous occupation. Following Cattaneo et al. (2016), we restrict our analysis to the sample of municipalities with population greater than the previous cutoff and smaller than the following cutoff: i.e., between 3,001 and 10,000 residents. Table 3 presents summary statistics for all municipal cabinets elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities within this size class.²⁴

The typical municipal cabinet member is a middle-aged man. Women account for little more than a third of the sample. Both median and average age are in the mid-forties. Almost half of local politicians have a university (or other post-secondary) degree, confirming positive selection relative to the overall population.

We code politicians' prior occupation along five mutually exclusive categories, on the lines of Gagliarducci and Nannicini (2013). First, we consider politicians who were unemployed, retired, or otherwise out of the labor force before their election: they account for about one sixth of our sample. Business owners, along with corporate executives and directors, account for one fifteenth. All other occupations we subdivide into skill categories based on the share of college graduates among all municipal office-holders reporting each occupation.²⁵ We define high-skill occupations as those with at least 60% college graduates: almost one third of municipal cabinet members in our sample report such occupations.²⁶ We define low-skill occupations as those with no more than 20% college graduates: these occupations account

²⁴Table A.2 in the Appendix provides separate summary statistics for mayors and other municipal cabinet members, as well as for municipal councillors.

²⁵To classify occupations, we use the entire universe of municipal office-holders in Italy, 2013–17, regardless of region and municipal population. Occupations in the database are not coded according to a standard occupational classification, so we cannot use a wider labor-force sample.

²⁶By this definition, the most common high-skill occupations in our sample include architects, engineers, lawyers and other legal professionals, medical doctors and other healthcare professionals, managers, and high-school teachers.

Table 3: Municipalities and Municipal Cabinets, 2013–17

| | Median | Average | Std. Dev. | Obs. |
|--|--------|---------|-----------|--------|
| <i>(a) Politicians' Characteristics</i> | | | | |
| Age | 45 | 45.4 | 11.6 | 11,039 |
| Female | 0 | .372 | .483 | 11,039 |
| University | 0 | .463 | .499 | 11,039 |
| Not Employed | 0 | .158 | .364 | 10,292 |
| Business Owner | 0 | .068 | .252 | 10,292 |
| High-Skill Occupation | 0 | .309 | .462 | 10,292 |
| Low-Skill Occupation | 0 | .161 | .368 | 10,292 |
| <i>(b) Municipal Waste Collection</i> | | | | |
| Recycled Waste (%) | 68.3 | 63.4 | 19.9 | 2,237 |
| Waste per Resident (kg) | 424 | 455 | 159 | 2,237 |
| Cost per Resident (€) | 124 | 141 | 70 | 1,608 |
| Unit Cost (¢/kg) | 28.6 | 31.2 | 10.8 | 1,608 |
| <i>(c) Other Municipal Characteristics</i> | | | | |
| Joblessness Rate (%) | 12.7 | 16.8 | 8.8 | 2,201 |
| Immigrant Inflow (per thousand) | 0.49 | 0.48 | 3.24 | 2,230 |
| MP Corruption News | 7.65 | 8.02 | 1.84 | 2,221 |

Notes: Data for municipal administrations elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities with 3,001 to 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Panel (a) reports characteristics of all municipal cabinet members, including mayors. Data are from the Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior. *Age* is measured at the beginning of each mandate (in years). All other variables are dummies. *University* measures if a politician obtained a college or other post-secondary degree. *Not Employed* includes unemployed, retired, or otherwise out of the labor force. *Business Owner* includes corporate directors and executives as well as business owners. *High-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with at least 60% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. *Low-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with no more than 20% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. Panel (b) reports data on municipal waste collection. Data are from the Cadaster of Municipal Waste administered by the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research. All variables are averages over the calendar years wholly included in a mayor's term. *Recycled Waste* is the ratio between recycled waste and total waste collected. *Waste per Resident* is the total amount of municipal waste collected, whether recycled or not. Costs refer to the total including capital costs as well as operating costs for recycling, for disposing non-recycled waste, and for managing overall waste collection. Panel (c) reports additional characteristics of each municipality. The *Joblessness Rate* is computed at the 2011 census among males 15 and older who are neither students nor retirees. *Immigrant Inflow* is the 2013–17 average net annual inflow of foreign immigrants into the municipality, reported as a share of 2011 census population. *MP Corruption News* is constructed for each House constituency by searching the “Justice” section of the online archive of Italy's main newspaper (*Corriere della Sera*) for the years 2012–18. It equals the percentage of articles mentioning MPs from the constituency that also contain a keyword for corruption, averaging across the keywords “investigated” (*indagato*) and “notice of investigation” (*avviso di garanzia*).

for one sixth of observations.²⁷ Other occupations form our omitted category, comprising almost a third of our sample.

Beyond the individual characteristics of municipal cabinet members, we measure the efficiency of municipal governments through their performance at waste management. Waste collection and disposal is one of the “fundamental functions” entrusted to Italian municipalities. It is the only one for which systematic performance measurement is available, through the Cadastre of Municipal Waste administered by the Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA).

Italian law mandates such measurement to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of local compliance with national environmental goals. Quantity measurements are collected at the municipal level by provincial and regional environmental protection agencies. We focus on a key performance indicator: the share of total municipal waste that is separately collected and sent to recycling facilities.²⁸ The Cadastre also includes cost measures from the official reporting of the institutions entrusted with municipal waste collection.²⁹

Increasing the share of recycling has become a prominent policy goal on a global scale, reflecting the growing political importance of environmental concerns (Kinnaman 2006). While the average share of recycled waste in our sample is around two thirds, there is substantial heterogeneity, with a range from 0.6% (in Zapponeta, FG) to 93% (in Breda di Piave, TV). Such variation reflects cross-municipality differences in both the design and the implementation of waste-management plans, and correlates negatively with local institutional quality more broadly (D’Amato, Mazzanti and Montini 2013; Agovino, Ferrara and Garofalo 2016; Agovino et al. 2020).

In our validity tests we check that the effect of the 5,000-resident threshold is robust to controlling for several local characteristics that plausibly affect demand for populism in each municipality. As a proxy for the health of the local labor market, we compute

²⁷By this definition, the most common low-skill occupations in our sample include craftsmen, factory workers, shopkeepers, policemen and security guards, nurses, and salesmen.

²⁸Our efficiency measures are averages of annual values over the years entirely included in a mayor’s term. Following Gagliarducci and Nannicini (2013), we exclude election years, when different administrations are responsible for the months before and after an election.

²⁹Municipal cost data, however, are often missing from the Cadastre. None have been provided after 2019.

the joblessness rate among males who are neither students nor retirees, using data from the 2011 census.³⁰ We measure exposure to immigrants by the 2013–17 average of their net annual inflows, relative to census population.³¹ Furthermore, we construct a measure of corruption scandals engulfing local representatives to the national parliament by web-scraping the historical archive of Italy’s leading national newspaper, the *Corriere della Sera*.³² For each representative sitting in the House (*Camera dei deputati*) in the 2008–13 or 2013–18 legislatures, we count the number of newspaper articles from 2012 to 2018 that mention the MP’s name, and the number of those articles that also contain a keyword denoting coverage of political corruption scandals.³³ For each House constituency, our measure of parliamentary corruption scandals is the percentage of articles mentioning MPs from the constituency that also include a keyword for corruption.³⁴

3.2 ELECTION DATA

Italians vote in elections at four levels of government: the municipality, the region, the national legislature and the European Parliament.³⁵ Ordinarily, elections at each level are held every five years, typically in late spring, with a staggered electoral calendar. We consider the 2014–18 electoral cycle.³⁶

³⁰We define jobless residents as those who are either unemployed, or out of the labor force without being students nor retirees. Excluding students and retirees from the computation approximates the non-employment rate for the prime-age male population. The census reports data by municipality only for the whole population ages 15 and over. The joblessness rate is missing for 29 municipalities that were created after the 2011 census.

³¹For municipalities created since 2013, the average is restricted to years after their creation.

³²We restrict our searches to the “Justice” subsection of the archive to minimize false positives.

³³We use as our keyword either “investigated” (*indagato*) or “notice of investigation” (*avviso di garanzia*), a formal notice that must be served to the subjects of a criminal investigation under Italian law. We build our measure using each keyword and then use the average of the two measures as our control variable.

³⁴Our measure is missing for nine municipalities because our searches find no articles mentioning MPs from Valle d’Aosta. The measure can also be interpreted as the share of articles mentioning an MP that also include a keyword for corruption, averaged across all MPs from a constituency weighting by the number of articles mentioning each MP. The weighting accounts for the different visibility and thereby salience of different MPs from the same constituency

³⁵Elections for a fifth level of government, the province, were held until 2011. Since then, the provincial council has instead been elected indirectly by mayors and municipal councillors.

³⁶During this five-year period, regional elections were held once each in every region except Basilicata, which should have voted in 2015 but called snap elections at the end of 2013 instead and thus returned to the regular election calendar in spring 2019. Our sample also excludes regional elections in Sardinia (2014)

The electoral system for regional elections bears close resemblance to the one for municipal elections. The regional president is directly elected with a single-round first-past-the-post system, and appoints members of the regional cabinet.³⁷ Regional councils are elected simultaneously, with an adjusted system of proportional representation. Deviations from pure proportionality differ across regions, but all adjustments share the goal of ensuring that the regional president is supported by an absolute majority of regional councillors.³⁸

National elections were held in 2018, at the end of a full five-year legislature. While presidential systems have been adopted for sub-national elections, the national government operates under a pure parliamentary system. Voters elect separately the two chambers of the legislature: the House and the Senate.³⁹ The electoral system is a peculiar mixture of closed-list proportional representation with a first-past-the-post add-on. For each chamber, voters cast a single ballot, but their vote has two functions.

First, it determines the allocation of slightly more than 60% of the seats by party-list proportional representation—with several electoral thresholds, and with electoral districts that always coincide with the regions for electing the Senate, but for electing the House split five larger regions into two and Lombardy alone into four.

Second, it also determines the election of slightly less than 40% of MPs in single-member first-past-the-post constituencies, based not on party lists, but rather on coalitions of several party lists fielding a single candidate. The system was designed to accommodate and promote the pre-electoral formation of two rival coalitions of left-wing and right-wing parties. However, the M5S has consistently run alone outside of the two coalitions.⁴⁰

Elections to the European Parliament were held in 2014, under an open-list system of proportional representation with a 4% electoral threshold. Italy was allocated 73 out of 751

because the M5S did not contest them, and in Valle d’Aosta (2018) because ballots were centrally collected before being counted, making municipal results unavailable.

³⁷In theory, the electoral system for Tuscany envisions a runoff election if no candidate achieves more than 40% of first-round votes. In practice, this has never occurred.

³⁸Most councillors are elected in open party lists, with a ranking determined by preference votes.

³⁹The House was composed of 630 representatives, reduced to 400 since the 2022 general election. The Senate of 315 (then 200) elected senators plus a small number of life senators appointed by the President of the Republic—currently six and historically never more than eleven.

⁴⁰A number of minor parties also run outside the major coalitions. Only one such minor party, the left-wing Free and Equal, managed to get any representatives elected in 2018.

seats, and its electoral districts coincided with the five NUTS-1 statistical groups of regions.

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for all these elections, based on official data from the Historical Election Archive of the Ministry of the Interior and complementary regional sources. To avoid duplication, for national elections we consider only House ballots; and for regional elections we consider only votes for the regional president.

We study election results in 2014–18 for municipalities whose mayor had been elected between 2013 and 2017 with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents. We also require mayors to have been elected no later than the year preceding the higher-level election under consideration, so voters have had some experience of their administration. As a result, our election sample is smallest in 2014, when we consider only municipalities that had elected their mayor in 2013 (one tenth of the total). It is largest for the 2018 national election.

Between 2014 and 2018, average turnout for municipalities in our sample ranges from 49% for European elections to 75% for national elections. These differences in turnout reflect long-standing variation across different levels of elections, rather than fluctuations over time. In each case, turnout is quite similar in the election we consider and the previous election for the same level of government. It is also close to the national average of 73% for the 2018 national election and 57% for the 2014 European election.

On the other hand, the average vote share of the M5S shows an upward trajectory over the period. In our sample, it starts at 21% in the 2014 European election and reaches its peak of 31% in the 2018 national election. These results mirror almost exactly its national average vote shares in the same elections, respectively 21% and 32%.

We aggregate the vote shares of other parties according to the stable two-coalition landscape discussed in Section 2. The mainstream right consists of the Brothers of Italy, Forza Italia, the Northern League and their minor coalition partners. The mainstream left consists of the Democratic Party and its minor coalition partners. The remainder is the non-M5S fringe, which typically consists of ideologically extreme parties. One of the two mainstream coalitions contested each election as the incumbent: in the 2018 national election, the mainstream left. We classify the rival coalition as the mainstream opposition. The non-M5S

Table 4: Election Data, 2014–18

| | Median | Average | Std. Dev. | Obs. |
|-----------------------------------|--------|---------|-----------|-------|
| <i>(a) Regional Elections</i> | | | | |
| M5S | 16.3 | 17.6 | 8.0 | 1,304 |
| Mainstream Right | 49.3 | 47.1 | 13.2 | 1,304 |
| Mainstream Left | 26.4 | 29.6 | 12.3 | 1,304 |
| Non-M5S Fringe | 3.8 | 5.7 | 5.2 | 1,304 |
| Incumbent Parties | 50.0 | 45.7 | 14.6 | 1,304 |
| Mainstream Opposition | 27.5 | 31.1 | 12.7 | 1,304 |
| Non-M5S Opposition | 33.3 | 36.7 | 12.6 | 1,304 |
| Turnout | 62.5 | 62.3 | 13.5 | 1,304 |
| <i>(b) 2018 National Election</i> | | | | |
| M5S | 27.8 | 31.1 | 11.1 | 2,226 |
| Mainstream Right | 41.7 | 41.7 | 11.1 | 2,226 |
| Mainstream Left | 20.0 | 20.5 | 6.4 | 2,226 |
| Non-M5S Fringe | 6.3 | 6.7 | 2.6 | 2,226 |
| Non-M5S Opposition | 48.4 | 48.4 | 10.7 | 2,226 |
| Turnout | 76.6 | 75.0 | 6.1 | 2,226 |
| <i>(c) 2014 European Election</i> | | | | |
| M5S | 20.5 | 20.9 | 6.2 | 226 |
| Mainstream Right | 28.4 | 28.8 | 9.4 | 226 |
| Mainstream Left | 45.9 | 46.6 | 8.5 | 226 |
| Non-M5S Fringe | 3.5 | 3.6 | 1.8 | 226 |
| Turnout | 49.6 | 49.4 | 10.8 | 226 |

Notes: Data for elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose administration had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d’Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. The *Mainstream Right* consists of Forza Italia, the Northern League, the Brothers of Italy and their minor coalition partners. The *Mainstream Left* consists of the Democratic Party and its minor coalition partners. The *Non-M5S Fringe* is the remainder. *Incumbent Parties* are those in the outgoing government coalition. At the regional level it always coincides with one of the mainstream coalitions. At the national level it coincides with the *Mainstream Left*. At the European level it is undefined. The *Mainstream Opposition* is the other mainstream coalition. The *Non-M5S Opposition* is the sum of the *Mainstream Opposition* and *Non-M5S Fringe*.

opposition is the sum of the mainstream opposition and the non-M5S fringe.⁴¹

Throughout our period of interest, the mainstream right reaped much greater electoral success than the mainstream left, essentially doubling the latter’s vote share. In keeping with the pattern of perfect turnover discussed in Section 2, this also implies that incumbent parties performed poorly in the 2018 national election, just as they always had since 1993. However, incumbents were much less disadvantaged at the regional level, where they typically retained at least a plurality and often an outright majority of the vote.

3.3 IDENTIFYING THE EFFECT OF THE THRESHOLD

In our regression discontinuity (RD) model, we estimate the average impact on electoral support for the M5S of a greater quality of municipal government, induced by higher wages for the mayor and municipal cabinet above the 5,000-resident threshold. This local average treatment effect (LATE) is given by the difference in the counterfactual outcomes $Y_i(T_i)$ computed at the threshold:

$$\tau = \mathbb{E}[Y_i(1) - Y_i(0) | X_i = \underline{x}], \quad (1)$$

where the treatment assignment $T_i = \mathbf{1}(X_i \geq \underline{x})$ is based on municipal population X_i and the 5,000-resident threshold \underline{x} . The identification of this sharp RD treatment effect relies on the assumption that the conditional expectation functions $\mathbb{E}[Y_i(t) | X_i = x]$ for $t \in \{0, 1\}$ are continuous at the threshold (Hahn, Todd and van der Klaauw 2001).

Calonico et al. (2019) provide further conditions for nonparametric identification of the RD treatment effect with additional control variables (such as fixed effects) included in a vector \mathbf{Z}_i . We follow their approach, assuming additive separability between the running variable (i.e., population) and these covariates, and a linear specification for the latter but a

⁴¹In the 2018 national election, the mainstream right includes the Union of the Center. The mainstream left includes More Europe, Italy and Europe Together, and the People’s Civic List. The non-M5S fringe includes three extreme left parties (Free and Equal, Power to the People!, and the Communist Party) and three extreme right parties (the House of [Ezra] Pound, the Family [Values] People, and Italy for Italians).

fully nonparametric specification for the former.⁴² Then the covariate-adjusted RD treatment effect estimator is consistent so long as there is no RD treatment effect on the covariates.⁴³ It is obtained through a weighted local linear regression of the form:

$$\hat{\tau} : \hat{Y}_i = \hat{\alpha} + T_i \hat{\tau} + X_i \hat{\beta}_- + T_i X_i \hat{\beta}_+ + \mathbf{Z}'_i \hat{\gamma}. \quad (2)$$

The regression is local because it exploits only observations in a neighborhood of the threshold, i.e., with $X_i \in [\underline{x} - h, \underline{x} + h]$. We select the optimal bandwidth h through the data-driven procedure of mean square error optimization. The weighting of observations is determined by the choice of kernel $K((X_i - \underline{x})/h)$. We adopt a triangular kernel function, which downweights observations linearly as a function of their distance from the threshold. While we have written Equation 2 linearly for simplicity, this approach can be used for a local polynomial estimator of arbitrary order. Without covariates, for instance, $\hat{\tau}$ estimates the RD treatment effect as the difference in the limit values at the threshold of two local polynomial fits, with identical bandwidth and kernel: one for observations below the threshold, and one for observations above the threshold.

4 RESULTS

4.1 EXOGENOUS CHANGES IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT QUALITY

We begin our empirical analysis by confirming the exogenous change in the quality of municipal government identified by Gagliarducci and Nannicini (2013). The discontinuous increase in wages at the 5,000-resident threshold induces the entry of more qualified local politicians, which in turn induces better local government performance. Table 5 presents our RD estimates of these effects for municipalities between 3,001 and 10,000 residents that elected their municipal administration between 2013 and 2017.

⁴²This approach to RD covariate adjustment assumes linearity in parameters for the covariates, but allows for transformations of the original covariates and admits regressors of all kinds, including discrete variables.

⁴³This assumption is weaker than requiring $\mathbf{Z}_i(0)$ and $\mathbf{Z}_i(1)$ to have identical marginal distributions at the threshold, which is the usual assumption of predetermined covariates in an experimental setting.

Table 5: Local Politicians' Selection

| | Age | Female | University | Not Employed | Business Owner | High-Skill Occupation | Low-Skill Occupation |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Effect | -.090 | -.052*** | .048** | -.019 | .002 | .022 | -.040** |
| | (.550) | (.016) | (.032) | (.021) | (.014) | (.019) | (.016) |
| Robust p -value | .948 | .001 | .032 | .269 | .850 | .318 | .012 |
| Total Obs. | 11,039 | 11,039 | 11,039 | 10,292 | 10,292 | 10,292 | 10,292 |
| Bandwidth | 403 | 361 | 598 | 431 | 432 | 881 | 538 |
| Effective Obs. | 1,690 | 1,469 | 2,413 | 1,670 | 1,670 | 3,222 | 2,025 |
| Region FE | No | No | No | No | No | No | No |
| Clustering | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. |
| Effect | -.152 | -.109*** | .048*** | -.018 | .007 | .024* | -.035*** |
| | (.478) | (.015) | (.017) | (.018) | (.012) | (.014) | (.012) |
| Robust p -value | .913 | .000 | .005 | .229 | .832 | .070 | .002 |
| Total Obs. | 11,039 | 11,039 | 11,039 | 10,292 | 10,292 | 10,292 | 10,292 |
| Bandwidth | 405 | 202 | 587 | 454 | 492 | 719 | 537 |
| Effective Obs. | 1,702 | 816 | 2,381 | 1,746 | 1,841 | 2,574 | 2,016 |
| Region FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Clustering | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region |

Notes: Effect of the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold on the characteristics of all municipal cabinet members, including mayors. Data from the Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior for municipal administrations elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities with 3,001 to 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for municipal administrations elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). *Age* is measured at the beginning of each mandate (in years). All other variables are dummies. *University* measures if a politician obtained a college or other post-secondary degree. *Not Employed* includes unemployed, retired, or otherwise out of the labor force. *Business Owner* includes corporate directors and executives as well as business owners. *High-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with at least 60% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. *Low-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with no more than 20% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. All regressions include fixed effects for a politician's position (mayor, deputy mayor, or other cabinet member). Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

The results in Table 5 are consistent with Gagliarducci and Nannicini’s (2013) findings for an earlier period. Column 3 shows the significant effect of an exogenous wage increase on education levels in the municipal cabinet. The threshold increases the share of local politicians with a post-secondary education by 5 percentage points, reflecting positive selection in response to heightened pecuniary incentives.

The same heightened selection is reflected by differences in prior occupations. Better-paid municipal cabinet members are significantly less likely to come from low-skill occupations. They also appear more likely to come from high-skill occupations and less likely to be non-employed, though both effects are imprecisely estimated. The threshold has no discernible impact on politicians’ average age, but it significantly reduces the share of women. This finding mirrors those for education and occupation. Higher wages attract politicians with higher outside earnings. Just as the skill premium implies they are more likely to be educated, so does the gender wage gap imply they are more likely to be male.⁴⁴

Table 6 turns from proxies for the quality of local politicians to a direct measure of the efficiency of their administration. Our results confirm Gagliarducci and Nannicini’s (2013) finding that more qualified local politicians cause better municipal government performance. While the estimates are noisier than for politicians’ quality, the share of recycled waste jumps up by 4 percentage points. Confirming that this jump represents an efficiency gain, the threshold has no significant effect on the cost of municipal waste collection, either relative to population or relative to the amount of waste collected. Nor does waste per capita exhibit any discontinuity, as expected since the amount of waste produced depends rather on residents than on municipal administrators.

⁴⁴Tables A.3 and A.4 in the Appendix report results separately for mayors and other cabinet members. The significance of our results are driven by the latter, which is unsurprising since the analysis is higher-powered both statistically and economically. Cabinet members are four times as numerous as mayors. Their compensation more than triples at the threshold, whereas mayors’ compensation increases by 30%. Table A.5 confirms there is no placebo effect for municipal councillors.

Table 6: Local Government Efficiency

| | Recycled Waste (%) | Waste per Resident (kg) | Cost per Resident (€) | Unit Cost (€/kg) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Effect | 4.92 (3.56) | -19.2 (23.2) | -14.0 (11.3) | 0.24 (2.18) |
| Robust p -value | .163 | .326 | .167 | .878 |
| Total Obs. | 2,237 | 2,237 | 1,608 | 1,608 |
| Bandwidth | 624 | 830 | 699 | 852 |
| Effective Obs. | 500 | 667 | 390 | 484 |
| Region FE Clustering | No Munic. | No Munic. | No Munic. | No Munic. |
| Effect | 3.68* (2.03) | -4.2 (15.2) | -8.69 (7.34) | -0.30 (1.09) |
| Robust p -value | .073 | .586 | .191 | .759 |
| Total Obs. | 2,237 | 2,237 | 1,608 | 1,608 |
| Bandwidth | 775 | 883 | 521 | 699 |
| Effective Obs. | 613 | 474 | 297 | 390 |
| Region FE Clustering | Yes Region | Yes Region | Yes Region | Yes Region |

Notes: Effect of the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold on the efficiency of municipal waste collection. Data from the Cadaster of Municipal Waste administered by the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research, for municipal administrations elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities with 3,001 to 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for municipal administrations elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Outcome variables are averages over the calendar years wholly included in a mayor's term. *Recycled Waste* is the ratio between recycled waste and total waste collected. *Waste per Resident* is the total amount of municipal waste collected, whether recycled or not. Costs refer to the total including capital costs as well as operating costs for recycling, for disposing non-recycled waste, and for managing overall waste collection. Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

4.2 EFFECT OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT QUALITY ON POPULISM

Having confirmed that the skill and effectiveness of municipal politicians rise exogenously at the 5,000-resident threshold, we proceed to study our main outcome of interest: the effect of such an exogenous change in the quality of local politicians on voter support for the populist M5S in higher-level elections. Table 7 presents our RD estimates of these effects for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration.

Pooling all elections, the effects of a higher-quality municipal cabinet on voter support for the M5S are statistically significant and quantitatively sizeable. The vote share for the anti-establishment populist party falls by 2 to 3 percentage points at the 5,000-resident threshold. This finding is robust to increasing the order of the local polynomial fit (Columns 2 and 4). It remains highly significant—if anything, more precisely estimated—when we include region as well as year fixed effects (Columns 3 and 4). Analyzing each election separately, our point estimates show a quantitatively analogous effect at every level. However, our preferred specification (Column 3) finds a larger point estimate for regional than national elections, which might suggest a tighter connection between the quality of municipal politicians and voter choices at the next most local electoral level.⁴⁵ Figure 2 illustrates these RD effects.

Combining our RD estimates of the effects of the 5,000-resident threshold on municipal governance (Table 5) and on election outcomes (Table 7), we can gauge approximately how much voter support for populism reacts to local government quality. The threshold causes an increase in the share of municipal cabinet members with a college degree by about 5 percentage points (0.1σ), which in turn leads to an increase in the municipal share of recycled waste by about 4 percentage points (0.2σ). Voters' experience of better governance then translates into a decrease in the M5S vote share by about 2 percentage points (0.2σ) across all elections. A linear approximation in standardized terms thus suggests that raising the

⁴⁵We do not report separate results for the 2014 European elections. In that case, our sample would shrink by 90%, since we would be considering only municipalities that held local elections in 2013. Such a small sample lacks the power to estimate the effect of the threshold.

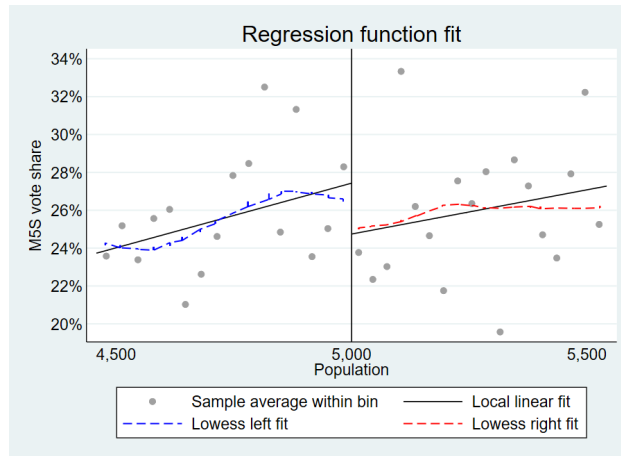
Table 7: Voter Support for Populism

| | M5S Vote Share | | | | Turnout | |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| <i>Regional, National and European Elections, 2014–18</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | -3.04** (1.41) | -3.32** (1.54) | -1.74** (0.66) | -1.66** (0.72) | -.086 (.900) | .256 (.596) |
| Robust p -value | .023 | .023 | .013 | .030 | .909 | .775 |
| Total Obs. | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 |
| Bandwidth | 542 | 985 | 579 | 1,101 | 869 | 559 |
| Effective Obs. | 735 | 1,294 | 787 | 1,448 | 1,173 | 756 |
| <i>Regional Elections, 2014–18</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | -2.92* (1.77) | -3.44* (1.92) | -4.25** (2.07) | -2.02* (1.27) | 0.05 (2.19) | 1.42 (1.30) |
| Robust p -value | .076 | .061 | .039 | .089 | .996 | .359 |
| Total Obs. | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 |
| Bandwidth | 654 | 1,111 | 295 | 937 | 754 | 757 |
| Effective Obs. | 296 | 509 | 135 | 430 | 341 | 343 |
| <i>2018 National Elections</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | -2.37 (1.98) | -3.29 (2.33) | -2.11** (0.85) | -2.16* (1.03) | -0.05 (1.10) | -.602 (.645) |
| Robust p -value | .160 | .127 | .020 | .061 | .895 | .297 |
| Total Obs. | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 |
| Bandwidth | 649 | 1,016 | 673 | 1,025 | 637 | 419 |
| Effective Obs. | 514 | 792 | 531 | 798 | 504 | 350 |
| Polynomial Order | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Region FE | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |
| Clustering | Munic. | Munic. | Region | Region | Munic. | Region |

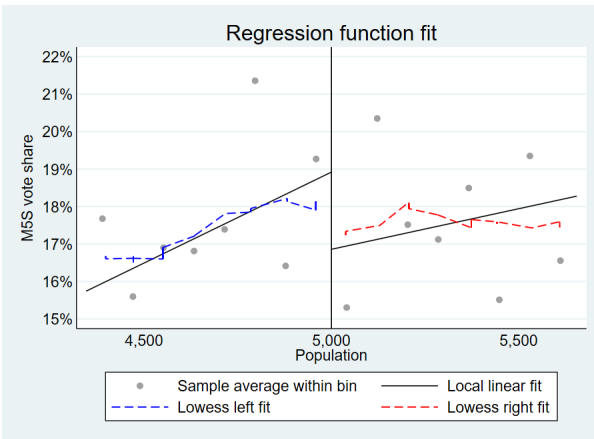
Notes: Effect of a higher quality of municipal government, induced by the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold, on municipality-level electoral outcomes. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d'Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the mayor's election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. All regression include year fixed effects. Pooled regressions include election-type fixed effects. Covariate-adjusted local polynomial RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Figure 2: Support for the M5S around the 5,000-Resident Threshold

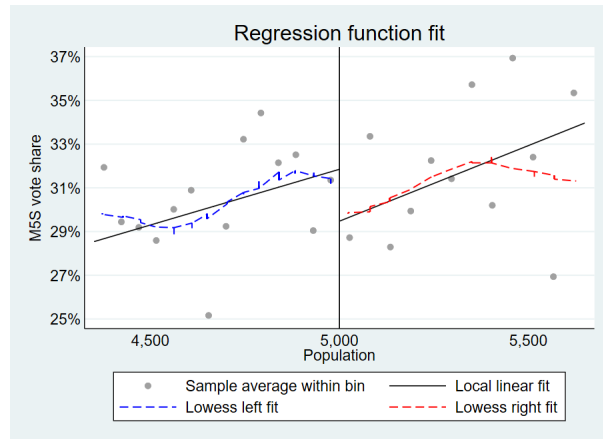
(a) Regional, National and European Elections, 2014–18



(b) Regional Elections, 2014–18



(c) 2018 National Elections



Notes: The figure shows binned scatterplots of the vote share of the M5S as a function of municipal population. Each point is the average observed value across municipalities in the corresponding bin. Local linear regression lines with optimal symmetric bandwidth. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d’Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the mayor’s election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives.

quality of local government by one standard deviation would reduce voter support for the populist M5S by 10 to 20 percentage points.

Columns 5 and 6 of Table 7 investigate if the quality of local politicians also has an effect on turnout in higher-level elections. Disappointment with the political class might keep voters away from the polls. However, we find no discernible impact on turnout. This negative result is precisely consistent with Campante, Durante and Sobbrío's (2018) findings. Their empirical analysis of internet penetration shows that disaffected voters in Italy used to abstain at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but then switched to supporting the M5S after it had emerged as a populist anti-establishment option.⁴⁶

4.3 EFFECTS ON OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES

Table 7 and Figure 2 established that a plausibly exogenous increase in the quality of municipal government reduces support for the M5S in higher-level elections. A natural follow-up question is whether it also has a systematic effect on voter support for specific other parties. Does experiencing worse local government drive voters to cast protest votes for all fringe parties? Does it promote an anti-incumbency bias?

To answer these questions, Table 8 presents RD estimates of the effects of the 5,000-resident threshold on voter support for incumbents and for opposition parties other than the M5S. We omit the 2014 European elections, since the concept of incumbency is not clearly defined in the European Parliament. Instead, every regional election from 2014 to 2018 as well as the 2018 national election was contested by one of the main coalitions as the outgoing government. The center-left coalition was the incumbent at the national level and in ten regions in our sample (Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Liguria, Marche, Molise, Puglia, Sicilia, Toscana, Umbria); the center-right coalition in the other six regions (Abruzzo, Calabria, Campania, Lombardia, Piemonte, Veneto).⁴⁷ We consider

⁴⁶Accordingly, Bordignon and Colussi (2020) find that turnout rises when a M5S candidate is on the ballot.

⁴⁷The center-left coalition was the incumbent in Basilicata, which did not hold elections in 2014–18, and in the autonomous provinces of Bolzano and Trento, which lack a 5,000-resident threshold for politicians' compensation. The center-right coalition was the incumbent in Sardinia, whose 2014 election the M5S did not contest, and Valle d'Aosta, which did not compute municipal vote tallies for the 2018 regional election.

two definitions of the opposition: the rival mainstream coalition alone (Columns 3-4), or all parties other than the M5S that do not belong to the incumbent coalition (Columns 5-6).

The decline in support for the M5S at the threshold corresponds to an increase in support for incumbent parties, most strongly in regional election. This result is consistent with existing findings from developing countries, where official corruption and a lack of government accountability translate into an anti-incumbency bias (Klašnja 2015; Klašnja and Titiunik 2018). Likewise, we find that in Italy poor performance of the municipal government causes an anti-incumbency bias at higher levels, at least in relative terms.

While Table 8 finds some evidence of rising support for opposition parties in general, the effect is strongest, most robust and most significant for the M5S, and weakest for mainstream parties. The anti-incumbency effect thus appears linked specifically to an increase in anti-establishment, populist voting, and not simply to a preference for turnover.

We proceed to study in Table 9 if there is any discontinuous pattern in voter support by party ideology. First, we distinguish the two mainstream coalition as left and right, rather than incumbent and challenger. Second, we separate out as a residual block the non-mainstream opposition parties other than the M5S, which tend to be ideologically extreme.

There is no RD effect on support for fringe parties. The quality of municipal politicians drives support for the populist, anti-establishment M5S, but does not appear to drive a broader protest vote for any other parties outside the two mainstream coalitions. Nor does there seem to be a robust effect on support for either coalition. The RD estimates show a significant increase at the threshold of support for the center-right in regional elections. Yet this finding seems to reflect no more than the effect of incumbency from Table 8. A majority of municipalities belong to regions that had a center-right incumbent, even though the center-left was the incumbent in a majority of regions.

All in all, our results indicate that a lower quality of local government causes an anti-incumbency bias and drives voters towards anti-establishment populism, but does not affect their ideological alignment on a left-right scale. This pattern is consistent with a broadly rational reaction by voters who are disappointed by the political establishment on a valence dimension rather than an ideological one.

Table 8: Voter Support by Incumbency Status

| Vote Shares: | Incumbent Parties | | Mainstream Opposition | | Non-M5S Opposition | |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| <i>Regional and National Elections, 2014–18</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | 1.20 (1.06) | 2.93*** (0.61) | 1.40 (1.54) | -1.21 (0.87) | 1.50 (1.55) | -1.05 (0.93) |
| Robust <i>p</i> -value | .200 | .000 | .315 | .211 | .285 | .287 |
| Total Obs. | 3,530 | 3,530 | 3,530 | 3,530 | 3,530 | 3,530 |
| Bandwidth | 615 | 579 | 568 | 538 | 613 | 576 |
| Effective Obs. | 779 | 741 | 723 | 688 | 777 | 739 |
| <i>Regional Elections, 2014–18</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | 1.68 (2.64) | 8.25*** (1.73) | -0.20 (2.86) | -3.40* (1.62) | 0.56 (2.58) | -3.84** (1.43) |
| Robust <i>p</i> -value | .429 | .000 | .887 | .051 | .861 | .011 |
| Total Obs. | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 |
| Bandwidth | 889 | 324 | 666 | 497 | 894 | 636 |
| Effective Obs. | 412 | 143 | 305 | 229 | 413 | 287 |
| <i>2018 National Elections</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | 0.11 (1.06) | 1.23 (0.85) | 2.24 (2.34) | .436 (.917) | 2.39 (2.23) | 1.03 (0.87) |
| Robust <i>p</i> -value | .867 | .240 | .282 | .599 | .227 | .225 |
| Total Obs. | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 |
| Bandwidth | 668 | 477 | 468 | 491 | 571 | 502 |
| Effective Obs. | 531 | 388 | 468 | 396 | 461 | 405 |
| Region FE | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Clustering | Munic. | Region | Munic. | Region | Munic. | Region |

Notes: Effect of a higher quality of municipal government, induced by the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold, on municipality-level electoral outcomes. Data for regional and national elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d'Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the mayor's election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. *Incumbent Parties* are those in the outgoing government coalition: the center-left coalition nationally and in ten regions (Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Liguria, Marche, Molise, Puglia, Sicilia, Toscana, Umbria); the center-right coalition in the other six regions (Abruzzo, Calabria, Campania, Lombardia, Piemonte, Veneto). The *Mainstream Opposition* is the other mainstream coalition alone. The *Non-M5S Opposition* includes all parties outside the outgoing government coalition, except the M5S. All regression include year fixed effects. Pooled regressions include election-type fixed effects. Covariate-adjusted local polynomial RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust *p*-values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Table 9: Voter Support by Party Ideology

| Vote Shares: | Mainstream Right | | Mainstream Left | | Non-M5S Fringe | |
|---|------------------|--------|-----------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| <i>Regional, National and European Elections, 2014–18</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | 3.63* | 1.89* | -1.05 | -0.32 | .179 | .122 |
| | (2.22) | (1.09) | (1.27) | (1.02) | (.505) | (.517) |
| Robust p -value | .090 | .057 | .445 | .898 | .347 | .850 |
| Total Obs. | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 | 3,756 |
| Bandwidth | 551 | 378 | 815 | 441 | 604 | 509 |
| Effective Obs. | 742 | 510 | 1,098 | 606 | 822 | 686 |
| <i>Regional Elections, 2014–18</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | 6.07* | 5.29** | -3.46 | -0.86 | 0.34 | -1.15 |
| | (3.56) | (2.48) | (2.93) | (1.60) | (1.27) | (1.28) |
| Robust p -value | .092 | .028 | .255 | .485 | .879 | .370 |
| Total Obs. | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 | 1,304 |
| Bandwidth | 650 | 351 | 785 | 509 | 627 | 619 |
| Effective Obs. | 294 | 156 | 360 | 235 | 286 | 286 |
| <i>2018 National Elections</i> | | | | | | |
| Effect | 2.24 | .436 | 0.11 | 1.23 | .059 | .573 |
| | (2.34) | (.917) | (1.06) | (0.85) | (.484) | (.400) |
| Robust p -value | .282 | .599 | .867 | .240 | .807 | .175 |
| Total Obs. | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 | 2,226 |
| Bandwidth | 574 | 491 | 668 | 477 | 681 | 494 |
| Effective Obs. | 468 | 396 | 531 | 388 | 538 | 400 |
| Region FE | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Clustering | Munic. | Region | Munic. | Region | Munic. | Region |

Notes: Effect of a higher quality of municipal government, induced by the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold, on municipality-level electoral outcomes. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d'Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the mayor's election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. The *Mainstream Right* consists of Forza Italia, the Northern League, the Brothers of Italy and their minor coalition partners. The *Mainstream Left* consists of the Democratic Party and its minor coalition partners. The *Non-M5S Fringe* is the remainder. All regression include year fixed effects. Pooled regressions include election-type fixed effects. Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

4.4 VALIDITY TESTS

Our estimates of RD treatment effects rely on two testable identifying assumptions. First, the distribution of municipal population must be balanced around the 5,000-resident threshold. Second, municipalities around the threshold should be similar in observables that do not reflect the greater competence and efficiency of local politicians induced by their higher compensation. This section tests formally the validity of both assumptions.

Continuity of the running variable around the threshold is the key identifying assumption for the RD treatment effect estimator. This assumption is particularly delicate in the context of political institutions, where office-holders may have both the incentives and the power to manipulate the variable and obtain their preferred treatment status (Eggers et al. 2018). We assess the threat of such manipulative sorting in Figure 3, which plots the histogram of municipal population and a McCrary (2008) test of discontinuity in density, implemented by local polynomial density estimation methods (Cattaneo, Jansson and Ma 2020). The test confirms that municipal cabinets were unable or unwilling to manipulate resident population in their municipality in order to sort around the 5,000-resident threshold—the same negative result Gagliarducci and Nannicini (2013) found for legal population.

Further evidence against manipulation comes from covariate balance around the threshold. Table 10 and Figure 4 present the results of such balance tests. We focus on three covariates that capture other drivers of populist voting: weakness of the local labor market; arrivals of immigrants in the municipality; and corruption scandals concerning the local MPs.

The joblessness rate is predetermined because it is measured at the 2011 census. Instead, immigrant inflows and parliamentary corruption scandals (at the House constituency level) should be interpreted as placebo outcomes. It seems unlikely that MPs' corruption, or its reporting in the national press, could react to the quality of local government in specific small towns in their constituency. Accordingly, our empirical findings confirm that all three covariates display no discontinuity at the 5,000-resident threshold.

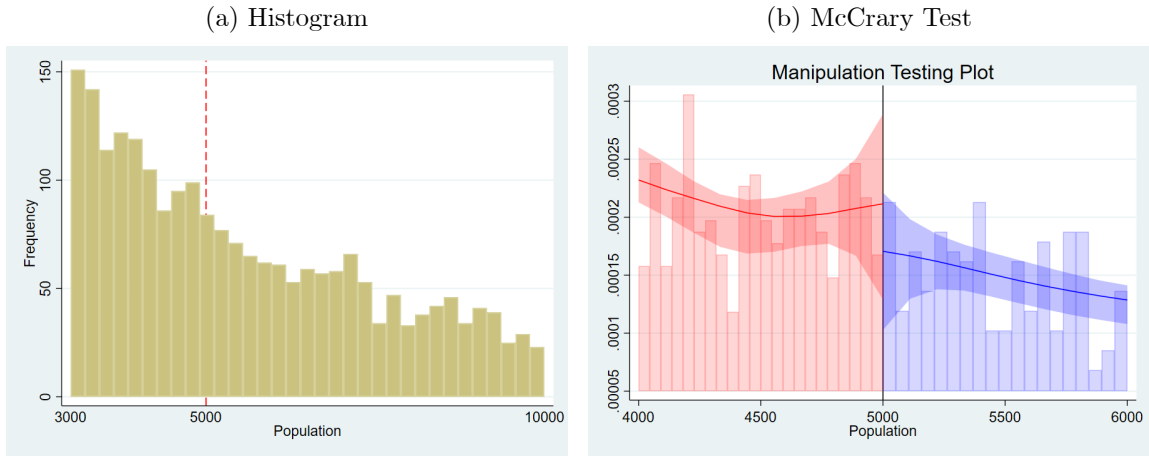
Table 11 provides a further robustness check by adding covariates to the baseline specification in Table 7, panel (a). As expected from covariate balance, our estimates of a 2

Table 10: Covariate Balance

| Outcome: | Joblessness Rate | | Immigrant Inflow | | MP Corruption News | |
|-------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Effect | 1.38 (1.35) | -.196 (.614) | .310 (.533) | .253 (.380) | -.065 (.363) | -.038 (.081) |
| Robust p -value | .484 | .800 | .750 | .681 | .858 | .832 |
| Total Obs. | 2,201 | 2,201 | 2,230 | 2,230 | 2,221 | 2,221 |
| Bandwidth | 984 | 532 | 684 | 692 | 738 | 456 |
| Effective Obs. | 752 | 422 | 540 | 542 | 574 | 374 |
| Region FE | No | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Clustering | Munic. | Region | Munic. | Region | Munic. | Region |

Notes: Effect of the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold on predetermined variables and placebo outcomes. Data for municipalities that held regional, national or European elections between 2014 and 2018 with a mayor who had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the year when the municipality’s first mayor in our sample was elected (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). The *Joblessness Rate* is computed at the 2011 census among males 15 and older who are neither students nor retirees. *Immigrant Inflow* is the 2013–17 average net annual inflow of foreign immigrants into the municipality, reported as a share of 2011 census population. *MP Corruption News* is constructed for each House constituency by searching the “Justice” section of the online archive of Italy’s main newspaper (*Corriere della Sera*) for the years 2012–18. It equals the percentage of articles mentioning MPs from the constituency that also contain a keyword for corruption, averaging across the keywords “investigated” (*indagato*) and “notice of investigation” (*avviso di garanzia*). Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Figure 3: Municipal Population around the 5,000-Resident Threshold



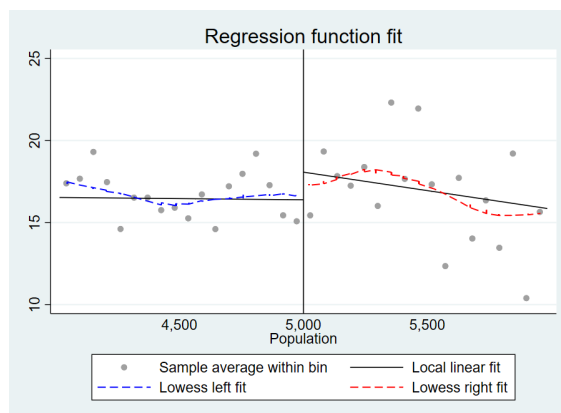
Notes: (a) Distribution of municipalities by population around the 5,000-resident threshold. (b) Discontinuity in density test based on a local quadratic density estimator (Cattaneo, Jansson and Ma 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Data for municipalities that held regional, national or European elections between 2014 and 2018 with a mayor who had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Population is measured at the beginning of the year when the municipality’s first mayor in our sample was elected (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014).

percentage-point drop in support for the M5S at the 5,000 resident threshold prove robust to these controls. At the same time, the controls themselves all predict an increase in anti-establishment voting, as shown in Table A.6. Needless to say, these intuitive correlations cannot be taken as evidence of causal relationships. However, they are consistent with prior evidence that labor-market weakness fuels populism (e.g., Algan et al. 2017; Guiso et al. 2018) and immigration fuels political extremism (e.g., Becker and Fetzer 2017; Halla, Wagner and Zweimüller 2017). Focusing on within-region variation alone makes most controls insignificant. Instead, the identified effect of the threshold remains significant and quantitatively close to the 2 percentage-point drop found in Table 7.

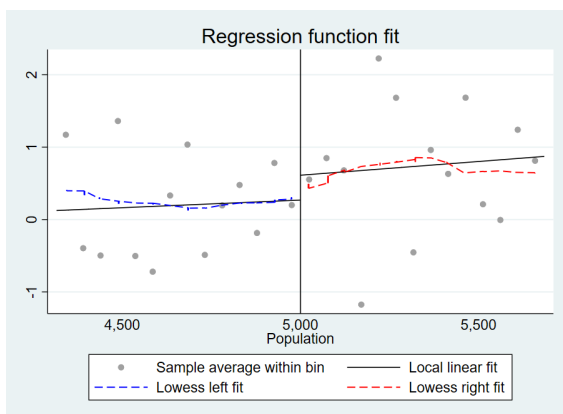
As a final validity check, Table 12 presents placebo tests that replicate our main result from Table 7 for irrelevant cutoffs above and below the true 5,000-resident threshold. Following Cattaneo, Idrobo and Titiunik (2019), we perform these tests separately for treated and untreated observations, to rule out contamination from the actual treatment effect. If the regression function is truly continuous for a given treatment status, this placebo design guarantees no treatment effect at any artificial threshold. Reassuringly, no placebo threshold exhibits a significant discontinuity, with p -values consistently above .10. Moreover, all but

Figure 4: Covariates around the 5,000-Resident Threshold

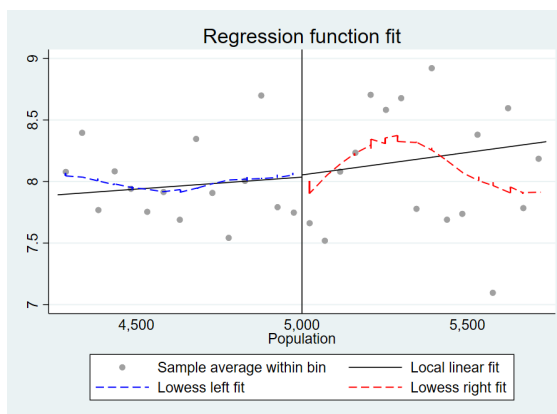
(a) Joblessness Rate



(b) Immigrant Inflow



(c) MP Corruption News



Notes: The figure shows binned scatterplots of predetermined variables and placebo outcomes as a function of municipal population. Each point is the average observed value across municipalities in the corresponding bin. Local linear regression lines with optimal symmetric bandwidth. Data for municipalities that held regional, national or European elections between 2014 and 2018 with a mayor who had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the year when the municipality’s first mayor in our sample was elected (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). The *Joblessness Rate* is computed at the 2011 census among males 15 and older who are neither students nor retirees. *Immigrant Inflow* is the 2013–17 average net annual inflow of foreign immigrants into the municipality, reported as a share of 2011 census population. *MP Corruption News* is constructed for each House constituency by searching the “Justice” section of the online archive of Italy’s main newspaper (*Corriere della Sera*) for the years 2012–18. It equals the percentage of articles mentioning MPs from the constituency that also contain a keyword for corruption, averaging across the keywords “investigated” (*indagato*) and “notice of investigation” (*avviso di garanzia*).

Table 11: Robustness to Covariates

| M5S Vote Share | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Effect | -2.13** | -3.34** | -2.65** | -2.14** |
| | (1.11) | (1.33) | (1.31) | (1.09) |
| Robust p -value | .049 | .010 | .033 | .045 |
| Total Obs. | 3,712 | 3,756 | 3,747 | 3,703 |
| Bandwidth | 650 | 545 | 576 | 672 |
| Effective Obs. | 846 | 739 | 781 | 875 |
| Covariates | Joblessness Rate | Immigrant Inflow | MP Corruption News | All Three Covariates |
| Region FE | No | No | No | No |
| Clustering | Municipality | Municipality | Municipality | Municipality |
| Effect | -1.82*** | -1.75** | -1.76** | -1.85*** |
| | (0.61) | (0.65) | (0.69) | (0.63) |
| Robust p -value | .006 | .012 | .016 | .007 |
| Total Obs. | 3,712 | 3,756 | 3,747 | 3,703 |
| Bandwidth | 573 | 586 | 554 | 559 |
| Effective Obs. | 769 | 801 | 743 | 739 |
| Covariates | Joblessness Rate | Immigrant Inflow | MP Corruption News | All Three Covariates |
| Region FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Clustering | Region | Region | Region | Region |

Notes: Effect of a higher quality of municipal government, induced by the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold, on municipality-level electoral outcomes, controlling for covariates. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d’Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the mayor’s election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. The *Joblessness Rate* is computed at the 2011 census among males 15 and older who are neither students nor retirees. *Immigrant Inflow* is the 2013–17 average net annual inflow of foreign immigrants into the municipality, reported as a share of 2011 census population. *MP Corruption News* is constructed for each House constituency by searching the “Justice” section of the online archive of Italy’s main newspaper (*Corriere della Sera*) for the years 2012–18. It equals the percentage of articles mentioning MPs from the constituency that also contain a keyword for corruption, averaging across the keywords “investigated” (*indagato*) and “notice of investigation” (*avviso di garanzia*). All regression include year and election-type fixed effects. Covariate-adjusted local polynomial RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Table 12: Continuity at Placebo Thresholds

| Threshold | Effect | Robust Std. Error | Robust <i>p</i> -value | Total Obs. | Bandwidth | Effective Obs. |
|-----------------|---------|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------|-----------|-------------------|
| 4,125 Residents | -1.23 | (1.83) | .464 | 1,775 | 371 | 609 |
| 4,300 Residents | 2.23 | (2.46) | .580 | 1,775 | 171 | 258 |
| 4,475 Residents | 0.59 | (2.78) | .705 | 1,775 | 171 | 254 |
| 4,650 Residents | -2.53 | (2.55) | .206 | 1,775 | 92 | 138 |
| 4,825 Residents | -1.37 | (4.75) | .934 | 1,775 | 131 | 198 |
| 5,000 Residents | -3.04** | (1.41) | .023 | 3,756 | 542 | 735 |
| 5,175 Residents | -0.88 | (2.56) | .942 | 1,981 | 441 | 365 |
| 5,350 Residents | -1.41 | (2.04) | .658 | 1,981 | 416 | 444 |
| 5,525 Residents | -1.77 | (2.19) | .433 | 1,981 | 350 | 412 |
| 5,700 Residents | 0.00 | (1.98) | .938 | 1,981 | 350 | 383 |
| 5,875 Residents | -3.25 | (2.76) | .382 | 1,981 | 235 | 242 |

Notes: Effect on municipality-level electoral outcomes of the true 5,000-resident threshold and of surrounding placebo thresholds. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d’Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the mayor’s election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. All regression include year and election-type fixed effects. Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Sample restricted to municipalities between 3,001 and 5,000 residents for placebo thresholds below 5,000, and between 5,001 and 10,000 residents for placebo thresholds above 5,000. Robust standard errors clustering by municipality (in parentheses) and robust *p*-values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

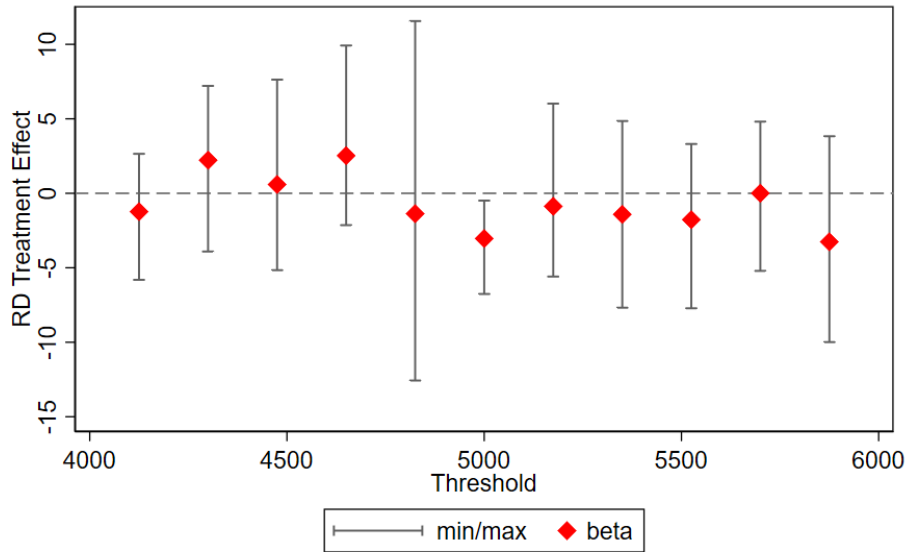
one of the point estimates of treatment effects at placebo thresholds are smaller in absolute value than our true estimate. Figure 5 presents these results graphically.

5 CONCLUSION

We have shown that an exogenous increase in the skill and effectiveness of local politicians, induced by a discontinuous increase in their compensation, reduces voter support for anti-establishment populists in elections for higher levels of government. This finding, identified through a sharp RD design, indicates that demand for populism partly reflects the same disappointment with incumbents that drives turnover in classic models of political agency.

The magnitude of our estimated treatment effect, relative to the overall electoral success of populist parties like the M5S in Italy, confirms that populism has many other drivers,

Figure 5: Changes in Support for the M5S at True and Placebo Thresholds



Notes: The figure shows the estimated effect on municipality-level electoral outcomes of the true 5,000-resident threshold and of surrounding placebo thresholds. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d'Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the mayor's election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. All regression include year and election-type fixed effects. Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Sample restricted to municipalities between 3,001 and 5,000 residents for placebo thresholds below 5,000, and between 5,001 and 10,000 residents for placebo thresholds above 5,000. Robust inference, clustering by municipality, following Calonico et al. (2019).

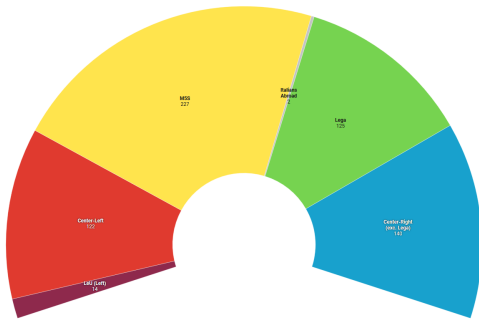
such as economic insecurity, resistance to cultural and demographic change, or a desire for descriptive representation (e.g., Colantone and Stanig 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Dal Bó et al. 2022; Guriev and Papaioannou 2022). On the other hand, it also shows that improvements in the performance of traditional politicians—even in local government alone—have a remarkable potential to dampen the systemic rise of populist outsiders.

Consider the 2018 Italian general election, which marked the zenith of electoral success for the M5S. The right-wing coalition won a plurality of votes and of seats in both chambers, but the M5S held the balance of power and was indispensable in government formation. A uniform nationwide decline in its vote share by 6.5 percentage points, reallocated proportionally across its rivals constituency by constituency, would have sufficed to shut the M5S out of government. It would have remained the single party with the most votes and seats—more than the entire center-left coalition. However, as the results of a counterfactual simulation presented in Figure 6 show, deviations from pure proportional representation imply that a loss of one fifth of its voters would have cost the M5S more than one fourth of its seats. The center-right coalition would have gained enough to enjoy a governing majority. Italy would have continued in the same tradition of turnover between center-left and center-right that had characterized its national politics since 1994.

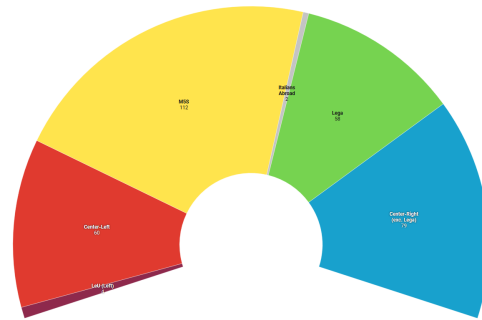
Our analysis indicates that such a radical change in the political landscape could have resulted from surprisingly attainable improvements in the quality of government. Our RD treatment effect raises the share of municipal cabinet members with a college education by 5 percentage points. It also causes a decline in the M5S vote share by 2 percentage points. The typical municipal cabinet in our sample has five members. A rough linear extrapolation thus implies that the rise of the M5S to a decisive position on the national political scene might have been effectively defused by the kind of governance improvement that follows from a single additional college graduate on each municipal cabinet. Or, in terms of outputs instead of inputs, by the kind of improvement in local government efficiency that translates, as far as waste collection is concerned, into an increase in recycling by about 12 percentage points.

Figure 6: Counterfactual Outcomes of the 2018 National Elections

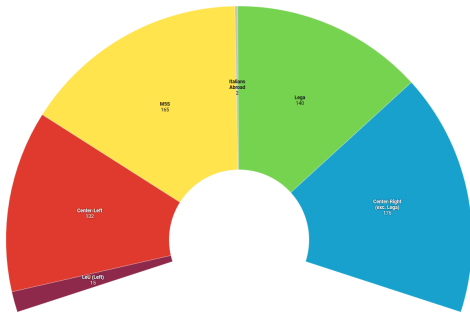
(a) 2018 House Election Outcomes



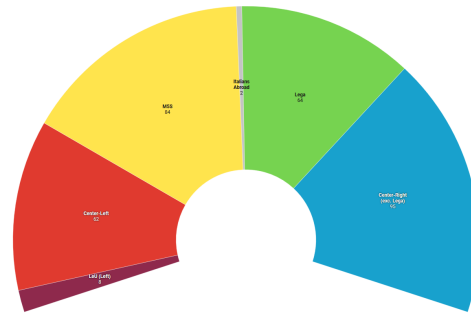
(b) 2018 Senate Election Outcomes



(c) Counterfactual House: -6.5% M5S



(d) Counterfactual Senate: -6.5% M5S



Notes: The top row depicts the breakdown of seats in the Italian Parliament after the 2018 national elections. The bottom row depicts a counterfactual simulated by lowering the M5S vote share by 6.5 percentage points everywhere, and reallocating its votes proportionally among all other parties constituency by constituency. LeU (in purple) denotes the left-wing party Free and Equal. The center-left coalition (in red) includes the Democratic Party (PD) and four minor allies (More Europe, Together, People's Civic List, South Tyrolean People's Party). M5S (in yellow) denotes the Five-Star Movement. Italians Abroad (in grey) denotes two non-partisan representatives of Italians in South America. Lega (in green) denotes the Northern League, which ran as part of the center-right coalition but then split from it to form a short-lived alternative ruling coalition with the M5S. The remainder of the center-right coalition (in blue) includes Forza Italia and two allies (Brothers of Italy, Us with Italy).

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Table A.1: Membership of Intermunicipal Unions

| <i>Summary Statistics</i> | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| | | Median | Average | Std. Dev. | Obs. | | | |
| | Intermunicipal Union Membership | 0 | .357 | .479 | 2,216 | | | |
| <i>RD Treatment Effect Estimates</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Outcome | Effect | Robust Std. Error | Robust p-value | Total Obs. | Bandwidth | Effective Obs. | Region FE | Clustering |
| | Intermunicipal Union Membership | -.034 | (.102) | .961 | 2,216 | 550 | 445 | No Municipality |
| | Intermunicipal Union Membership | -.067 | (.054) | .246 | 2,216 | 747 | 585 | Yes Region |

Notes: Effect of the 5,000-resident threshold on membership of intermunicipal unions. Data from the National Association of Italian Municipalities for municipalities with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. *Intermunicipal Union* is a binary variable denoting membership in such a union in 2018. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of 2017. Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors clustering by municipality (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Table A.2: Characteristics of Local Politicians, 2013–17

| | Median | Average | Std. Dev. | Obs. |
|--|--------|---------|-----------|--------|
| <i>(a) Mayors</i> | | | | |
| Age | 49 | 49.6 | 10.2 | 2,212 |
| Female | 0 | .152 | .359 | 2,212 |
| University | 1 | .539 | .499 | 2,212 |
| Not Employed | 0 | .105 | .307 | 2,152 |
| Business Owner | 0 | .093 | .291 | 2,152 |
| High-Skill Occupation | 0 | .350 | .477 | 2,152 |
| Low-Skill Occupation | 0 | .128 | .334 | 2,152 |
| <i>(b) Municipal Cabinet Members (exc. Mayors)</i> | | | | |
| Age | 44 | 44.4 | 11.7 | 8,827 |
| Female | 0 | .427 | .495 | 8,827 |
| University | 0 | .444 | .497 | 8,827 |
| Not Employed | 0 | .171 | .377 | 8,140 |
| Business Owner | 0 | .062 | .241 | 8,140 |
| High-Skill Occupation | 0 | .299 | .458 | 8,140 |
| Low-Skill Occupation | 0 | .170 | .376 | 8,140 |
| <i>(c) Municipal Councillors</i> | | | | |
| Age | 43 | 43.7 | 12.4 | 25,474 |
| Female | 0 | .339 | .474 | 25,474 |
| University | 0 | .391 | .488 | 25,474 |
| Not Employed | 0 | .172 | .377 | 23,304 |
| Business Owner | 0 | .065 | .246 | 23,304 |
| High-Skill Occupation | 0 | .268 | .443 | 23,304 |
| Low-Skill Occupation | 0 | .214 | .410 | 23,304 |

Notes: Data for municipal administrations elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities with 3,001 to 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Panel (a) reports characteristics of mayors. Panel (b) reports those of municipal cabinet members, excluding mayors. Panel (c) reports those of municipal councillors. Data are from the Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior. *Age* is measured at the beginning of each mandate (in years). All other variables are dummies. *University* measures if a politician obtained a college or other post-secondary degree. *Not Employed* includes unemployed, retired, or otherwise out of the labor force. *Business Owner* includes corporate directors and executives as well as business owners. *High-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with at least 60% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. *Low-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with no more than 20% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them.

Table A.3: Mayors' Selection

| | Age | Female | University | Not Employed | Business Owner | High-Skill Occupation | Low-Skill Occupation |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Effect | -1.47 | -.118** | .024 | -.006 | -.041 | .065 | -.001 |
| | (1.62) | (.050) | (.097) | (.056) | (.056) | (.094) | (.058) |
| Robust p -value | .377 | .052 | .826 | .811 | .537 | .421 | .842 |
| Total Obs. | 2,212 | 2,212 | 2,212 | 2,152 | 2,152 | 2,152 | 2,152 |
| Bandwidth | 847 | 860 | 652 | 606 | 732 | 616 | 917 |
| Effective Obs. | 666 | 683 | 512 | 466 | 542 | 470 | 684 |
| Region FE | No | No | No | No | No | No | No |
| Clustering | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. |
| Effect | -1.34 | -.137*** | .028 | -.000 | -.033 | .074 | -.005 |
| | (1.36) | (.043) | (.090) | (.042) | (.036) | (.095) | (.048) |
| Robust p -value | .363 | .003 | .733 | .831 | .430 | .344 | .793 |
| Total Obs. | 2,212 | 2,212 | 2,212 | 2,152 | 2,152 | 2,152 | 2,152 |
| Bandwidth | 766 | 604 | 653 | 520 | 696 | 497 | 747 |
| Effective Obs. | 593 | 484 | 429 | 397 | 518 | 379 | 553 |
| Region FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Clustering | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region |

Notes: Effect of the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold on mayors' characteristics. Data from the Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior for mayors elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities with 3,001 to 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for mayors elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). *Age* is measured at the beginning of each mandate (in years). All other variables are dummies. *University* measures if a mayor obtained a college or other post-secondary degree. *Not Employed* includes unemployed, retired, or otherwise out of the labor force. *Business Owner* includes corporate directors and executives as well as business owners. *High-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with at least 60% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. *Low-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with no more than 20% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Table A.4: Selection of Municipal Cabinet Members (exc. Mayors)

| | Age | Female | University | Not Employed | Business Owner | High-Skill Occupation | Low-Skill Occupation |
|-------------------|------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Effect | .509 | -.004 | .059*** | -.008 | .010 | .003 | -.041** |
| | (.820) | (.017) | (.022) | (.025) | (.017) | (.026) | (.018) |
| Robust p -value | .416 | .592 | .008 | .624 | .833 | .927 | .022 |
| Total Obs. | 8,827 | 8,827 | 8,827 | 8,140 | 8,140 | 8,140 | 8,140 |
| Bandwidth | 376 | 429 | 734 | 524 | 462 | 612 | 567 |
| Effective Obs. | 1,236 | 1,423 | 2,271 | 1,574 | 1,401 | 1,803 | 1,697 |
| Region FE | No | No | No | No | No | No | No |
| Clustering | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. |
| Effect | .467 | -.018 | .060*** | -.015 | .017 | .016 | -.037** |
| | (.794) | (.016) | (.019) | (.023) | (.014) | (.016) | (.016) |
| Robust p -value | .457 | .124 | .001 | .440 | .414 | .359 | .017 |
| Total Obs. | 8,827 | 8,827 | 8,827 | 8,140 | 8,140 | 8,140 | 8,140 |
| Bandwidth | 357 | 337 | 670 | 527 | 549 | 675 | 632 |
| Effective Obs. | 1,160 | 1,105 | 2,111 | 1,579 | 1,632 | 1,963 | 1,830 |
| Region FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Clustering | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region | Region |

Notes: Effect of the wage increase at the 5,000-resident threshold on the characteristics of municipal cabinet members, excluding mayors. Data from the Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior for municipal administrations elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities with 3,001 to 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for municipal administrations elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). *Age* is measured at the beginning of each mandate (in years). All other variables are dummies. *University* measures if a politician obtained a college or other post-secondary degree. *Not Employed* includes unemployed, retired, or otherwise out of the labor force. *Business Owner* includes corporate directors and executives as well as business owners. *High-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with at least 60% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. *Low-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with no more than 20% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. All regressions include fixed effects for a politician’s position (deputy mayor or other cabinet member). Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Table A.5: Placebo Effects for Municipal Councillors

| | Age | Female | University | Not Employed | Business Owner | High-Skill Occupation | Low-Skill Occupation |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Effect | .353 (.306) | .029 (.013) | .005 (.016) | -.007 (.009) | .008 (.008) | -.006 (.012) | -.017* (.008) |
| Robust p -value | .105 | .130 | .977 | .307 | .242 | .407 | .061 |
| Total Obs. | 25,474 | 25,474 | 25,474 | 23,304 | 23,304 | 23,304 | 23,304 |
| Bandwidth | 301 | 322 | 514 | 763 | 494 | 679 | 787 |
| Effective Obs. | 2,948 | 3,083 | 4,849 | 6,250 | 4,286 | 5,702 | 6,500 |
| Region FE Clustering | No Munic. | No Munic. | No Munic. | No Munic. | No Munic. | No Munic. | No Munic. |
| Effect | .511 (.371) | .017 (.009) | .003 (.012) | -.004 (.009) | .009 (.007) | -.011 (.012) | -.010 (.008) |
| Robust p -value | .104 | .374 | .951 | .428 | .139 | .627 | .273 |
| Total Obs. | 25,474 | 25,474 | 25,474 | 23,304 | 23,304 | 23,304 | 23,304 |
| Bandwidth | 301 | 339 | 738 | 587 | 437 | 521 | 908 |
| Effective Obs. | 2,948 | 3,246 | 6,656 | 5,112 | 3,862 | 4,501 | 7,446 |
| Region FE Clustering | Yes Region | Yes Region | Yes Region | Yes Region | Yes Region | Yes Region | Yes Region |

Notes: Placebo effect of the 5,000-resident threshold on the characteristics of municipal councillors. Data from the Statistical Office of the Ministry of the Interior for municipal administrations elected from 2013 to 2017 in municipalities with 3,001 to 10,000 residents. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. The running variable is population measured at the beginning of the election year (at the 2011 census for Friuli-Venezia Giulia and for municipal administrations elected in Sicily in 2013 and 2014). *Age* is measured at the beginning of each mandate (in years). All other variables are dummies. *University* measures if a politician obtained a college or other post-secondary degree. *Not Employed* includes unemployed, retired, or otherwise out of the labor force. *Business Owner* includes corporate directors and executives as well as business owners. *High-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with at least 60% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. *Low-Skill Occupation* includes all other occupations with no more than 20% college graduates among all municipal office holders in Italy, 2013–17, reporting them. Covariate-adjusted local linear RD treatment effect estimator (Calonico et al. 2019) with triangular kernel and optimal bandwidth chosen by mean square error optimization. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses) and robust p -values estimated following Calonico et al. (2019). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Table A.6: Correlation between Outcome and Covariates

| | M5S Vote Share | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Joblessness Rate | .722*** (.024) | | | .670*** (.026) |
| Immigrant Inflow | | .842*** (0.60) | | .263*** (.065) |
| MP Corruption News | | | 1.14*** (0.10) | .339*** (.094) |
| Observations | 3,712 | 3,756 | 3,747 | 3,703 |
| Region FE | No | No | No | No |
| Clustering | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. | Munic. |
| Joblessness Rate | -.052 (.081) | | | -.056 (.081) |
| Immigrant Inflow | | .131 (.135) | | .122 (.131) |
| MP Corruption News | | | .588** (.233) | .552** (.226) |
| Observations | 3,712 | 3,756 | 3,747 | 3,703 |
| Region FE | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Clustering | Region | Region | Region | Region |

Notes: Correlation between electoral outcomes and covariates at the municipality level. Data for regional, national and European elections held between 2014 and 2018 in municipalities whose mayor had been elected with a population between 3,001 and 10,000 residents, no earlier than 2013 and no later than the year before the election under consideration. Trentino-Alto Adige is excluded. Regional elections are missing for Basilicata because they were not held in the sample period, for Sardinia (2014) because the M5S did not contest them, and for Valle d'Aosta (2018) because votes were not tallied by municipality. Regional election vote shares refer to candidates for regional president. National election vote shares refer to coalition candidates for the House of Representatives. The *Joblessness Rate* is computed at the 2011 census among males 15 and older who are neither students nor retirees. *Immigrant Inflow* is the 2013–17 average net annual inflow of foreign immigrants into the municipality, reported as a share of 2011 census population. *MP Corruption News* is constructed for each House constituency by searching the “Justice” section of the online archive of Italy’s main newspaper (*Corriere della Sera*) for the years 2012–18. It equals the percentage of articles mentioning MPs from the constituency that also contain a keyword for corruption, averaging across the keywords “investigated” (*indagato*) and “notice of investigation” (*avviso di garanzia*). All regression include year fixed effects. Robust standard errors corrected for clustering (in parentheses). * Significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.