

The Free Movement of People and the Success of Far-Right Parties: Evidence from Switzerland's Border Liberalization

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The main theories explaining electoral backlash against immigration focus on citizens' cultural, economic, and security concerns. We test these predictions in Switzerland, which opened its labor market to neighboring countries in the 2000s. Employing a difference-in-differences design, we document a substantial rise in immigrant workers in Swiss border municipalities after the border opened. This was accompanied by a 6-percentage-point (95% confidence interval 2–10) increase in support for anti-immigrant parties, equivalent to a 32% rise at the mean. However, we find no adverse effects on citizens' employment, wages, or subjective perceptions of economic, cultural, or security threats. Instead, we describe how far-right parties introduced novel narratives related to overcrowding to advance hostility toward immigrants. We provide evidence that this rhetoric targeted border municipalities, where it had the greatest impact on voters susceptible to political persuasion. Together, these findings suggest that elites can play a role in driving anti-immigrant votes.

"The spirits that I called, I want to keep and multiply."

—James Schwarzenbach (1971), a pioneer of anti-immigrant populism in Europe.

In June 1999, Switzerland and the European Union (EU) signed the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons, which lifted restrictions on EU citizens' ability to live and work in Switzerland. Over the next few years, hundreds of thousands of EU citizens, mostly from neighboring France, Germany, and Italy, moved to Switzerland or began commuting there as cross-border workers. Using a difference-in-differences (DID) design to compare municipalities within a 15-minute drive of the border crossings with those located 15–30 minutes away before and after the border opening, we find that the number of immigrant workers increased by an average of 14% (95% confidence


interval (CI) 7–20). Their arrival had a significant and lasting political impact. Using the same DID design, our estimates imply that the border opening and associated immigration increased support for anti-immigrant parties by 32% (CI 11–53). What explains this response?

An extensive literature focuses on bottom-up explanations of anti-immigrant attitudes, postulating that anti-immigrant sentiment and voting increase when the host community perceives certain threats from immigrant arrivals. Work in this area has identified three key drivers: cultural concerns about how immigration changes the fabric of the host society (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Sides and Citrin 2007); economic threats, either about individual labor market competition (Dancygier and Donnelly 2013; Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013) or sociotropic concerns about the economy and the welfare state (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Cavaille and Ferwerda 2023); and, more recently, security threats about crime or disorder associated with immigration (Hangartner et al. 2019; Solodoch 2021; Ward 2019). A rich literature documents how right-wing parties can translate these concerns into votes (see, e.g., Barone et al. 2016; Brunner and Kuhn 2018; Cools, Finseraas, and Rogeberg 2021; Dancygier 2010; Dinas et al. 2019; Dustmann and Preston, 2006; 2007; Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Otto and Steinhardt 2014; Sniderman et al. 2000).

These standard cultural, economic, and security arguments are unlikely to explain the sharp rise in anti-immigrant voting we observe in Switzerland. Neighboring immigrants and cross-border workers

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share important characteristics with native-born citizens—such as language, ethnicity, and religion—rendering *cultural* concerns unlikely. Consequently, our DID regressions find no evidence that native survey respondents in the border region are more likely to emphasize the need to protect Swiss traditions. *Economic* threats are also largely absent: using a large-scale employment survey covering up to half of the country’s labor force, our DID estimates for employment and wages are small and do not undermine the economic outcomes of Swiss natives—a result corroborated by Beerli et al. (2021). Subjective economic perceptions are consistent with objective labor market measures: using representative panel surveys, we find no evidence that the border opening increased the perceived risk of unemployment, cost of housing, or worsened financial satisfaction. Finally, public rhetoric about immigrants from neighboring countries has not strongly emphasized *security* concerns, nor do native survey respondents in the border region prioritize law and order or a stronger military.

What, then, explains the rise of anti-immigrant parties in the border regions? Building on scholarship on elite rhetoric and public opinion, we suggest that elites may be driving the increase in anti-immigrant voting in Switzerland. In the absence of standard threats, political elites representing anti-immigrant parties have supplemented traditional narratives about economic, cultural, and security threats with new narratives to heighten anti-immigrant fears and encourage hostility toward migrants. The staunchly anti-immigrant Swiss People’s Party (SVP) introduced the term *density stress* (“Dichtestress”), originally used in biology to explain sudden mass mortality due to overcrowding, as an umbrella term to encompass the strain on cities, public transportation, roads, farmland, and even shopping malls and movie theaters caused by the rising numbers of immigrants.¹ The overcrowding narrative is also popular elsewhere. In the Brexit campaign, politicians used a similar rhetorical strategy by claiming that Britain had reached a “breaking point” because of the many immigrants and refugees queuing to enter the country. Similarly, during his re-election campaign, Trump declared, “Our country is full” to signal to his supporters his plans to keep immigrants out. Such rhetoric, which echoes the theme of density stress, allows politicians to promote anti-immigrant policies without mentioning tangible grievances or making explicitly racist or xenophobic claims. When these narratives are newly introduced, pro-immigration advocates typically do not have a counter-narrative ready.

To determine when (and where) such elite-driven narratives are likely to be successful, we build on Hopkins’s (2010) “politicized places” hypothesis, which argues that political responses to immigration

are most potent when two conditions are met: (1) rapid local changes in the presence of immigrants and (2) salient rhetoric that characterizes these immigrants as a threat. We ground this hypothesis in Zaller’s (1992) receive-accept-sample (RAS) model of public opinion change to derive testable predictions about the types of voters who are most susceptible to the interaction of immigration and elite rhetoric. Consistent with these predictions, we present suggestive evidence that residents of border regions with intermediate levels of political awareness were most likely to oppose equal opportunities for foreigners after the border opened. Second, we find evidence that political elites target districts where they expect their position taking to resonate the most with voters. We focus on Ticino, the canton that experienced the largest per capita increase in foreign workers. Following the border opening, right-wing politicians in the border region proposed more anti-immigration legislation than their counterparts in control municipalities. Although these results, which suggest a mechanism linking immigration with electoral outcomes, are necessarily tentative, they support the notion that elite rhetoric influences attitudes toward immigration. Future research should further explore this phenomenon.

Our study advances four lines of research. First, it contributes to the rich literature on anti-immigrant sentiment. Prior work has predominantly focused on how economic, cultural, or security threats shape public attitudes (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Cavaille and Ferwerda 2023; Dancygier and Donnelly 2013; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hangartner et al. 2019; Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013; Sides and Citrin 2007; Sniderman et al. 2000; Solodoch 2021; Ward 2019). However, this research does not focus on the role of elites in influencing attitudes toward immigrants. Examining a case with little evidence of economic, cultural, or security threats allows us to isolate the effects of nontraditional explanations of anti-immigrant attitudes. We present evidence consistent with a top-down process in which politicians use hostile rhetoric to increase anti-immigrant sentiment.

Second, this top-down process builds on and advances our understanding of the role of political entrepreneurs, a phenomenon particularly relevant to the far right (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Hobolt and De Vries 2015). Political entrepreneurs from challenger parties often undermine established parties by introducing and mobilizing around new issues—often immigration within European populist parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Our study suggests that these entrepreneurs can attract votes even when economic, cultural, and security threats are not dominant concerns by framing the immigration issue with a novel narrative such as density stress.

Third, our study complements emerging work on the recent “backlash”² against expanding minority rights

¹ As discussed below, traffic congestion, a prominent indicator of density stress, increased in both treated and control municipalities after the border opened. However, our DID estimates find no evidence of a larger increase in places near the border vs. further from it.

² Our use of the term “backlash” to describe how voters turned to anti-immigrant parties following the border opening differs from the traditional scholarly understanding of backlash as a “large, negative,

(such as marriage equality for LGBTQI+), which argues that this phenomenon is best understood as voters taking cues from political elites who exploit these issues rather than reacting to an external threat. For example, Bishin et al. (2016) analyze cases from the gay rights movement in which the minority group sought to advance its rights and protections. The authors find limited evidence of public opinion backlash and propose that elite-led mobilization explains the opposition to gay rights in the United States (US; Bishin et al. 2016). We complement this strand of research by showing how similar strategies may be at play when political opinion leaders mobilize against liberal immigration policies (see also Bishin et al. 2021). From a methodological perspective, our case has an important advantage—the absence of the standard drivers of anti-immigrant sentiments. This void helps us disentangle top-down elite mobilization from bottom-up opinion change.

Finally, our findings advance the rich literature examining how and when immigration boosts support for the (far) right (see, e.g., Barone et al. 2016; Brunner and Kuhn 2018; Dinas et al. 2019; Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Otto and Steinhardt 2014; Sniderman et al. 2000). Previous studies focus almost exclusively on the effects of geographically and culturally distant labor migrants or refugees and many find that the arrival of immigrants increases support for (far) right and anti-immigrant parties (for a recent meta-analysis, see Cools, Finseraas, and Rogeberg 2021). Our study adds new insights by examining immigration from neighboring countries with similar levels of economic development and shared linguistic, cultural, religious, and ethnic/racial characteristics with the host society. Surprisingly, even under these “favorable” circumstances, immigration can still have substantial and persistent electoral effects. These findings suggest that the conditions under which parties can exploit immigration as a divisive issue are broader than previously thought, which has important implications for other contexts. Cross-border immigration is prevalent across the Schengen Area, where open borders facilitate the free movement of people for work and residence. Similar policies have also been included in other regional economic agreements between the US, Canada, and Mexico and the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. The ramifications of some of these policies have also been documented in other European countries (Dorn and Zweimüller 2021; Dustmann, Schönberg, and Stuhler 2017). In addition to economic migration, political factors also often lead to emigration that predominantly affects neighboring countries. Notable examples include the migration from East Germany to West Germany during the

Cold War, the influx of Syrians into Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey due to the Syrian conflict, and the movement of Venezuelans into Colombia amid Venezuela’s recent crisis.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we introduce the reform of Swiss immigration law that we study and describe its staggered and geographically segmented implementation. We then explain how we leverage this reform to identify its effects, as well as our data, measures, and statistical models. The results are presented in four sections. First, we discuss the impact of the border opening on immigration. Second, we document the impact of liberalization on anti-immigrant voting. Third, we demonstrate that liberalization had no discernible negative effects on citizens’ employment or earnings, and did not generate perceived economic, security, and cultural threats. Fourth, we describe how political elites introduced the narrative of density stress, examine the rise of immigration-related parliamentary bills in the border region of Ticino, and document differential effects on the citizens most likely to be persuaded by political elites. The final section discusses the study’s limitations and contributions.

BACKGROUND: THREE-PHASED BORDER OPENING

In this section, we briefly summarize the timeline of the border opening and its implications for cross-border workers (CBWs) and immigrants seeking to work and live in Switzerland. Dataverse Appendix Section B1 provides further details on the staggered opening process. The bilateral Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP), signed by the EU and Switzerland on June 21, 1999, opened the Swiss labor market to EU citizens. The AFMP was then approved by each EU member state, the European Parliament, and the Swiss electorate (in a national referendum with a solid majority of 67.2%). While the agreement entered into force on June 1, 2002, Switzerland did not abolish its bureaucratic admission process and liberalize access to its labor market until 2004.

We identify three phases of the reform’s implementation. In the *pre-reform phase* (1995–99), CBWs and resident immigrants seeking work in Switzerland faced severe restrictions, including a priority requirement for resident job seekers, lengthy admission procedures, and binding annual quotas. During the *transition phase* (2000–03), we would expect to observe some increase in the number of CBWs and resident immigrants. After the AFMP came into force, several restrictions were lifted for CBWs working in municipalities in the border region³ and annual quotas increased for immigrants.

and enduring shift in opinion against a policy or group that occurs in response to some event that threatens the status quo” (Bishin et al. 2016, 626). In this standard definition, public opinion responds to the threatening event, not to cues from elites who seek to exploit it.

³ Several bilateral agreements between Switzerland and adjacent countries define which municipalities are included in the border region, and thus serve as potential labor markets for CBWs. This definition is independent of the AFMP and has not changed since 1973.

CBWs gained full and equal access to the labor market (on par with the Swiss resident population) in the border region during the *free-movement* phase in mid-2004. The priority requirements for resident immigrants from EU and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries were abolished at this time (whenever the EU expands, the agreement is extended to encompass the new member states). Dataverse Appendix Table B1 details how the reform removed barriers to entry for CBWs and resident immigrants.

Swiss border liberalization is a useful case study to show that immigration can affect support for far-right parties even under “favorable” conditions. Switzerland is a small, multilingual, and multicultural country. Immigrants from the neighboring countries we study often share cultural and linguistic similarities with Swiss locals in the border region. Switzerland’s strict rules for obtaining citizenship might lessen the perceived threat from new immigrants after border liberalization. Additionally, critical parts of the welfare system (such as healthcare) are privatized, so foreign workers must cover their own expenses.

Anti-immigrant parties employed different narratives to stoke fear of immigration during this period. They played on fears of Islam, leading to a 2009 referendum that banned minarets. While discrimination against immigrants from former Yugoslavia was common before the reform we evaluate (see, e.g., Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013), we argue that opening the country’s borders also triggered xenophobia toward migrants from neighboring countries who shared many traits with Swiss natives (Helbling 2011). Dataverse Appendix Section B7.3 provides anecdotal evidence from news coverage that exemplifies the negative perception of economic migrants from neighboring countries following the border liberalization.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Empirical Strategy

Building on Beerli et al. (2021), we exploit the reform’s staggered implementation to identify its effects using a DID design. This design compares outcomes before and after the border opening in municipalities immediately next to the border versus those slightly further away. While it is impossible to directly test the parallel-trends assumption—that is, that both types of municipalities would have developed in the same way if the border had not opened—we perform a series of placebo tests to validate it during the pre-treatment period.

The left panel of Figure 1 illustrates our identification strategy. At the start of the transition phase, we define treated municipalities as those within a 15-minute drive of a border crossing (dark green). The control group includes municipalities within 15–30 minutes of a crossing (light green). The panel on the right visualizes the increase in the number of “immigrant workers” (the sum of CBWs and resident immigrants, see below) between 1996 and 2016, scaled by the

number of Swiss citizens in 1998.⁴ This panel indicates that the number of immigrant workers increased substantially after the reform: increases of more than 10% were common, especially for municipalities within 15 minutes of the border.

We focus the main analyses on municipalities within 30 minutes of the border to maximize the internal validity of our estimates. Restricting our comparison to municipalities 0–15 versus 15–30 minutes from the border allows us to consider sets of municipalities that are *ex ante* quite similar in terms of political cleavages, government spending, and the overall structure of the economy.⁵ To the extent that municipalities in the 15–30-minute range also experienced an increase in immigrant workers due to the border opening (see Beerli et al. 2021), our estimates represent a lower bound of the overall treatment effect.

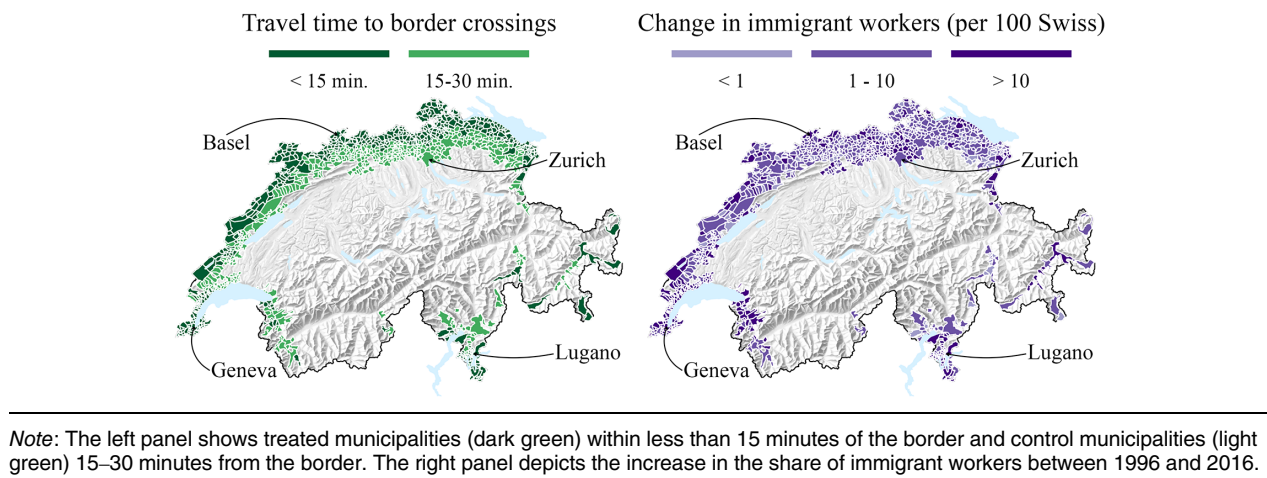
Data and Measures

Our treatment indicator for border-proximate municipalities is a binary indicator based on the travel time to a border crossing. We measure travel times from the center of a municipality to the border using the Open Source Routing Machine (<http://project-osrm.org/>). *Border Proximity* takes a value of 1 for municipalities less than 15 minutes from the border, which includes all municipalities with a border crossing and those in close proximity ($n = 523$). Since they are easier to access, we expect citizens of neighboring countries to be more likely to work or live in these places compared to municipalities in the control group that are 15–30 minutes away ($n = 470$). Depending on the data source, we use 2012 or 2019 classifications of Swiss municipalities.

We create two binary indicators to indicate the period of the reform: *Transition* for 2000–03 and *Free Movement* for 2004 onward. We quantify the impact of the liberalization process on immigration by measuring the *Immigrant Worker-to-Swiss Ratio*, which is the ratio of CBWs and resident immigrants to the number of Swiss citizens. We focus on this ratio to account for the different sizes of border municipalities (which include Zurich, Geneva, and Basel, Switzerland’s three largest cities, as well as municipalities with fewer than 1,000 residents) and the fact that the same absolute increase in immigration affects communities of different sizes differently. We calculate this ratio by combining information from two datasets compiled by the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics (SFOS): (1) data on the resident immigrant and Swiss populations between 1991 and 2018 and (2) the number of CBWs from 1996 to 2016, which we aggregate to the municipal level (Swiss Federal Office of Statistics 2017; 2019a). We use 1998 levels

⁴ To visualize the change in the number of immigrant workers, we calculate the average number of immigrant workers between 1996 and 1999 (pre) and from 2007 to 2016 (post) in each municipality. We then take the difference between the two values.

⁵ Supplementary Material (SM) Section A1 presents summary statistics on economic conditions, immigration, voting, and other outcomes in the control and treated regions before and after the reform period.

FIGURE 1. Visualization of the Empirical Strategy

to fix the number of Swiss citizens in a municipality in this ratio to ensure that any variation in our measure is due solely to changes in the number of foreigners and not to changes in the population caused by factors such as Swiss citizens moving away due to an increase in immigrant workers.⁶

We measure the electoral consequences of open borders with *Anti-Immigrant Party Support* in federal elections. This outcome comes from the SFOS, which covers elections from 1991 to 2019 (Swiss Federal Office of Statistics 2019b). While Switzerland has an extensive party system with several regional parties, right-wing populist parties that espouse nativist and anti-immigrant positions have been prevalent throughout the country during the study period. The most successful of these parties is the Swiss People's Party (SVP; *Schweizerische Volkspartei / Union Démocratique du Centre*), which has existed under this name since the 1970s, but only experienced substantial growth in the 1990s and 2000s after a turn to anti-immigrant populism. In addition to the SVP, our measure includes support for the following anti-immigrant parties: the Ticino League, the Geneva/Romandy Citizens' Movement, the Swiss Democrats, the Republicans, and the Freedom Party of Switzerland.

To study the attitudinal effects of border liberalization, we use data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) and VOX surveys (GfS-Forschungsinstitut, 2017; Tillmann et al. 2022). The SHP is an annual panel survey that began in 1999 (so we have only 1 year of observations in the pre-treatment phase). The VOX survey has been conducted after every popular vote, including referendums and popular initiatives under Switzerland's direct democracy system. These votes typically occur four to six times each year, and the

survey has been consistently administered since 1996, providing a repeated cross section of the population. All survey outcomes are standardized to have zero mean and unit standard deviations. We exclude missing and inapplicable responses from the analyses.

To measure the potential displacement effects on Swiss citizens' labor market outcomes, we use the biannual Swiss Earnings Structure Surveys (SESS) from 1994 to 2010 (Swiss Federal Office of Statistics 2016).⁷ Conducted by the SFOS, the SESS provides a stratified random sample of workers employed in private and public firms. Each iteration covers 16.6% (1996) to 50% (2010) of the country's total employment. We use the SESS data to construct measures of *Employment* and *Hourly Wages* for Swiss workers.⁸

To measure traffic congestion, a prominent indicator of density stress, we use data from road traffic counting stations operated by the Swiss Federal Roads Office. These stations counted the number of cars passing every hour of the day from 1997 to 2015 (Swiss Federal Roads Office 2022). We calculate *Traffic* as the average number of cars passing on both sides of the road per hour. We assign each counting station to the 0–15 or 15–30 minute region by either directly using the coordinates given in the data description (for about 70% of the counting stations) or linking the station's name to the closest municipality.

Finally, we compiled a dataset of bills introduced between 1992 and 2021 in the cantonal parliament of Ticino (Ticino Parliament 2022). After scraping all the bills from the Ticino parliament's website, we identified the authors and sponsors of each bill and matched them with a dataset containing the names and municipalities that the authors represent. We retained the bills sponsored by legislators representing either treated or control municipalities. We then used keywords to search

⁶ In robustness tests in the SM, we establish that the results are the same if we use the Swiss population level at the time of the observation (we refer to this as the Current Swiss population). For summary statistics on immigration and other outcomes, see SM Section A1.

⁷ We employ the same measures of travel distance to the border used by Beerli et al. (2021) when analyzing the SESS data.

⁸ Hourly wages were indexed to construct real wages.

the titles to identify bills related to immigration to proxy for elite anti-immigrant rhetoric.⁹ We manually reviewed this list to determine whether each bill's title was actually related to immigration. This produced a list of 267 unique bills related to immigration between 1992 and 2021.

Statistical Models

We estimate the effect of exposure to open borders using linear panel regressions with municipality and year fixed effects. Our specification includes two predictors: *Border Proximity* \times *Transition* and *Border Proximity* \times *Free Movement*. The first estimates the effect (ρ) of the partially open border of the transition period. The second is the main quantity of interest (γ), the effect of open borders, comparing municipalities in *Border Proximity* (< 15 minutes) to control municipalities (15–30 minutes). By controlling for municipal (δ_i) and year fixed effects (λ_t), our specifications account for all confounding variables that are constant within municipalities over time as well as all time-varying confounders that are constant across municipalities. Unless otherwise specified, we cluster standard errors at the municipality level to account for disturbances correlated within municipalities over time and include population weights. We run the following model:

$$y_{it} = \lambda_t + \delta_i + \rho \text{Border Proximity}_i \times \text{Transition}_t + \gamma \text{Border Proximity}_i \times \text{Free Movement}_t + \epsilon_{it}. \quad (1)$$

This model estimates the average treatment effect for border-proximate municipalities separately for the transition and free-movement periods. We use this model to estimate how liberalization affects our various outcome measures, including the share of immigrant workers in the population and anti-immigrant parties' vote share. We complement this with a second specification that estimates year- or election-specific effects by replacing our two predictors with interactions between *Border Proximity* and binary indicators for all years/elections except the last one before the transition period, which serves as our baseline. This specification allows us to compare outcomes in border versus control municipalities against the baseline year. While these specifications are somewhat more demanding, they provide two significant benefits. First, they allow us to empirically assess an implication of the parallel-trends assumption: we can test for significant differences in the outcome trajectories of treated and control municipalities before the borders opened, which would imply the presence of unmeasured time-varying confounders. Second, these specifications allow us to estimate how long it takes for any effects to materialize and their persistence using the following model:

⁹ The keywords include “*migrant*,” “*immigrant*,” “*frontalier*” (cross-border worker), “*frontier*” (border), “*Schengen*,” “*cittadin*” (citizen), “*migrator*,” “*immigrazione*,” “*rimpatri*” (repatriation), “*estero*” (abroad), and “*stranier*” (foreigner).

$$y_{it} = \lambda_t + \delta_i + \sum_{t=1996, t \neq 1999}^{2016} \gamma_t I(\text{year} = t) \quad (2) \\ \times \text{Border Proximity}_i + \epsilon_{it}.$$

EFFECTS ON THE PRESENCE OF FOREIGNERS

Figure 2 indicates that opening Switzerland's borders with the EU increased the share of foreigners in border-proximate municipalities. Panel A presents an event-study specification of yearly DID estimates of the border opening's impact on the ratio of immigrant workers (including foreign residents and CBWs) to the Swiss population. It shows that the pre-treatment trends were very similar. For the transition period, we find a differential increase in the share of immigrant workers in border municipalities, and this trend gained traction in the free-movement period. Averaged over the free movement period, the increase amounts to 14% (CI 7–20) over the baseline. Toward the end of the free-movement period, the border opening boosted the share of immigrant workers by 10.5 percentage points (CI 5.4–15.6), an increase of 23% over the baseline.¹⁰

Panel B illustrates that each language region¹¹ experienced an increase in the relative size of its foreign population. Additionally, it shows that in each region, most of this growth came from foreigners from a neighboring country who spoke the same language as the residents and often shared similar religious and ethnic characteristics. This similarity suggests that cultural drivers of hostility toward immigrants are unlikely to be significant in Switzerland, especially since much of the movement was concentrated in the border areas. The panel also establishes that the increase in the share of foreigners from a country with the same language was much more significant in the Italian- and French-language regions. Even though the German-language region experienced some growth in German arrivals, this increase was about 6–10 percentage points smaller than Italian and French arrivals in the Italian- and French-language regions.¹² Additional analyses, reported in SM Section A2, provide more information about the specific effects of liberalization on immigration.

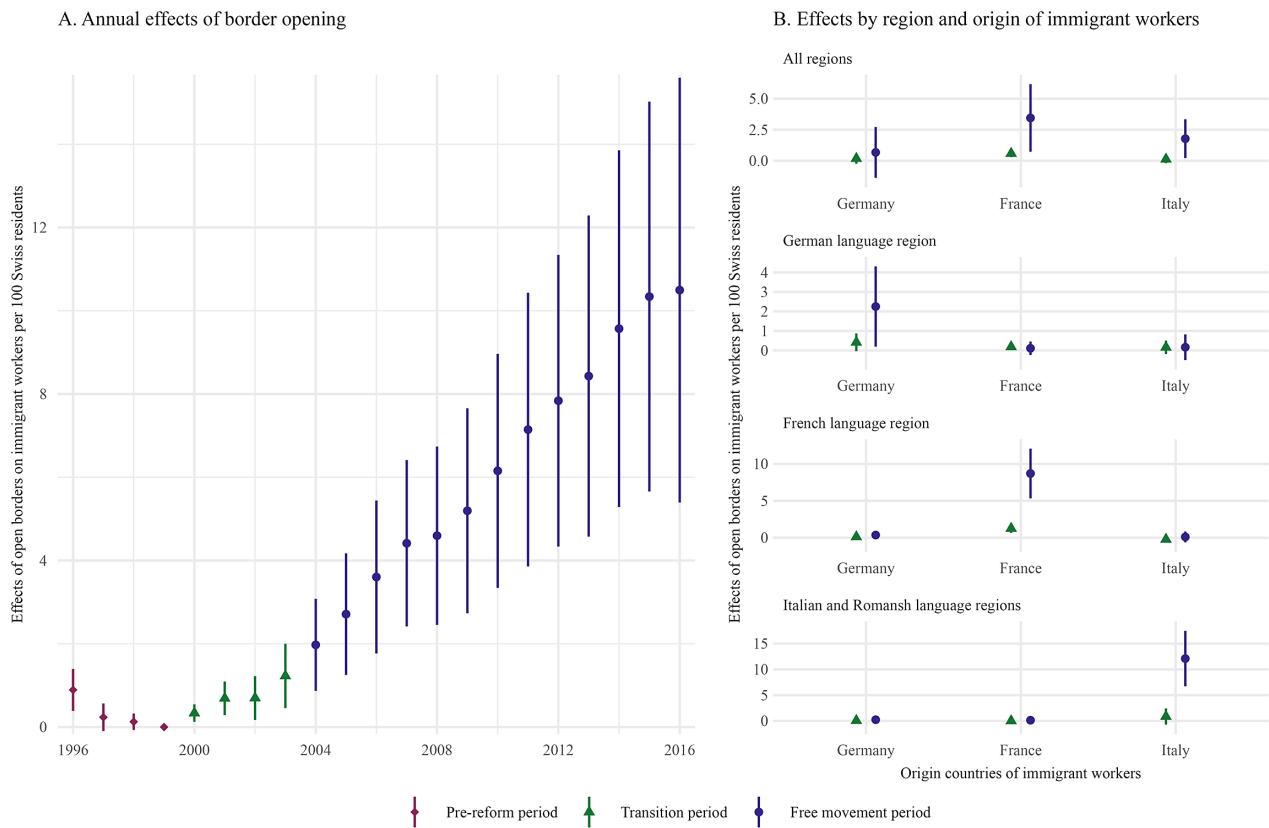
EFFECTS ON ANTI-IMMIGRANT VOTING

We now investigate whether border municipalities voted for anti-immigrant parties after liberalization.

¹⁰ SM Table A10 presents the results from the DID model and demonstrates that they are robust to using an alternative control group consisting of municipalities that are 30–45 minutes away from the border.

¹¹ We group the Italian- and Romansh-language municipalities into a single category given the tiny number of Romansh municipalities in the border region.

¹² The coefficient on German arrivals to the German-speaking region was 2.3 (CI 0.2–4.3). Similarly, the estimate for Italian arrivals to the Italian-speaking region was 12.1 (CI 6.7–17.5). For French arrivals to the French-speaking region, it was 8.7 (CI 5.3–12.1).

FIGURE 2. Effects of Opening Borders on the Presence of Foreigners

Note: Panel A displays regression estimates for the difference in the share of immigrant workers in treated (< 15 minutes) and control (15–30 minutes) municipalities by year. The baseline year is 1999. The points denote estimates with cluster-robust 95% CI bars. Panel B presents DID regression estimates of the effect of the border opening on the immigrant worker population by region and foreigners' country of origin. Points are estimates with cluster-robust 95% CIs. The regression results are shown in SM Tables A11, A12, A14, A16, and A18.

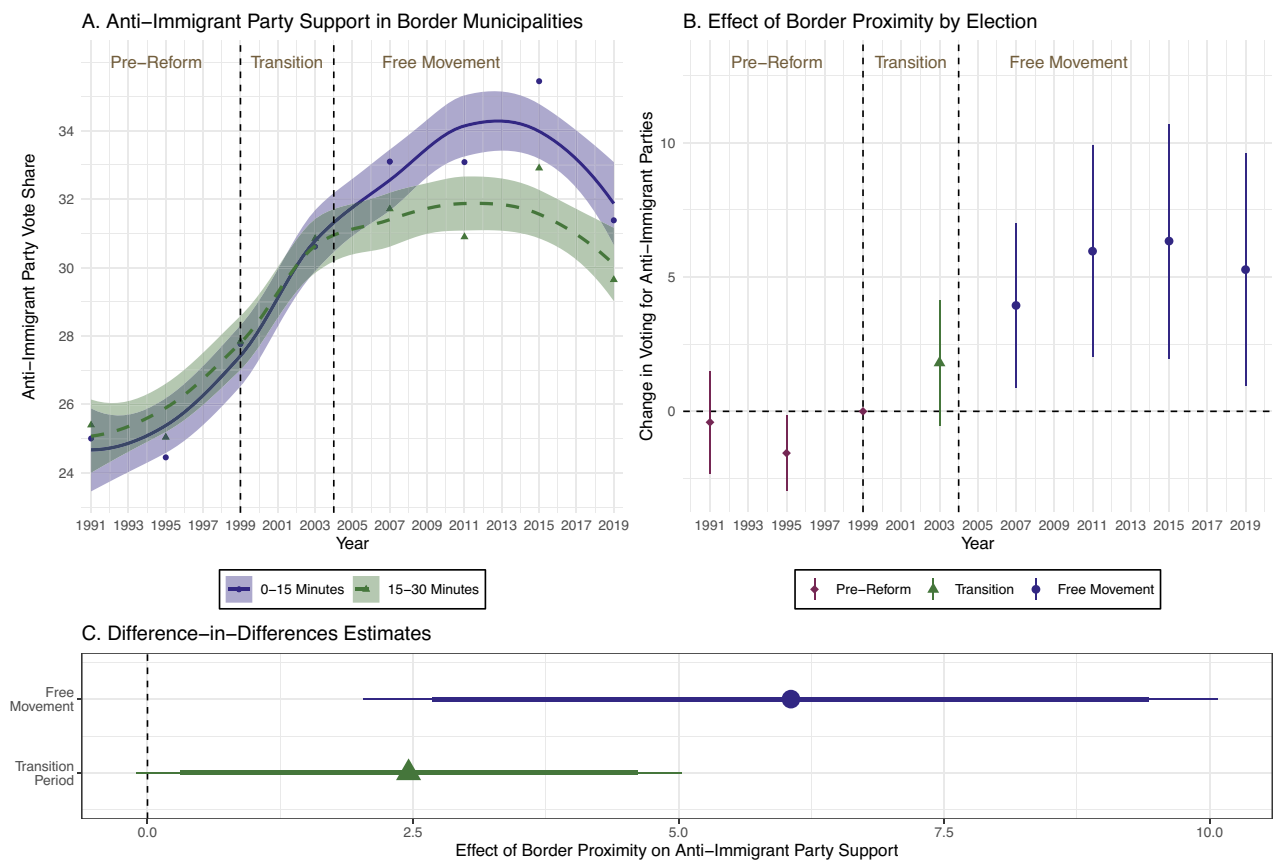
We use the same regressions as in Equation 1 and Equation 2 and replace years with election years (Panel A of Figure 3). Before liberalization, these parties were strong in the control municipalities, securing around 25% of the vote, on average. While voting for anti-immigrant parties increased in both types of municipalities during the free-movement period, support for anti-immigrant parties rose at a higher rate in border than in control municipalities. In the final election in our study period, anti-immigrant parties received, on average, around 30% of the vote in both types of municipalities.

Panel B reports the results of our election-specific effect estimates. They formalize the trends in Panel A: there are no large differences in anti-immigrant party support between the border and control municipalities in the early elections (the 1999 elections are the baseline category).¹³ During the transition period, we observe a slight increase in support for anti-immigrant

parties in border municipalities compared to control municipalities. However, this difference is not statistically significant compared to the baseline difference. After liberalization, this pattern changes. In the four elections that followed liberalization, the difference in anti-immigrant voting between the two groups of municipalities is approximately 4 (CI 1–7) to 6 (CI 2–11) percentage points higher than in the baseline (1999) election. This effect is statistically significant in all four free-movement period elections (2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019).

Panel C presents the estimates from our baseline DID specification, which reinforce our conclusion that liberalization caused anti-immigrant votes to increase by over 6 percentage points (CI 2–10) in border municipalities, which corresponds to a 32% increase over pre-reform levels. We also observe a slight increase in anti-immigrant voting in the transition period compared to the pre-reform phase. We assess the robustness of these results by estimating alternative specifications. Dataverse Appendix Table B3 shows that the results are similar when using different thresholds for the treated and control groups (5–25 minutes to the border in 5-minute increments) and continuous distance measures.

¹³ There is a slight difference in 1995. However, the difference is no longer statistically significant without population weights, as model 1 of SM Table A22 shows. Nor do we find a significant difference in the 1987 election shown in the same table.

FIGURE 3. Effects of Opening Borders on Anti-Immigrant Voting

Note: Panel A: Points represent raw yearly means within commuting distance groups (without population weights). Lines are a loess-smoother estimate of the over-time trend; shaded areas denote 95% CIs. Panel B: Regression estimates of differential change in anti-immigrant party support between treated (< 15 minutes to the border) and untreated (15–30 minutes to the border) municipalities. The 1999 election is left out as the baseline. Points are estimates with 95% CI bars. Panel C: DID regression estimates of the effect of border opening on anti-immigrant party support in federal elections. Points are estimates with cluster-robust 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) CIs. The regression results are shown in model 2 of SM Table A21 and model 2 of SM Table A22.

We also report similar results with alternative control groups consisting of municipalities that are 30–45 or 30–60 minutes from border crossings in SM Tables A21 and A22. One potential issue with the main analysis is spatial dependence. Dataverse Appendix Table B6 indicates that the findings are robust to regressions that account for spatial correlations.¹⁴

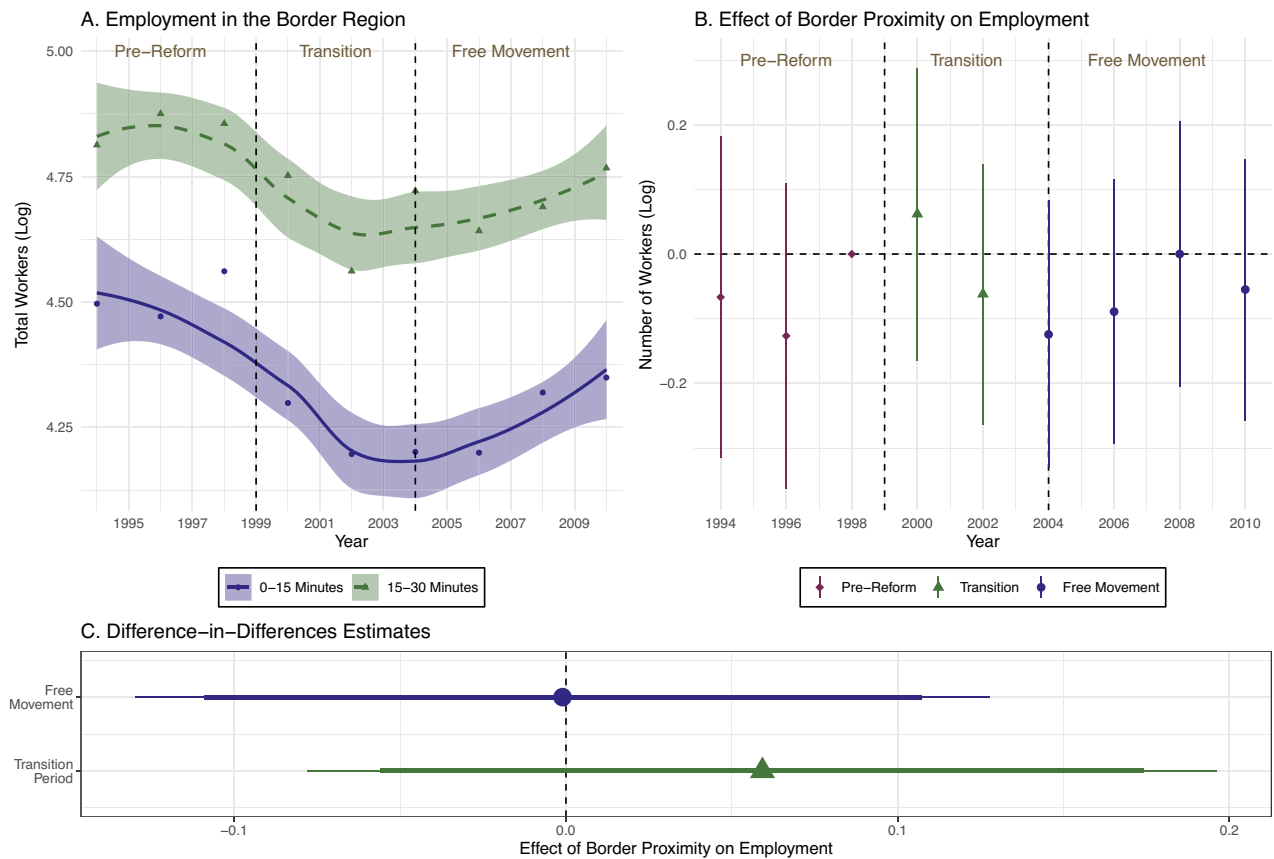
In addition to anti-immigrant voting in Swiss federal elections, we also report on anti-immigrant voting in Swiss referendums and popular initiatives in Dataverse Appendix Section B6. The results show that anti-immigrant voting in referendums also increased during the free-movement period (e.g., Dataverse Appendix Figure B7), including in prominent initiatives framed around mass immigration and overpopulation. We also

¹⁴ Dataverse Appendix Tables B4 and B5 provide the same analysis for other political parties. The results establish that centrist parties lost the most from border liberalization (such as the Christian Democratic People's Party and the Evangelical People's Party of Switzerland), suggesting that some people may have shifted their votes from the center to the far right.

examine a set of placebo referendums unrelated to immigration and find no significant differences between border and control municipalities (Dataverse Appendix Figure B8).

TESTING FOR CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, AND SECURITY CONCERNS

What explains the increase in voting for anti-immigrant parties in the liberalization period? Prior research has identified several drivers of hostility toward immigrant groups, especially perceived economic concerns and cultural threats (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010; Adida, Lo, and Platas 2019; Alrababah et al. 2021a; Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). According to these studies, citizens often believe foreigners have a negative effect on the economy and local culture. However, in this context, the discussion of the economic impact of liberalizing the border emphasized its *benefits*. Switzerland is an aging

FIGURE 4. Effects of Opening Borders on Employment

Note: Panel A: Points represent yearly means of treated (< 15 minutes to the border) and control municipalities (15–30 minutes to the border). Lines are a loess-smoother estimate of the over-time trend; shaded areas are 95% CIs. Panel B: Regression estimates of the differential change in the number of workers between treated and control municipalities. Points are estimates with 95% CI bars. Panel C: DID regression estimates of the effect of border opening on Swiss workers' employment. Points are estimates with cluster-robust 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) CIs. Models 1 and 3 of SM Table A25 report the regression results.

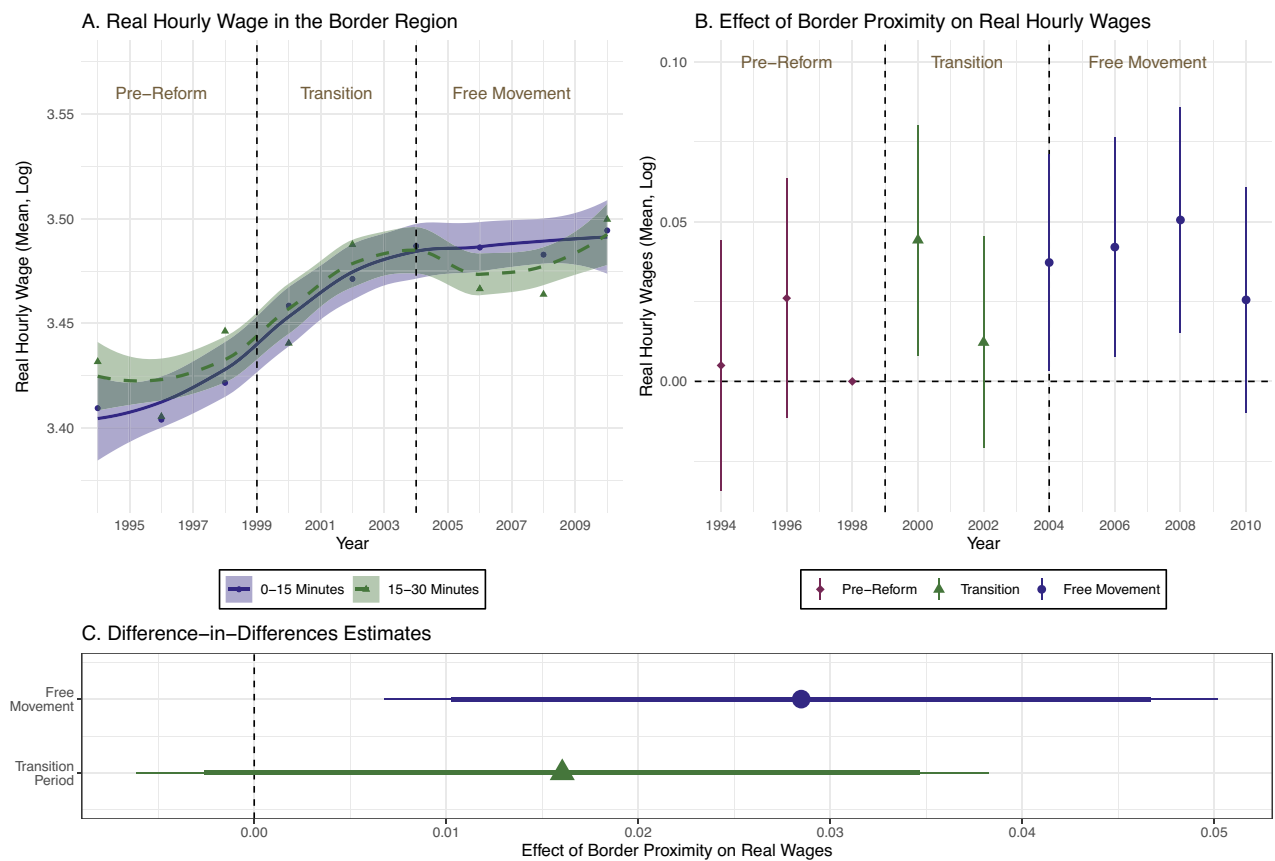
country, which places pressure on social security funds. Economists widely acknowledged that immigration can slow down demographic aging and ease the burden on social security. Furthermore, given its low unemployment rate, academic researchers and policymakers claim that the local Swiss market needs more high- and low-skilled workers (Beerli, Indergand, and Kunz 2023). These claims receive empirical support from Beerli et al. (2021), who find no evidence of displacement or wage dumping for Swiss workers following the border opening and show that firms, particularly knowledge-intensive ones, benefited and grew.

We run the same regression models to more closely examine the effects of liberalization on Swiss citizens' employment and real wages.¹⁵ Figures 4 and 5 display the results. Panel A of Figure 4 shows the trends in

employment among Swiss citizens over time in border and control municipalities: the number of Swiss workers declined both during the pre-reform and transitional periods. During the free-movement period, the number of Swiss workers increased in the border and control municipalities. Panel B displays the regression coefficients, which suggest that opening the borders did not depress employment in the treated municipalities. Panel A of Figure 5 depicts trends in the real wages of Swiss citizens by border region. Panel B shows the coefficient estimates and suggests that Swiss workers' real wages did not decrease, and if anything, they increased in border municipalities compared to controls.

These results establish that liberalization had no significant adverse effects on Swiss citizens' employment or wages. To test whether individuals still perceived immigrants' economic impact as negative, we analyze SHP data from 1999 to 2017. We use three questions from the survey to measure perceptions of economic security: one related to *unemployment risk*, which measures respondents' perceived risk of becoming unemployed in the next 12 months; one related to

¹⁵ These analyses replicate the findings in Beerli et al. (2021) but use different treated and control groups. We report unweighted results in the main paper and the results weighted by the number of workers in SM Table A25.

FIGURE 5. Effects of Opening Borders on Real Wages

Note: Panel A: Points represent yearly means within commuting distance groups. Lines are a loess-smoother estimate of the over-time trend; shaded areas denote 95% CIs. Panel B: Regression estimates of the differential change in real hourly wages between treated (< 15 minutes to the border) and control (15–30 minutes to the border) municipalities. Points are estimates with 95% CI bars. Panel C: DID regression estimates of the effect of border opening on Swiss workers' real wages. Points are estimates with cluster-robust 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) CIs. Models 5 and 7 of SM Table A25 present the regression results.

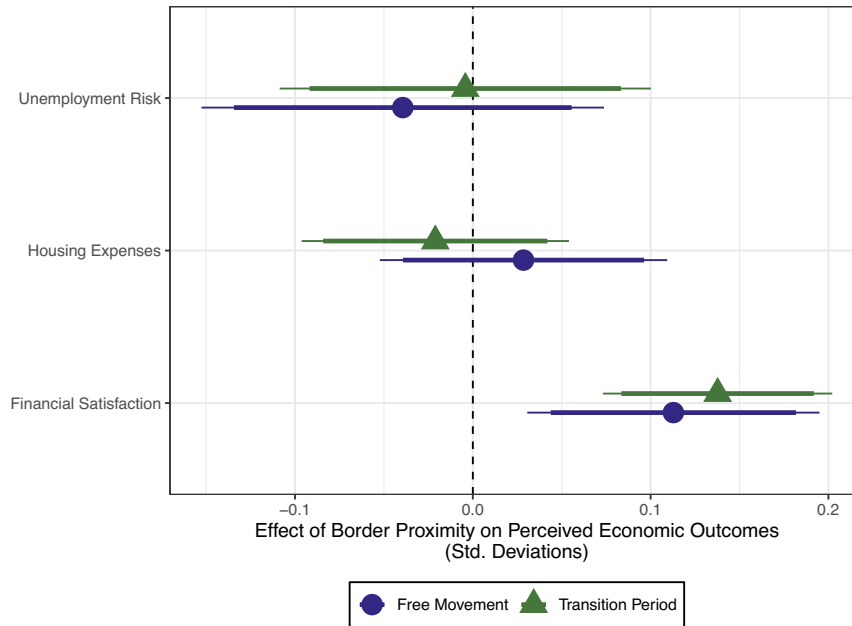
housing expenses, which assesses the perceived cost of accommodation; and one related to *financial satisfaction*, which measures respondents' satisfaction with their personal financial situation. We use the same identification strategy and regression specification, comparing respondents who live within 0–15 minutes of the border to those who live within 15–30 minutes of the border. We include municipality, year, and individual fixed effects and use population weights. We also cluster standard errors at the municipality level. The results, presented in Figure 6, indicate that border liberalization did not worsen respondents' perceived economic outcomes. If anything, it seems to have increased the financial satisfaction of the people most exposed to immigration.

These analyses suggest that liberalization did not undermine a series of critical economic outcomes, covering objective and subjective measures. The literature on immigration has alternatively claimed that *cultural* threats (generally measured using linguistic and religious differences between migrants and citizens) can generate anti-immigrant attitudes (Bansak, Hainmueller, and

Hangartner 2016; Hopkins 2015; Sniderman, Hagedoorn, and Prior 2004). Immigrants and Swiss citizens across the border often share a language and religion. While there might be differences in dialects, there are significant linguistic differences among the Swiss population both in dialects and in the four official languages used in the country. Prior work has also identified *security* threats as another driver of anti-immigrant attitudes. Some natives may view immigrants as potential threats to national security and blame them for increased crime and violence (Lahav and Courtemanche 2012; Ward 2019). While political campaigns and the Swiss media have discussed potential security threats of asylum migration, they have rarely emphasized security threats related to immigration from neighboring France, Germany, or Italy. It is also possible that concerns over environmental protection caused by increased immigration and the economic prosperity associated with it could lead individuals to oppose immigration.

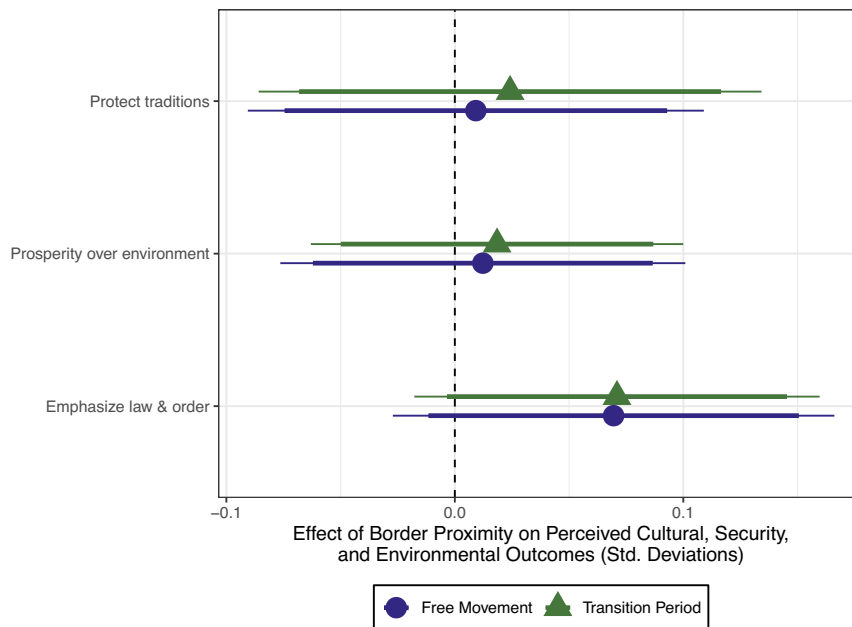
Since the SHP survey does not ask about cultural and security concerns, we use the VOX survey for these measures. First, we consider the desire to protect Swiss

FIGURE 6. Effects of Opening Borders on Perceived Economic Outcomes



Note: DID regression estimates of how border liberalization affected perceived economic outcomes. Points are estimates with cluster-robust 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) CIs. SM Table A26 reports the regression results.

FIGURE 7. Effects of Opening Borders on Cultural, Environmental, and Security Concerns



Note: DID regression estimates of the effect of border opening on cultural, environmental, and security concerns. Points are estimates with cluster-robust 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) CIs. SM Table A28 presents the regression results.

traditions as an indicator of cultural threats using a question about whether respondents *prefer a Switzerland that is modern or a Switzerland that protects its traditions*. To evaluate security threats, we use a question that asks whether people *prefer a Switzerland in*

which law (or peace) and order are little emphasized or a Switzerland where law (peace) and order are strongly emphasized. For environmental concerns, we use the question *would you like Switzerland to prioritize environmental protection over economic prosperity or vice*

versa? We use the same DID strategy as above. Since VOX consists of a repeated cross section, we cannot add individual fixed effects; we instead add a series of controls, including income, gender, age, education, employment, and marital status. These results, depicted in Figure 7, should therefore be viewed as merely suggestive. The figure shows that liberalization did not significantly increase the desire to protect traditions in the areas most exposed to immigrant workers. While it has had a slightly larger effect on emphasizing law and order in municipalities close to the border, this effect does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.¹⁶

We use SHP data to report on alternative outcomes in Dataverse Appendix Table B8. One potential interpretation of security threats is that people may perceive an increase in external threats. We did not find a statistically significant effect when using a question from the SHP that asks respondents if they favor a strong versus no army. Alternatively, support for far-right parties may have increased because of the anti-establishment aspects of these parties, especially among those who may have opposed opening the borders or felt unrepresented by the government. However, we found no effect on measures of trust in the government or satisfaction with democracy. Finally, respondents may fear that opening the borders could be a step toward joining the EU. However, we only found a weak effect on staying outside the EU during the transitional period, which is no longer significant during the free-movement period.

This section's findings suggest that the border opening likely did not increase economic, cultural, or security concerns in border municipalities. Thus, these factors are unlikely to explain the vote gains of anti-immigrant parties.

The Role of Political Elites

In light of these null findings for the standard explanations of anti-immigrant voting in this context, how can we explain the effects of border liberalization on voting for anti-immigrant parties? Research on public opinion formation emphasizes two processes to describe the relationship between political elites and the public. Early work in this area focused on a top-down process in which political elites influence public attitudes in a variety of ways, including through cues, persuasion, and issue framing (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010; Friedman 2012; Gerber *et al.* 2011; Kinder 1998; Zaller 1992). Later research also highlighted a bottom-up process, in which the public influences elites. According to this view, the public has consistent opinions on specific issues, to which politicians respond by strategically adjusting their policy positions (Shapiro and Page

1988). Recent scholarship has argued that both processes can simultaneously co-exist (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Steenbergen, Edwards, and De Vries 2007). Together, these strands of the literature suggest that elites can both influence and be influenced by public opinion.

The extensive research on elites' impact on various political outcomes—including political attitudes, far-right voting, hate crimes, online prejudice, and the erosion of democratic norms (Alrababah *et al.* 2021b; Clayton *et al.* 2021; De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Zaller 1992)—highlights a significant gap in studies of anti-immigrant attitudes, particularly regarding the role of elites in shaping them.¹⁷ In this section, we propose an explanation for why political elites can be effective at changing attitudes toward immigration. We argue that elites can be particularly effective at shaping public attitudes when they introduce novel narratives about the threats posed by immigrants, especially in areas that receive a large and relatively sudden influx of immigration.

Our starting point in this argument is Hopkins's "politicized places" hypothesis, which maintains that anti-immigrant sentiment increases when communities experience sudden influxes of immigrants and when national rhetoric emphasizing the threat of immigration is salient. This suggests that a sudden rise in immigration gives anti-immigrant elites the opportunity to increase the salience of rhetoric against the flow of migrants. We argue that where traditional threats from immigration are insufficient, political elites could formulate and propagate new narratives to shift public opinion via public statements, legislative initiatives, political campaigns—and, in Switzerland, popular initiatives for the public to vote on.

When traditional threats are minimal, anti-immigrant rhetoric becomes compelling by highlighting novel threats, making it difficult for the general public and pro-immigrant advocates to respond effectively. We do not argue that elites will stop exploiting traditional fears, but that they can combine them with novel threats to mobilize voters against immigration. We expect elite narratives to change the opinions of certain subgroups. Drawing on Zaller's model of public opinion formation, we also suggest that individuals with moderate levels of political awareness are especially susceptible to elite rhetoric. This group is more likely to receive messages from political elites and is less likely to resist them. Furthermore, in line with Hopkins (2010), we expect elite narratives to be most effective in areas that receive large immigration inflows.

Our argument may seem at odds with at least two recent studies on attitudes toward immigrants. For instance, Donnelly, Islam, and Savoie (2020) use survey experiments informing respondents that some politicians, business leaders, or unions bring in skills or

¹⁶ For the law-and-order outcome, one concern could be a ceiling effect. Dataverse Appendix Figure B6 demonstrates trends in the weighted mean of this variable. While the emphasis on law and order increased in both groups after the reform, it decreased after 2010 and never reached its earlier peak. This suggests that a ceiling effect is unlikely to explain the insignificant result.

¹⁷ Some research on the rise of populism has argued that political entrepreneurs can contribute to radicalizing the public, including by exacerbating anti-immigrant sentiment (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). However, these studies have primarily focused on contexts where sizeable segments of the host population perceive immigrants as a cultural, security, or economic threat.

contribute to local culture and find null or small effects. Yet their findings are likely to differ from ours for three reasons. First, they use elites (politicians) as a control group, as their goal is not to isolate the effects of elites per se. Second, their experiment seeks to improve attitudes toward immigration, which might be more challenging than lowering them. Finally, their treatment consists of a single sentence, so its effect is unlikely to be comparable to the influx of large numbers of immigrants over multiple years.

Second, Kustov, Laaker, and Reller find that immigration attitudes tend to be stable over time. They provide convincing evidence from panel studies in several countries that the immigration attitudes of roughly 30%–80% of citizens remained stable during the study period. This could suggest that elites (or shocks) may not significantly affect attitudes toward immigration. However, we do not argue that the attitudes of the average citizen tend to be unstable. Instead, we suggest that, in line with Hopkins (2010), the effects are strongest among the citizens most exposed to immigration. In our case, border liberalization increased anti-immigrant voting by 4 (CI 1–7) to 6 (CI 2–11) percentage points. The findings in Kustov, Laaker, and Reller (2021) do not rule out the possibility that exposure to migration affects relevant subgroups—particularly those most exposed to immigrant arrivals.

The limited significance of traditional explanations in our context gives us an opportunity to unravel the top-down process. Since the 1970s, political entrepreneurs in Switzerland have launched multiple initiatives to reduce immigration. They have typically mobilized around two related narratives: “Überfremdung” (over-foreignization) and its sanitized cousin, “Überbevölkerung” (overpopulation). The former communicates traditional fears associated with immigration, including a loss of cultural identity, social cohesion, and public safety. The latter echoes Malthusian theories of exponential population growth and is ostensibly less xenophobic as it implies that the country is getting too crowded. However, political actors in Switzerland who speak about overpopulation are clear about who they believe is responsible for population growth (foreigners) and their proposed solution (reducing immigration) (see Odenwald 2021). James Schwarzenbach, the Swiss pioneer of far-right populism who was responsible for launching several early initiatives against over-foreignization and overpopulation, was transparent about his role in fueling anti-immigrant votes. Following the qualified success of his first initiative in 1970, he even styled himself after Goethe’s *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* in an op-ed: “The spirits that I called, I want to keep and multiply” (Schwarzenbach 1971).

With the border opening, and likely because of limited cultural and security concerns about immigration from neighboring countries, the overpopulation narrative took hold. In the early 2000s, this culminated in right-wing parties advancing a term borrowed from biology—“density stress” (*Dichtestress*)—that describes a collapse in behavior resulting from overcrowding due to unfettered population growth.¹⁸ Populist right-wing politicians used this catch-all term to complain about issues as diverse as

overcrowded trains, congested roads, urbanization of the countryside, and the loss of cultivated land (Odenwald 2021). An SVP pamphlet even referenced crowded malls, queues at cinemas and shopping malls, and the lack of empty parking spaces as examples of density stress.¹⁹

As seen previously with the term overpopulation, those employing the concept of density stress attributed overcrowding to foreigners and advocated immigration restrictions as the solution. The SVP initiative “Against Mass Immigration,” launched in 2014, sought to impose strict quotas on EU immigration. During the campaign leading up to the vote, supporters highlighted density stress as a primary reason why the free movement agreement with the EU has harmed Switzerland (Odenwald 2021).²⁰ Of course, this does not mean that anti-immigrant elites have stopped talking about traditional (e.g., economic, cultural, and security) threats from immigration. We include these anecdotes to highlight that anti-immigrant elites in Switzerland also discussed narratives related to density stress and overpopulation. Dataverse Appendix Figure B10 shows that news coverage of these narratives in articles that also mention anti-immigrant parties, significantly increased in the free movement period, starting in the late 2000s and peaking in the mid-2010s. While it decreased afterward, this rhetoric has increased again in recent years. The figure also depicts narratives associated with economic threats of migrants that mention these parties, suggesting that political parties may not have abandoned narratives of traditional threats but instead supplemented them with new discussions of density stress.

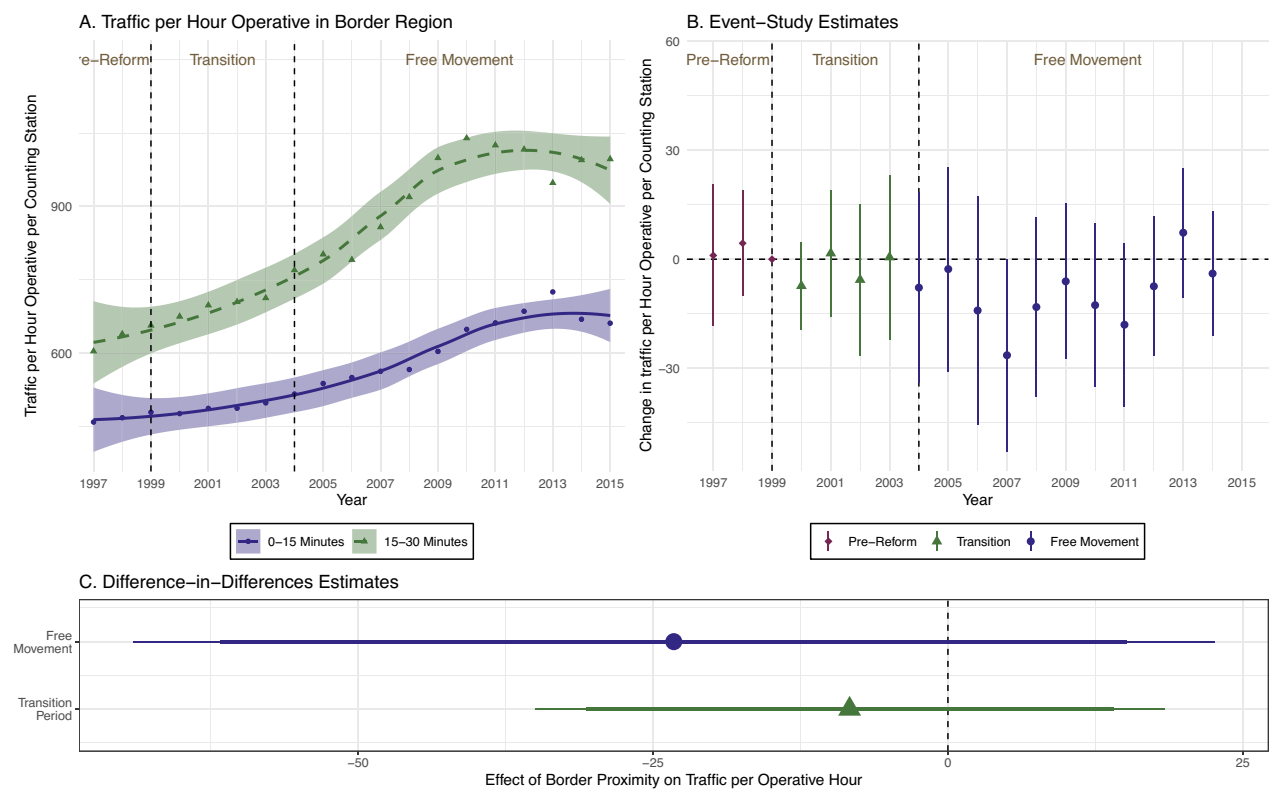
To determine whether this narrative of density stress was pure rhetoric or at least partly reflected a measurable change in the crowdedness of border neighborhoods, we examine density stress’s arguably most salient indicator: traffic congestion. Using our DID strategy and detailed data from road traffic counting stations from the Federal Roads Office for the years 1997–2015, we test whether municipalities within 0–15 minutes of border crossings were exposed to more traffic after liberalization than those within 15–30 minutes.²¹ Figure 8 presents the results. Panel A indicates an overall increase in traffic during the transition, and especially the free movement phases. However, this increase is similar (and if anything, larger) for control

¹⁸ Christian, Flyger, and Davis (1960) use the term “density stress” to explain the sudden mass mortality of sika deer on James Island in Chesapeake Bay, Maryland.

¹⁹ The publication claimed that a mass exodus of migrants would lead to Swiss people finding “parking spaces in the cities again and [avoiding standing] in line for too long, whether it is in front of the movie theater, in the Swisscom store [a telecommunication provider], or the shopping mall” (Feldges 2018).

²⁰ The initiative passed by a very narrow margin (50.33% “yes” votes).

²¹ We include linear trends interacted with the treatment to account for differences in pre-treatment trends between treated and control municipalities. This specification limits the number of estimable year-times-trend interactions to 1997–2014. Panel B of Figure 8 establishes that linear trends are sufficient to parallelize pre-trends. SM Table A23 reports similar results that do not include linear trends.

FIGURE 8. Effects of Opening Borders on Traffic

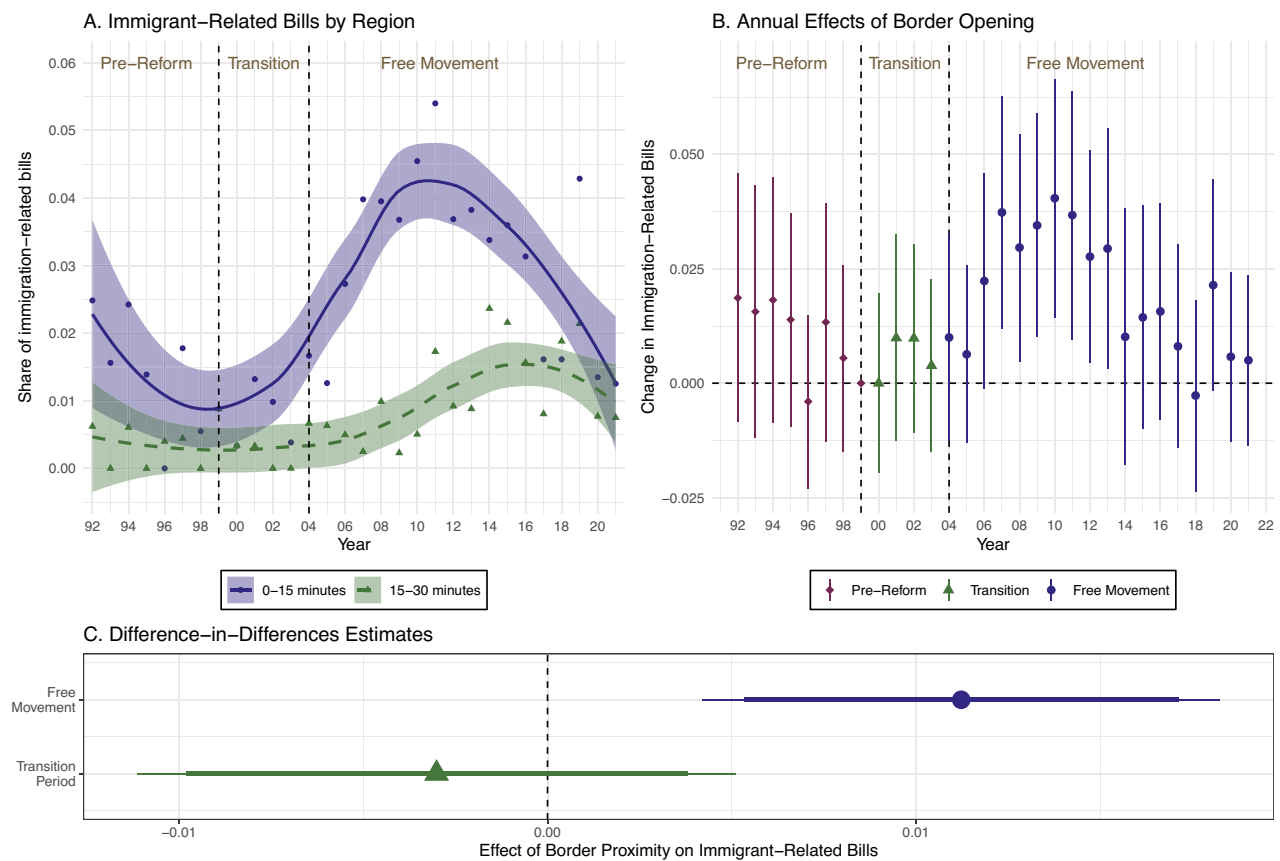
Note: This figure displays the impact of border liberalization on the annual traffic in treated and control municipalities. Panel A depicts annual traffic means per operative hour of car counting stations on Swiss roads located in both types of municipalities. The lines are loess-smoother estimates of the regional time trend, and the shaded areas represent 95% CIs. Panel B displays the estimates (and 95% CIs) from an event study akin to Equation 2 with year and counting station fixed effects and a linear regional trend. It shows the differential change in traffic between treated (< 15 minutes to the border) and untreated (15–30 minutes to the border) municipalities. Panel C presents estimates (and 90% and 95% CIs) from a DID regression, as in Equation 1, including the linear trend interacted with the treated region indicator. The regression results are shown in models 1 and 3 of SM Table A23.

municipalities than for treated municipalities, a pattern confirmed by both the event-study estimates (Panel B) and the DID estimates (Panel C). We also conduct robustness tests using two related outcomes: (1) traffic excluding counting stations on highways, which are more likely to contain longer-distance traffic, and (2) an index measuring traffic congestion, which we define as the absolute difference in traffic between the directions of a counting station in an hour divided by the mean traffic per day of the counting station. The results remain similar, as shown in Dataverse Appendix Figures B1–B3. Together, the data provide no evidence that traffic disproportionately increased in the border region following liberalization. This finding suggests that the narrative regarding density stress advanced by anti-immigrant parties did not reflect an actual change in a prominent indicator of density stress related to life quality in border municipalities.

If not because of an increase in traffic congestion, why did the narrative of density stress resonate more with voters in the border region? We discuss two complementary explanations. First, we might expect elites to go beyond national rhetoric and strategically intensify their position taking in places where it is likely

to resonate with voters. To explore this channel, we focus on parliamentary bills in the canton of Ticino. In line with previous research, we use parliamentary bills to measure legislators' position taking (Mayhew 2004), which can also shape voter attitudes (Broockman and Butler 2017). This measure has the advantages of being direct (i.e., not mediated via the media), behavioral, and geographically fine-grained. We focus on Ticino for two reasons. First, we were able to obtain data on parliamentary bills for this canton from 1992—before the bilateral agreement with the EU. Second, opening the border had a particularly sizeable effect on immigration in Ticino: Panel B of Figure 2 establishes that the DID estimates for the border regions in the Italian- and Romansh-language cantons were larger than in French-language and particularly in German-language cantons. This suggests that the border municipalities in Ticino are a prime target for anti-immigrant rhetoric.²²

²² It is possible that immigrant workers in Ticino differ from those in other language regions. We use the SESS data to examine the education levels of immigrants in each language region. Among recently arrived migrants (L or B permit), Ticino and the German-

FIGURE 9. Effects of Opening Borders on Immigration-Related Parliamentary Bills in Ticino

Note: Panel A: Points represent yearly means for treated (< 15 minutes to the border) and control (15–30 minutes to the border) municipalities within Ticino. Lines are a loess-smoother estimate of the over-time trend; shaded areas denote 95% CIs. Panel B: Regression estimates of the differential change in immigration-related bills between treated and control municipalities. The 1999 election is left out as the baseline. Points are estimates with 95% CI bars. Panel C: Regression estimates of the differential change in the share of immigration-related bills in treated and control municipalities. Points are estimates with 95% CI bars. The regression results are shown in models 1 and 2 of SM Table A24.

Our manual review of all bills identified 267 unique bills related to immigration between 1992 and 2021. Such bills often emphasize issues related to the density stress concept, such as the alleged overcrowding and pressure on Ticino's infrastructure. We coded whether any Member of Parliament (MP) from treated or control municipalities sponsored these immigration-related bills. For each region, our outcome measure equals 1 if the bill is related to immigration *and* any of its sponsors represents a municipality in that region and

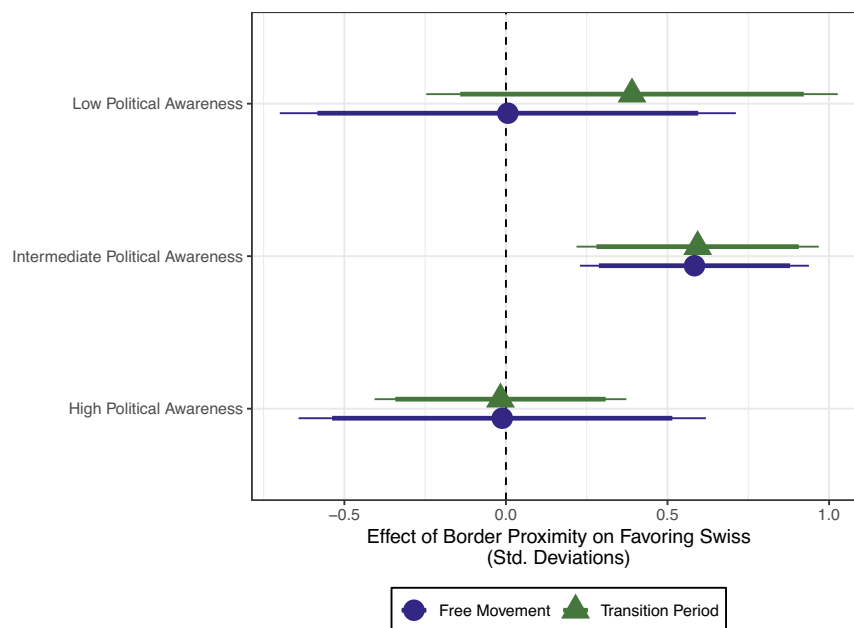
speaking regions are broadly similar: around 71% of immigrants lack tertiary education. In the French-speaking region, 60% of immigrants have less than tertiary education. As for CBWs, 71% in the French-speaking region lack tertiary education, followed by 75% in the German-speaking region, and Ticino had a somewhat higher rate of 87%. Given the scale of immigration to Ticino and some of the differences in the characteristics of citizens and natives, we do not claim that our results from Ticino would necessarily generalize to the rest of Switzerland. We hope future research can further examine the conditions under which elites affect opinions about immigration. SM Section A1 provides additional summary statistics in Ticino.

0 otherwise. Our unit of analysis is the bill-region level. We regress this outcome on our treatment indicators and adjust for year fixed effects. We cluster standard errors by bills.²³

Figure 9 shows that the share of immigration-related bills was fairly constant in control municipalities during the pre-reform and transition phases. In border municipalities, the share declined during the pre-reform phase but then increased toward the end of the transition phase. This divergent trend gained further traction during the free movement phase. The DID estimates, which indicate a differential increase in the share of immigration-related bills of more than 1 percentage point (CI 0.4–1.8) during the free movement period, further support this finding.²⁴ In Dataverse Appendix

²³ We do not include population weights since the analysis is at the bill level.

²⁴ The estimates reported in Figure 9 display the effect on parliamentary bills related to immigration in each region as a share of all bills in both regions. In Dataverse Appendix Figure B4, we change the denominator and demonstrate that the results are very similar if

FIGURE 10. Effects of Opening Borders on Favoring More Opportunities for the Swiss Compared to Foreigners

Note: This figure shows the DID estimates of the effect of border liberalization on attitudes toward providing foreigners the same opportunities as Swiss citizens by the level of self-reported political awareness. Higher scores on the outcome indicate favoring more opportunities for Swiss than foreigners. Points are estimates with cluster-robust 90% (thick) and 95% (thin) CIs. The regression results are reported in models 1, 3, and 5 of SM Table A27.

Figure B5, we subset the analysis by the party affiliation of the bill's sponsor using binary coding for far-right and other parties. This analysis shows that the effect on immigration-related bills depicted in Figure 9 is driven by far-right parties.

In addition to elites targeting border municipalities, we might expect density stress to resonate more strongly with voters who experience higher exposure to foreigners. This expectation aligns with the “politicized places” hypothesis, which postulates that “political reactions to neighboring immigrants are most likely when communities undergo sudden influxes of immigrants and when salient national rhetoric reinforces the threat” (Hopkins 2010, 40). In several dimensions, the border opening in Ticino is a textbook case of the politicized places hypothesis: a sudden and substantial increase in the presence of immigrant workers interacted with a highly salient rhetoric that construed immigration as a threat to the quality of life. The only caveat is that, in our context, political rhetoric takes place at the local and national levels, a point we revisit in the conclusion. While it is difficult to directly test the politicized places hypothesis without an exogenous shift in political rhetoric, we can still provide indirect evidence by investigating whether the effects of the density stress rhetoric are more pronounced among voters who are more susceptible to being influenced

by this rhetoric. To do so, we marry the politicized places hypothesis with Zaller’s (1992) RAS model of opinion change.

Building on McGuire (1968), Zaller (1992) suggests that persuasion partly depends on two factors: (1) the likelihood of being exposed to information (reception) and (2) the possibility that the message is persuasive (acceptance). In this model, political awareness, defined as “the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics *and* understands what he or she has encountered,” plays a central role (Zaller 1992, 21). According to the RAS model, people with low levels of political awareness are less likely to receive information, making them less susceptible to persuasion. People with high levels of political awareness are more likely to receive information. Yet, since they are also likely to have more solidified political predispositions, they are less persuadable by new information. Zaller thus suggests that people with intermediate levels of political awareness are most likely to change their attitudes. Combining the politicized places hypothesis with the RAS model, we derive the prediction that citizens with intermediate levels of political awareness who live in border municipalities in Ticino should react most strongly to the interaction of increasing immigration and the local and national rhetoric about density stress.²⁵ We expect citizens in the treated region with

we divide them separately by the number of bills in treated and control regions.

²⁵ We focus on Ticino because, as Figure 2 shows, exposure to immigration as a result of border liberalization increased more in

low and high levels of political awareness and all citizens in the control region to be less persuaded by the density stress rhetoric. Using the SHP again, we measure political awareness using the question: *Generally, how interested are you in politics, if 0 means 'not at all interested' and 10 'very interested'?* We divide respondents into three roughly equal-sized groups of low, intermediate, and high levels of awareness. To measure attitudes toward immigrants, we use the only available question: *Are you in favor of Switzerland offering foreigners the same opportunities as those offered to Swiss citizens, or in favor of Switzerland offering Swiss citizens better opportunities?*

Figure 10 plots the results.²⁶ We find no significant effects during the transition and free movement phases among respondents with low and high levels of awareness on their likelihood of opposing equal opportunities for foreigners. Citizens with intermediate levels of political awareness in the treated region were significantly more likely to oppose equal opportunities for foreigners during these phases. Based on six subgroup-specific estimates, this pattern aligns with the predictions based on the combined politicized places hypothesis and RAS model. While consistent with our argument, the differences between the political awareness subgroups are not significant and this evidence is only suggestive. We hope future research examines the causal effects of elites on anti-immigrant attitudes.

An alternative explanation is that immigrants from neighboring countries may have brought anti-immigrant discourse from their places of origin.²⁷ If elites in neighboring countries engaged in anti-immigrant rhetoric focusing on overcrowding, then immigration into Switzerland may have caused these ideas to spread. To examine this possibility, we compare coverage in major Swiss newspapers by language region to newspapers in neighboring countries. We use Factiva and search in major German, French, and Italian newspapers, as well as German- and French-speaking newspapers in Switzerland.²⁸ We report the results in Dataverse Appendix Figure B9. Coverage of terms related to overcrowding constituted a higher portion of the total coverage of immigration in Swiss newspapers, both German speaking and French speaking, than in German or French newspapers. Coverage of these issues in Italian newspapers was quite low during the study period, which suggests that migrants were unlikely to have imported this discourse from their countries of origin.

the Italian-speaking region than in any other language region. Additionally, as Figure 9 demonstrates, MPs in the border region in Ticino significantly increased references to immigration as a political issue following the border liberalization.

²⁶ SM Table A27 reports the regressions and displays the results using stable groups of respondents—i.e., based on their average political awareness during the entire study period rather than their political awareness in each survey wave.

²⁷ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this potential explanation.

²⁸ We were unable to find coverage during the same period in Ticino-based newspapers. We select newspapers with the highest circulation, according to Wikipedia. Details on the search terms and newspapers are provided in Dataverse Appendix Section B7.

CONCLUSION

Across the globe, anti-immigrant parties and candidates have experienced renewed success in recent years. Prominent explanations for this success claim that voters support these parties because they promise to address their economic, cultural, or security concerns triggered by increasing immigration. We examine these explanations of anti-immigrant attitudes using a DID design that compares Swiss municipalities within 0–15 minutes from border crossings to those located slightly farther away. Our DID estimates demonstrate that in the aftermath of the open border agreement between Switzerland and the EU in 2000, the presence of immigrant workers in border municipalities increased by 14% (CI 7–20) and support for anti-immigrant parties rose by 32% (CI 11–53). However, we find limited evidence that the standard economic, cultural, and security explanations are driving this rising anti-immigrant sentiment.

Our study explores how elites advance narratives of overcrowding and density stress. While anti-immigrant politicians in Switzerland pioneered this narrative, Brexit campaigners similarly claimed that Britain had reached a “breaking point,” and President Trump advanced the slogan “our country is full.” Examining traffic congestion, a salient proxy for density stress, we find no evidence of a differential increase between border municipalities and those farther away. However, our analysis suggests that political elites target their hostile rhetoric at border regions and that it resonates more strongly with persuadable voters exposed to immigration. We provide evidence of the first channel by examining parliamentary legislation in Ticino and show that politicians who represent border municipalities are more likely to propose anti-immigrant legislation. This suggests that political elites go beyond national rhetoric and strategically intensify their position taking in areas experiencing the most significant increase in immigration. While this finding does not definitively establish a top-down influence, it demonstrates that in areas where immigration is particularly salient, elites increase anti-immigrant rhetoric. The second channel proposes that anti-immigrant rhetoric resonates most strongly with citizens who face the highest exposure to immigration and are the most susceptible to persuasion. Consistent with this prediction, we find that voters in border municipalities with intermediate levels of political awareness were more likely to oppose equal opportunities for foreigners after the border liberalization.

Our study suffers from at least five limitations. First, while we test for major economic, cultural, and security threats, we cannot account for all potential bottom-up explanations for anti-immigrant sentiment. Another possible driver is a feeling of deprivation among native citizens after the arrival of immigrant workers, particularly in rural areas with relatively few job opportunities. While we cannot completely rule out this factor, our evidence is inconsistent with this idea because we do not find that people in the border region were more likely to report feeling economically insecure, measured as their

perceived risk of unemployment. On the contrary, border liberalization is associated with an increased likelihood of financial satisfaction (Figure 6). Additionally, the treated region includes major urban centers such as Basel, Geneva, and Lugano, which can hardly be considered left-behind places.

Second, it is plausible that citizens with intermediate levels of political awareness in the border region of Ticino harbor anti-immigrant attitudes *not* because they react more strongly to political rhetoric but because they are more negatively affected by the economic implications of the border opening. While we cannot stratify our register-data-based labor market outcomes by level of political awareness, we can leverage SHP measures to investigate this possibility. We subset the DID regressions using the same awareness levels employed in Figure 10, focusing on perceived unemployment risk, housing expenses, and financial satisfaction. The results are presented in Dataverse Appendix Tables B9–B11. If more persuadable voters turned against immigrants due to changes in economic outcomes, we would expect the interaction of intermediate levels of political awareness and living in the border region to be significant (as in Figure 10). However, our results (models 3 and 4) reveal that respondents with intermediate political awareness in the treated group showed limited evidence of worse economic outcomes during the free movement period. We also conduct a causal moderation analysis of respondents' cultural characteristics, including interactions between cultural characteristics and the treatment indicators (Bansak 2021) (see Dataverse Appendix Table B12). In line with our previous analysis, we find that favoring better opportunities for Swiss citizens compared to foreigners has a significantly positive effect on respondents with intermediate levels of political awareness, and remains insignificant in the low- and high-awareness groups.

Third, ideally, we would like to disentangle whether the differential reactions of persuadable voters in border municipalities are caused by locally intensified position taking of anti-immigrant MPs or because the national rhetoric of density stress resonates more with these voters. Isolating the role of local versus national rhetoric is empirically challenging, as it would require exogenous shifts in rhetoric at both levels—which might be hard to find in a natural setting where the national- and local-level rhetoric inform each other. We suspect that both of these complementary channels might be at work. In our context, elite rhetoric—at both the local and national levels—advances frames about overcrowding that politicize people's day-to-day exposure to immigrant workers. Given the similarity of narratives promoted in the parliamentary bills of right-wing MPs and those offered by their parties at the national level, we might expect them to generate similar effects. We hope future work will illuminate potential differences between local and national rhetoric.

Fourth, narratives related to overcrowding and overpopulation can lead to several types of fear, including fiscal arguments about pressure on

infrastructure and services, pressure on the housing market, and pressure on the environment. While distinguishing the supply side of these fears is beyond the scope of this article, our evidence suggests that the effects on traffic, perceived housing expenses, and environmental concerns were not significant. We hope future research can further discriminate between these different types of fears.

Finally, our evidence rules out a series of traditional bottom-up explanations. We propose a new explanation that focuses on the supply of anti-immigrant arguments and provide anecdotal and quantitative evidence that is consistent with this explanation. Dataverse Appendix Figure B10, for instance, illustrates the increase in newspaper coverage of far-right parties and mentions of terms related to overcrowding associated with immigration, starting in the late 2000s and peaking in the mid-2010s. Much of our other quantitative evidence that is consistent with this explanation focuses on Ticino. We hope future research can engage further with supply-side arguments, causally estimate them, and examine the conditions under which they may fuel support for far-right parties.

These caveats notwithstanding, our study advances the theoretical literature on the drivers of anti-immigrant sentiment in important ways. Previous research has extensively documented how immigrants who differ from the dominant native group along ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural dimensions can crystallize concerns among citizens, which motivates them to support right-wing parties. Our research suggests the importance of examining how elites shape anti-immigrant attitudes. The case of the Swiss border opening conveys the relative ease with which political elites can fuel hostile votes toward immigrants when the standard drivers of anti-immigrant sentiment are largely absent.

The study's findings have important policy implications for the EU and national entities considering liberal border policies. Since its inception, the principle of free movement of labor has been a fundamental pillar of European integration. However, our research sheds light on an unforeseen consequence of this policy, especially in regions where it enabled substantial migration flows. We document that even when such flows do not have measurable repercussions for citizens, right-wing and far-right political factions (which would like to abolish the EU) can leverage them to rally support.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424001151>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X9STDF>.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human participants.

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