Does Asylum Seeker Immigration Increase Support for the Far Right?

Evidence from the United Kingdom, 2000-2015

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Abstract

What effect does the influx of asylum seekers have on the electoral support of the far right? This paper answers this question by examining changes in support for far right parties in response to the British government's relocation of asylum seekers across the United Kingdom from 2000 to 2015. Relying primarily on a difference-in-differences (DD) empirical strategy, our main finding is that an increase in the number of asylum seekers dispersed to a local authority is associated with an increase in the vote share of parties of the far right. Further tests indicate that the effect is due both to the far right contesting more seats in those localities receiving asylum seekers and to higher levels of support it receives in those areas where it is present. We find the effect is non-linear, that it is mitigated by higher recipient area ethnic diversity, and that it is limited to the most extreme right wing parties.

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1 Introduction

Europe is currently experiencing its most severe refugee crisis since the Second World War, with around 1.3 million immigrants seeking asylum in European Union states in each of 2015 and 2016, around half that number again in each of 2017 and 2018, and almost a further half a million in 2019. This massive inflow of asylum seekers comes at a time when far right parties have already made inroads into the dominance of moderate mainstream parties across the continent. Does the actual inflow of asylum seekers cause an increase in the electoral support of far right parties?

Research to date on the electoral effects of immigration has yielded mixed results. A substantial body of research has found that those countries and regions receiving the highest number of immigrants and with the highest immigrant populations display greater support for the far right (Golder, 2003; Semyonov *et al.*, 2006). Yet other research at the cross–national (Stockemer, 2015; Hjerm, 2007; Van der Brug *et al.*, 2005) and subnational levels (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; McLaren, 2003) finds no evidence of a relationship between actual immigration levels and anti-immigrant attitudes or political behavior. Researchers further disagree over whether gains in response to immigration are experienced by all parties on the right or just those on the extreme end, and whether the effects are dependent on preexisting socioeconomic and sociodemographic conditions (Dustmann *et al.*, 2019; Otto & Steinhardt, 2014).

Problematically, hoewver, much of the existing research misidentifies the true effect of all types of immigration – including that of asylum seekers – because migration paths are typically endogenous to the politics of receiving countries or subnational units. That is, asylum seekers are likely to go to the places where they are most accepted, thus leading to the potential underestimation of the effect of immigration on support for the far right. A number of recent papers have sought to deal with this bias by instrumenting for immigration with prior immigrant stocks (Halla *et al.*, 2012; Otto & Steinhardt, 2014), the availability of low-cost or temporary housing (Harmon, 2018; Steinmayr, 2018, 2017; Vertier & Viskanic, 2018), or proximinty to migrant inflows (Dinas *et al.*, 2019). Some of this research has found a positive effect of immigration on support for the far right (Dinas *et al.*, 2019; Harmon, 2018; Halla *et al.*, 2012; Otto & Steinhardt, 2014), while other research has found no effect or even the opposite effect (Steinmayr, 2018, 2017; Vertier & Viskanic, 2018). Two further problems exist,

however. First, because the instruments used are typically static, the problem of confounding due to omitted time-varying variables persists; second, it is impossible to exclude alternative pathways through which instruments such as the availability of social housing would plausibly be related to the outcome of far right support.

Thus far, only Dustmann *et al.* (2019), Tomberg *et al.* (2019), and Jensen (2020) utilize the quasi-random variation in the timing of refugee allocation to municipalities by central governments to estimate the causal effect of immigration on voting behavior. However, results still remain inconclusive. For instance, using Danish data from distinct but overlapping periods (1986-1998 and 1993-2013 respectively), Dustmann *et al.* (2019) find that *all* parties on the right of the spectrum gain in response to refugee immigration, but that these gains are concentrated in rural areas; urban municipalities experience the opposite effect. Jensen (2020) finds that immigration shocks have no effect on the vote shares of any parties, even those of the far right. The substantive effect of refugee immigration on support for the far right remains unclear.

We tackle this question by examining changes in subnational support for far right parties in the United Kingdom in response to a distinctive policy intervention governing the immigration of asylum seekers. Due to growing numbers of immigrants in the late 1990s and their concentration in London and the Southeast, the Labour government passed the Immigration and Asylum Act (1999), which required that new asylum seekers be dispersed to local authorities in other parts of the country if they wished to receive housing and benefits while their claims were being processed.

We find that an increase in the number of asylum seekers dispersed to a local authority is associated with a small but significant increase in the vote share of the British National Party (BNP) and other parties of the far right. A selection model indicates that the effect is due both to the far right contesting more seats in those localities receiving asylum seekers and to higher levels of support in those areas where the far right is present. We find no evidence of an effect on the vote share of conservative or merely Eurosceptic right-leaning parties. The effect is limited to only the most extreme element of the British right. We also find that the effect is conditional on recipient area characteristics. We find that the effect is greater the lower is a recipient area's ethnic diversity. Last, we find that the effect of asylum seeker immigration is

non-linear. That is, there is a declining marginal effect of asylum seeker immigration on the far right's vote share. We discuss the broader implications of these findings in the Conclusion section.

2 Background: The United Kingdom's Asylum Seeker Dispersal Program

Asylum seekers represent a significant (minority) category of immigrant to the United Kingdom. The number of asylum applications has grown dramatically since the late 1980s. There were just 5,000 applications for asylum in 1988, but this figure rose to over 15,000 in 1989, 30,000 in 1990, and eventually peaked at 84,132 in 2002 (excluding dependents). Only a minority of asylum seekers are ultimately granted permission to stay; the rest are repatriated. Figure A1 in Appendix A shows that the bulk of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom in this period come from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia; Roma are also over-represented among those coming from Europe (non-EU).

The dispersal program was introduced by Labour under Section 95 of the Immigration Act (1999). The policy was put into operation in April 2000 under the control of the Home Office's newly formed National Asylum Support Service (NASS), and the first asylum seekers were dispersed in 2001. The average number of asylum seekers received is 100 per local authority per year but the distribution is uneven, as Figure A2 in Appendix A illustrates. Overall, of the 539 local authorities that existed in the United Kingdom between 2001 and 2015, 140 (26 percent) had some asylum seekers provided with accommodation by NASS. Even though asylum seeker numbers in each local authority–year were low on average, there were many cases in which several thousand asylum seekers were dispersed to a single local authority in a calendar year. The cities of Birmingham (15,380), Liverpool (11,728), Leeds (10,781), Manchester (9,946), and Newcastle (8,490) were the most common destinations.[1]

From an analytical perspective, this program has a particularly useful design in that asylum seekers had no choice where they would be located except in instances of family reunification (which were a fraction of total asylum seekers and which we exclude from the analysis). Unlike

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[1] These figures are for total flows of asylum seekers dispersed, not for stocks of asylum seekers resident at any one time in a given local authority.

many studies of the political effects of immigration, the location decision is thus independent of the preferences of immigrants themselves, hence removing a potential source of confounding. The dispersal program in effect operates as a policy shock, exposing some local authorities to the 'treatment' of asylum seeker dispersal, while leaving others 'untreated'.

However, dispersal itself was not fully randomized. We find that local authorities receiving asylum seekers tended to have higher unemployment, higher levels of violent crime, to have higher levels of 'multiple deprivation',[2] and to be more ethnically diverse, and to have greater prior support for the BNP than those not receiving asylum seekers (see Table A1 in Appendix A). We deal with these imbalances by incorporating control variables into our main models and by conducting a lengthy series of robustness and sensitivity tests as described below.

The United Kingdom case is also of both theoretical and intrinsic interest. The United Kingdom has a range of parties on the right of the political spectrum, allowing us to distinguish the effects of asylum seeker immigration on parties of the far right, the Eurosceptic right, and the center right. The BNP is Britain's main far right party (Goodwin, 2011). There is no universally agreed upon definition of the *far right* or on the criteria by which parties can be categorized as members of the far right party family. In general terms, however, European far right parties are characterized by an emphasis on law and order, traditional family values, ethnonationalism, opposition to immigration and European integration, Islamophobia, and (historically) anti-Semitism (Mudde, 1996). In Britain, the BNP has the weakest commitment to liberal democracy (especially its protections for minorities) of any major British party and is the most openly racist and xenophobic (Goodwin, 2011). Founded in 1982, the BNP reached its peak of popularity in the 2000s, winning over 50 council seats. The British far right also comprises a number of other minor parties, including the British Freedom Party (BFP) and the National Front (NF), which was the main party of the far right in the 1970s.[3] We distinguish far right from Eurosceptic parties, which have historically focused more on issues of national sovereignty, especially vis-à-vis European integration. The Eurosceptic right includes the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the English Democrats Party (EDP). In

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[2]The Multiple Deprivation Index is a qualitative measure of socioeconomic deprivation composed of seven indicators: income, employment, health and disability, education and training, housing and services, crime, and living environment.

[3]The far right also includes the street protest movement, the English Defence League (EDL), but it has not been directly active in local or national electoral politics. The EDL instead furnished candidates and support for the BFP.

spite of UKIP's increasing reputation as a 'nativist' or 'populist radical right' party especially in the context of the Brexit referendum, in contrast to the BNP, it only turned its attention to immigration relatively late, after most of the dispersion had already occurred. Moreover, at least until the lead-up to the Brexit vote in 2015, UKIP maintained a moderate, indeed supportive, position with respect to asylum seekers, if not immigrants from the EU. In fact, former UKIP leader Nigel Farage actually called for refugees from the Syrian conflict to be given asylum to the United Kingdom. Although more moderate than either the BNP or UKIP, the center-right Conservative Party has been consistently more restrictive on immigration than other mainstream parties, namley the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. The British case thus allows us to examine whether, if people are more likely to vote for the right in response to immigration, all strands of right wing politics gain equally from this trend.

3   Theoretical Contribution

The notion that a sudden increase in the minority population of a residential area should produce an increase in native threat perception, and hence, greater support for far right parties, is hardly new (Allport, 1958; Blumer, 1958). Contact theory proposes that as levels of positive contact between immigrant and native populations increase, prejudice towards immigrant groups should decline (Allport, 1958; McLaren, 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The quality of that contact matters, however, and as we explain below, for a number of reasons the depth of native–asylum seeker immigrant contact tends to be minimal. Thus, our data allows us to focus primarily on the mechanism of threat perception in the context of a sudden immigrant influx (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Fussell, 2014). Additionally, the present case allows us to probe two particular dimensions of the threat perceptions theory, concerning immigration population size and recipient area context, which remain unresolved in the literature.

Although asylum seeker numbers are much lower than those of regular immigrants, several factors nevertheless make asylum seekers substantively important and likely to increase native threat perception as inflows rise. Asylum seekers, as we pointed out above, at least in the British context, are very likely to be from a visibly minority ethnic and/or religious group, and hence distinct from the native (mostly white) population (see Figure A1 in Appendix A). Research in Britain and elsewhere suggests that this tangible sense of cultural distance and

difference should exacerbate perceptions of threat (Ford, 2011; Schneider, 2008). Second, asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, as in many Western European countries, have typically been housed in inner city, public or low-cost private housing. As a result, asylum seeker populations have come to be concentrated into select, relatively deprived urban areas, thus limiting contact with natives (Spicer, 2008). This kind of physical concentration of minorities coupled with their isolation, has been shown to increase threat perception (Enos, 2017; Semyonov & Glikman, 2009). Third, asylum seekers are also barred from employment, which further limits contact with natives. Relatedly, to the extent that asylum seeker males of employable age are seen to be not working (e.g., socializing in cafes), native perceptions of them as lazy or as welfare cheats could be exacerbated. Fourth, because asylum seekers themselves come from diverse and often traumatic backgrounds, and are repatriated in more than half of cases, even moderate sized communities of asylum seekers may have low levels of internal cohesion or social capital (Zetter *et al.*, 2005). Without family or community sanctioning for norm violations, young male asylum seekers in particular may be prone to delinquency, which could also further increase threat perception among native groups. Last, asylum seeker settlement elsewhere has been shown to reduce perceived neighborhood quality, which could also contribute to anti-immigrant sentiment (Hennig, 2019). For these reasons, we expect asylum seeker inflows in particular to be associated with increased anti-immigrant sentiment as indicated by support for the far right.

At the same time, some features of threat perception theory remain contested. The first concerns immigrant population size. Early work proposed that group size would have a significant impact on threat perceptions (Taylor, 1998; Blalock, 1967; Pettigrew, 1997; Quillian, 1996). However, these findings have been contested in subsequent research (Hjerm, 2007, 2009; Rydgren & Ruth, 2011; Schneider, 2008; Weber, 2015). Enos (2017), for instance, has shown that even minor increases in minority populations can raise such feelings of threat, especially where minorities are both concentrated and segregated. The dispersal of asylum seekers in the British case, most of whom are non-white, to public and low-cost private housing implies that, in spite of their small numbers overall, asylum seeker populations should be highly visible and therefore be likely to prime anti-immigrant sentiment and increase support for the far right. However, we theorize that increases in asylum seeker numbers should yield diminishing

marginal returns for the far right. That is, the marginal 'shock value' of asylum seekers diminishes the more are received.

Second, like previous researchers, we expect that the effect of the inflow of asylum seekers to a local authority on the vote share of the far right should be conditional on recipient area characteristics. Existing findings, however, have been mixed on the effect of context (Campbell *et al.*, 2006; Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000; Tomberg *et al.*, 2019). Prior work on the British case has speculated that the political effects of asylum seeker dispersal were the result of immigrants being sent to socioeconomically deprived areas (Phillimore & Goodson, 2006; Stewart, 2011). We test that hypothesis. Additionally, at least for the special case of asylum seekers, we posit that the effect should be *exacerbated* where pre-existing levels of diversity are low, due to the greater visibility of asylum seeker immigrants.

4   Empirical Strategy

Due to the underlying differences in the local authorities receiving asylum seekers, our primary empirical strategy is a difference-in-differences (DD) model, or what is also known as a comparative interrupted time series design or a non-equivalent control group pretest design (Wing *et al.*, 2018, 454). DD models calculate the effect of a treatment on an outcome by comparing the average change over time in the outcome variable for the treatment group with that of the control group. This allows us to control for any potential confounders which are invariant within local authorities over time or which might result from time specific shocks at the national level.

The DD design rests on the common trend assumption, which assumes "that confounders varying across the groups are time invariant, and time-varying confounders are group invariant" (Wing *et al.*, 2018, 455). Although we cannot test the common trends assumption directly–i.e., the assumption that there is no difference in underlying *trends* in the outcome of interest between treated and untreated units–we can compare trends across these groups prior to the beginning of the treatment. As Table 2 shows, the pre-2000 BNP vote share has a significant and positive association with whether a local authority later received asylum seekers. However, while the baseline *level* of BNP support differs, Figure 1 illustrates that Section 95 participating local authorities were subject to the same *trend* in BNP vote share prior to the

program as non-participating local authorities. To test this assumption formally, we regressed the BNP vote share on an interaction between participation in the dispersal program and year, and found it to be insignificant (see Table A2 in Appendix A). That is, the prior *trend* in BNP vote share is not statistically distinguishable between 'treated' and 'untreated' units. As described in the Robustness Checks subsection, we also run additional models in which we measure the outcome as the difference between the BNP vote share and is pre-dispersal maximum and implement the covariate balancing propensity score matching method for DD estimation of Imai & Ratkovic (2014).

The DD strategy also relies on the assumption that asylum seeker dispersals are uncorrelated with time and location specific shocks which may also have affected the BNP's vote share. While cross-sectional variation in socioeconomic conditions between local authorities is dealt with by the inclusion of local authority fixed effects, we need to take into account the possible effect of time-varying conditions within local authorities. In the British context, the literature points to two relevant confounders. First, both local authorities' decisions to participate in the dispersal program and vote choice could be affected by local economic conditions, such as a localized increase in unemployment (Hynes, 2006). Second, asylum seeker dispersal appears to have been associated with incidents of verbal harassment, racial harassment, and physical assault of asylum seekers at the local level (**?**); violent crime could also influence support for a party focused on law and order issues.

To address these concerns we adopt four approaches that are described further below. First, we include time-varying location-specific controls for unemployment and violent crime.[4] Second, we run additional models in which we interact a linear time trend and location dummies (Angrist & Pischke, 2015). Third, we examine whether electoral outcomes in any election year affect asylum seeker allocation to a particular local authority. Fourth, following (Imbens, 2003), we run additional sensitivity analyses to estimate the magnitude that an omitted confounding variable would have to take on to undermine the results.

The main model form is given in equation 1 in Appendix B.

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[4]These models exclude Scotland because Scottish crime data is recorded differently to English data.

Figure 1: Pre-dispersal trend in BNP share by recipient and non-recipient local authorities
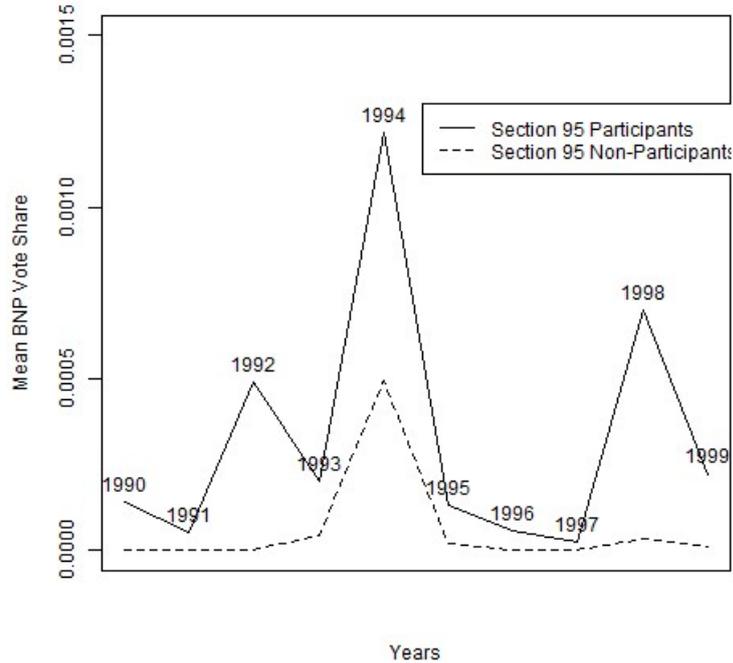
5 Data

We collected data from the United Kingdom Home Office on the dispersal of asylum seekers from 2000 to 2015. We use the number of asylum seekers dispersed per annum as a proportion of the adult population in local authority as our main independent variable (*Asylum PC*). The majority of asylum seekers whose applications are approved continue to live in the location to which they were originally dispersed (Stewart, 2011). However, because a majority of asylum applications are denied and because some approved asylum seekers do move away, the number of asylum seekers dispersed in a given year is preferable to the total number of asylum seekers claiming support in a local authority. In our main models, the dispersal measurement is proportional to the local population size estimated from the Labour Force Survey to take account of intra-decenial population movements.

The main dependent variable is the vote share of the BNP (*BNP share*) in local authority elections. We also include a measure of the broader far right share (*Far right share*), which includes the vote shares of the BFP and the NF in addition to that of the BNP. We separately measure the vote share of UKIP (*UKIP share*), and, with the EDP, the Eurosceptic party vote (*Eurosceptic share*). We also include the Conservative Party vote (*Conservative share*).

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Elections occur in most local authorities every two years, but in some cases they are less frequent. We focus on elections for local authorities for both practical and substantive reasons. First, and most importantly, local authorities are the units to which asylum seekers are dispersed. These boundaries do not line up precisely with national parliamentary constituencies or electoral wards. Second, the geographical pattern of support for minority parties in a majoritarian electoral system means that the BNP and other minor right-wing parties themselves strategically targeted local authority elections in their political activity in this period (Goodwin, 2011). Third, in the experience of other parties such as the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party (SNP), success at the local level has been a precursor to increased vote shares in national elections. Local election results may thus be a bellwether for future political trends. Fourth, local elections are more likely to represent sincere expressions of preferences and an undercurrent of strong anti-immigration sentiment that may not be as apparent in national level elections due to the first-order nature of latter. Last, to the extent that voters are aware that local authorities are the bodies that ultimately decide whether or not to accept dispersed asylum seekers, theoretically, this focus allows for a tighter matching of cause and effect for each unit of analysis.

A threat to internal validity from the use of figures aggregated to the local authority level would arise if the influx of asylum seekers to a local authority affected the composition of the local authority electorate in a way that introduced bias in favor of our hypotheses. However, there are good reasons to doubt that this is the case. First, in their study of inter-ward migration in the United Kingdom, Kaufmann & Harris (2015) find no evidence that whites who support the BNP or UKIP are more likely to leave more diverse areas or that such individuals are any less likely to migrate to a more diverse area than non-BNP or UKIP supporters. Second, using data from the 2001 and 2011 census, we find that dispersal is correlated with a reduction in the level of the ethnically white population in a local authority.[5] Given that the BNP received less support in wards with the highest white outflows (Harris, 2012), this finding should bias against our observing a positive relationship between asylum seeker dispseral and the BNP's vote share.

We include controls for location-specific time-varying conditions that may have been associated with dispersal. First, we use the level of unemployment (proportional to the working age

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[5]See Table A3 in Appendix A. The table shows the change in the ethnically white percentage of the United Kingdom population as a percentage of local authority population in the 2001 census vs the 2011 census regressed on total number of asylum seekers received up to that point.

population), lagged by one year, as a measure of the state of the local economy (*Unemployment*). Second, we use the level of violent crime lagged by one year (*Violent Crime*), as a proxy for violence involving resettled asylum seekers. Because crime data is recorded differently in Scotland, models with time varying controls include only England and Wales.

Summary statistics are shown in Table A4 of Appendix A and source information for all variables is given in Appendix F.

6 Main Results

Figure 2: Marginal effect of asylum seeker dispersal on BNP vote share
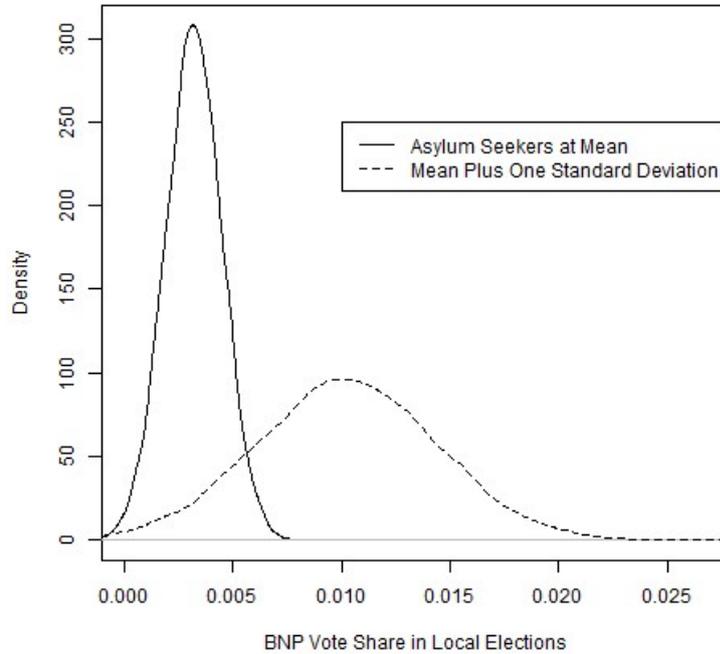
Asylum PC has a positive (but small) effect on the *BNP share* and the *Far right share* (se models 1 and 3 in Table A5 in Appendix A). Models 2 and 4 in Table A5 in Appendix A control for *Unemployment* and *Violent Crime* and exclude Scotland. *Unemployment* is *negatively* associated with *BNP share* and *Far right share*. The effect of *Asylum PC* continues to have a positive effect on the *BNP share* and the *Far right share* when time-varying controls are included.

As illustrated in Figure 2 (based on model 2 in Table A5), we find that a one standard deviation increase in the dispersal of asylum seekers per capita is associated with more than a doubling of the BNP's vote share. In an average sized local authority of just under 67,000

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inhabitants, which received the average of 100 asylum seekers, our empirical results imply that the BNP vote would be just under 1.5 percentage points higher than it would have been had that authority received no asylum seekers.

6.1   Robustness Checks

All main models use dispersed asylum seekers as a proportion of the local population. Results do not change when we use raw numbers of asylum seekers (see table A6 in Appendix A).

To ensure that the main results were not driven by outliers, we reran the models for *BNP share* and *Far right share* excluding observations which were excessively influential in terms of Cook's distance (i.e. Cook's distance greater than the standard threshold of 4/n) and found our results to be unchanged (See Table A7 in Appendix A.) (Fox & Long, 1990).

To rule out the possibility that our results are driven by a time trend in the BNP vote, we ran alternative specifications with first a linear and then a quadratic time trend instead of year dummies and found our results to be unchanged (see Tables A8 in Appendix A).

To account for the correlation between the vote shares of different parties running for election in the same places and times, we also ran our results as a seemingly unrelated regression and again found our results to be unchanged (see Table A9 in Appendix A) (Tomz *et al.*, 2002).

As a check against the possibility that our results are driven by differential responses to asylum seeker dispersal in those local authorities with higher pre-treatment levels of support for the BNP, we also rerun our main model with the dependent variable calculated as the difference between the BNP vote share and its pre-1999 maximum. Our results remain unchanged, indicating that they are not driven by some underlying political differences between recipient and non-recipient local authorities (see Table A10 in Appendix A).

We also check that the rise in support for the far right was not driven by the concurrent wave of immigration from Europe that followed the accession of Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) beginning in 2004. We measure CEEC immigration using applications for National Insurance numbers by foreign nationals. Table A11 in Appendix A replicates Table

A5 with controls for *EU 8*, *EU 2*, and *EU 10* immigration.[6] CEEC immigration, however measured, has no effect on the BNP share, while the effect of *Asylum PC* remains robust.

Given the different political landscape in Scotland, which saw the BNP run candidates in only a single local authority, and the concentration of most Scotland-bound asylum seekers in the city of Glasgow, we re-run all of our models (including those described in the following sections) excluding Scottish local authorities. All results remain substantively unchanged. For example, the coefficient on *Asylum PC* in our main result in Model 1 of Table A5 remains exactly the same when Scottish local authorities are excluded, while the standard error drops from 3.347 to 3.320. Results excluding Scotland are available on request.

To check against the possibility that DD methods systematically under-reject the null hypothesis, we implemented a revised version of the Bertrand *et al.* (2004) suggested check, repeatedly generating 'placebo' asylum seekers at random and regressing the BNP vote share on them. In 1,000 simulated regressions we found that the null was rejected less than 5 percent of the time, allowing us to rule out the possibility that our chosen approach was insufficiently conservative (see Appendix C).

To take account of the imbalance of pre-treatment covariates across treated and untreated units (see Table A1 in Appendix A), we implement the covariate balancing propensity score matching method of Imai & Ratkovic (2014) for DD estimation (see Appendix D). We match on the *Max pre-2000 BNP Share*, the percentage of the local authority's population identifying as 'White British' in the 2001 census (*White UK 2001*), and a measure of local authority *Deprivation* from Norman (2017), which gives estimates of the Townsend Deprivation Index (Townsend *et al.*, 1988). The index is calculated from unemployment as a percentage of the working age population, non-home ownership as a percenage of all households, no access to a car as a percentage of all households, and household overcrowding. Time varying controls for *Unemployment* and *Violent Crime* are included in model 2 of Table D1 in Appendix D. Results are robust at the 1 percent level in model 1. The coefficient on Asylum PC remains correctly signed but is significant only at the 10 percent threshold when *Unemployment* and *Violent Crime* are included and Scottish data is dropped (model 2).

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[6]The EU 8 refers to Malta, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary, while the EU 2 refers to Hungary and Romania. The EU 10 refers to the full bloc of Eastern European entrants. EU 8 member citizens gained full rights to live and work in the United Kingdom from 2004, while the EU 2 faced extended restrictions until 2014.

To test the sensitivity of our results to the assumption that they are driven by some omitted local authority specific time-varying factor (e.g., an unrelated increase in anti-immigrant sentiment in specific local authorities over time), following the approach of (Angrist & Pischke, 2015) we re-ran the above models with a local authority-specific time trend added in, as shown in Table A12 in Appendix A. We found our results to be practically unchanged with respect to the *BNP share* (models 1 and 2) or the *Far right share* (models 3 and 4), with the asylum seekers variable still having a significant effect. This remains the case when controls for EU immigration are included (Table A13 in Appendix A).

In order for our results to be driven by some omitted time and location specific shock we would need to assume that the Westminster government was sending asylum seekers to local authorities where the BNP vote share would have been higher even absent the asylum seekers or where asylum seekers would be likely to have had the strongest effect on the BNP vote share. We argue that this is highly implausible given that all major British parties are publicly committed to opposing the BNP. To test this claim more formally, following Dustmann & Preston (2007), we examine whether electoral outcomes in any election year affect asylum seeker allocation to a particular authority. To this end, we regress the asylum seekers variable on the BNP's vote share, lagged 1, 2, 3, and 4 years respectively in models 1 to 4 of Table A14 in Appendix A. We find that the BNP's vote share, lagged 4 years, has a significant and *negative* effect on asylum seeker dispersal (although the BNP's vote share lagged 1, 2, or 3 years has no effect). We also regress the BNP's vote share on the 1 to 5 year leads of the asylum seeker variable (that is, using the asylum seekers per capita which a local authority would receive 1 to 5 years in the future). As Table A15 shows, we found a *negative* and significant effect for the 4 and 5 year lead of the BNP share. These findings suggest that local authorities and the central government in London may have been attempting to systematically divert asylum seekers away from authorities in which they would have had the most positive effect on the BNP's vote share or in which the BNP's vote share would otherwise have been higher. This in turn implies that the estimated effect on the BNP's vote share is most likely to be an underestimate.

Finally, we ran a sensitivity analysis to determine the magnitude that an omitted confounder would have to take on in order to overturn our main results (Imbens, 2003). As shown in Appendix E, in order to overturn our results, an omitted time-varying confounder would have

to correlate much more highly with both the independent and dependent variable than any of the observed controls do.

6.2 Effects on Related Parties

We find that asylum seeker immigration is not associated with an increase in support for the right more broadly defined. As shown in Table A16 in Appendix A, it has no effect on *Conservative share* (models 1 and 2), *UKIP share* (model 3 and 4), or the *Eurosceptic Share* (UKIP and EDP) (model 5 and 6).

6.3 Nonlinear Effects

To test the hypothesis that asylum seeker inflows should have a marginally declining effect on the vote sare of the far right, we include a squared asylum seekers per capita term *Asylum PC Squared* in our main regression models. The marginal effect then varies according to the level of asylum seekers dispersed. Table A17 in Appendix A provides strong support for the idea there is a declining marginal effect of asylum dispersal. The *Asylum PC* term is positive, while the *Asylum PC Squared* term is negative in all models. The coefficients are statistically significant both in the model with (1) and without controls (2). This indicates that the effect of asylum seeker dispersal is non-linear, with the marginal effect declining as the asylum seeker share of the population goes up.[7]

7 Selection Effects

Because of far right parties' minority status, a critical issue arises with respect to interpreting the effect of dispersal on their vote share (Bowyer, 2008; Golder, 2003). We want to know whether the increase in the far right's vote share is solely due to such parties' decisions to selectively field candidates in asylum seeker receiving local authorities or if it reflects a change in the quantity of support that the far right receives assuming it is an actual option for voters. Figure 3 shows that the BNP vote share is zero for the vast majority of election-year

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[7]Technically, a negative coefficient on the squared term implies that at some point the relationship would reverse. Our calculations imply that if one additional asylum seeker was added to an annual influx of 4,384 in a local authority, this would begin to generate a fall in support for the BNP from its peak. However, we do not actually observe any more than 3,210 asylum seekers going to any one authority in any one year so such a reversal is out of sample.

Figure 3: Distribution of BNP vote share in local authority elections, 2000–2015
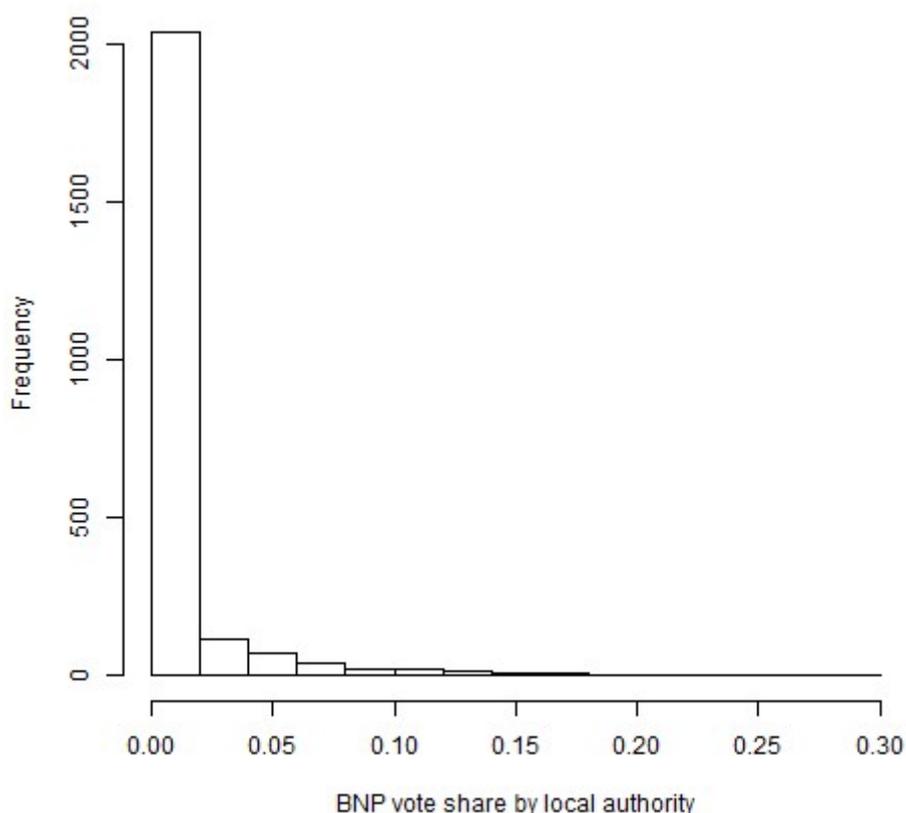
observations. However, many of the zeros observed for the BNP's vote may reflect the fact that voters did not have the option of choosing a BNP candidate, while the apparent increase in BNP support in other constituencies may not be due to a change in the level of its support in the authorities that received asylum seekers but rather to the BNP's decision to selectively field candidates in those localities. Both dimensions are substantively important, but a more complete interpretation of the process requies further disaggregation.

To distinguish these effects, we model both the selection decision of the BNP leadership to run candidates in a given constituency *and* the outcome decision that is the result of an aggregation of choices made by individual voters to vote for the BNP conditional on a candidate running. To deal with clustering or 'piling up' of the dependent variable at zero, we utilize the truncated normal hurdle model put forward by Cragg (1971). This two-stage approach allows us to separate the effects of selection from increased support, as it effectively models the selection decision by the BNP as a probit in the first stage, and a truncated normal regression (with truncation at zero) for the share of BNP support in the second stage. As

shown in Table A18 in Appendix A, asylum seeker dispersal is positively associated with both the decision of the BNP to run in a given election (first stage) and on the decision of voters to support the BNP, conditional on a BNP candidate being on the ballot (second stage). In other words, dispersal positively influences not just the decision of the BNP leadership to field candidates but also the level of support that BNP candidates receive if they do run. However, because it is not possible to employ location fixed effects in this approach, caution is still needed in interpreting its results.

8 Interaction Effects

This section examines whether the effect of immigration on support for the far right is conditional on recipient area characteristics, or in other words, whether there is an *interaction* effect between local characteristics and the influx of asylum seekers on political preferences. In estimating the conditioning effects of prior local authority characteristics on the relationship between the BNP vote share and asylum seekers, we follow the method of Dustmann *et al.* (2019). Since prior authority characteristics would be collinear with the local authority fixed effects, we omit them and instead interact prior characteristics with differences in asylum seekers. The model form is specified in equation 2 in Appendix B.

We analyze a number of relevant context variables with the results given in Table A19 in Appendix A. First, following Dustmann *et al.* (2019) we included a measure of population density to test whether the effect is conditional on the relative urbanization of a local authority *Population Density* (population relative to local authority area) (model 1). Second, we include (*White UK 2001*) (model 2). Third, we constructed an index of ethnic fragmentation, which is calculated as the probability that two randomly selected individuals from a given local authority will belong to different ethnic groups as defined in the United Kingdom 2001 Census *Ethnic Fragmentation 2001* (model 3) (Greenberg, 1956). Fourth, we include the Muslim share of the local authority population from the 2001 census (*Muslim 2001*) (model 4). Last, we use local authority *Deprivation* (model 5).

The significant interactions are illustrated in Figure 4, panels a–d. We find that the effect of asylum seeker immigration on the far right is exacerbated the more white (a) and less ethnically diverse (b) is a local authority. We find evidence of a small but statistically

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(a) White UK 2001

(b) Ethnic Fragmentation

(c) Muslim

(d) Deprivation
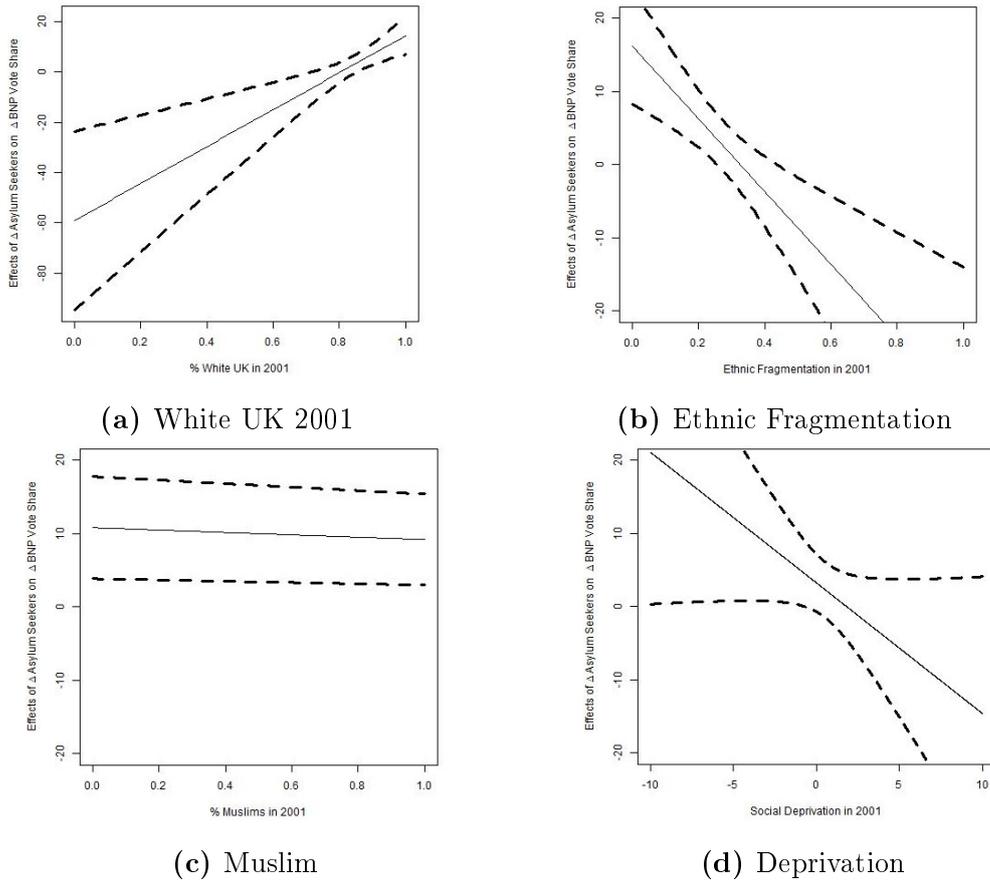
Figure 4: Interaction Effects

significant conditioning negative effect of *Muslim 2001* (c). These findings point to the conclusion that generally whiter, less diverse, and less Muslim recipient locales responded more negatively to asylum seeker dispersals than more diverse locales. Contrary to previous research, we find no evidence of an interaction effect between inflows and population size or density on support for the far right (c.f. Dustmann *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, contrary to existing interpretations (Phillimore & Goodson, 2006; Stewart, 2011), we find that the positive effect of asylum seeker inflows on support for the BNP is *lessened* by prior local authority *Deprivation*. However, we would note that although this effect appears to be substantively large (d), it is significant only at the 10 percent threshold.

9   Conclusion

Exploiting a British policy intervention that dispersed asylum seekers to local authorities across England and Wales, this paper estimates the effect of asylum seeker immigration on support for the far right. It finds that asylum seeker inflows, in spite of their modest numbers

compared to overall immigration flows, increase the vote share of the far right. Although the British far right's vote share remained small throughout, our finding that it more than doubled in response to a single standard deviation increase in asylum seeker inflows is notable. Even though the political and institutional context, as well as the precise outlines of the refugee dispersal policy, are unique to the United Kingdom—-warranting caution in generalizing from this result–both the methodological approach and the substantive findings should have implications beyond this case.

First, this setting allows us to simultaneously address several limitations of existing research on the political effects of immigration. Because dispersal location is unrelated to immigrant preferences, we avoid a common source of confounding due to the endogeneity of migration paths to the politics of the receiving subnational units. Moreover, by focusing on a particular category of immigrant – asylum seekers – we avoid the problem of multiple categories of immigrant having significant but offsetting effects on political behavior. Studies of the aggregate effect of immigration or foreign-born populations on political behavior may not be calibrated to capture the small marginal effects that we do here. The findings are robust to a battery of additional checks and sensitivity tests.

Second, by distinguishing between the extreme far right and the merely conservative, populist, or Eurosceptic right, we are also able to detect a marginal effect that might not be observed without attention to differences within the right family of parties. Our non-finding with respect to UKIP is especially interesting given the party's role in the Brexit referendum. The main reason, we suggest, is that UKIP only became strongly associated with opposition to immigration towards the end of the period under investigation, and remained less extreme than the BNP throughout. As late as 2009, for example, Ford & Goodwin (2010) found that the main distinction between BNP and UKIP supporters was that the former were more openly racist. With the virtual disappearance of the BNP and the conclusion of Brexit, we cannot rule out that future asylum seeker inflows could increase the vote share of UKIP if it embraced a more explicit anti-asylum seeker posture.

Third, our results indicate that the effect of asylum seeker immigration on far right support is due both to the far right contesting more seats in those localities receiving asylum seekers and to higher levels of support in those areas where the far right is an option for voters.

Substantively, we can infer that while there is a strategic element to the increase in far right support in response to asylum seeker inflows, there is also some change in the intensity of far right support at the aggregate (local authority) level. This finding provides an important contextual complement to psychological models of voter behavior in response to immigration.

Fourth, our finding that the effect of asylum seeker inflows on support for the far right is non-linear is also novel. The first inflows of asylum seekers seem most likely to generate resentment. Although we cannot directly test whether sustained contact mitigates anti-immigrant sentiment, the findings suggest that initial integration poses particular challenges, especially for temporary groups such as asylum seekers.

Finally, we find that the political effects of asylum seeker dispersal were exacerbated by the dispersal of asylum seekers to less diverse localities. While the increase in the far right share in response to asylum seeker dispsersal is felt across contexts, this suggests that more sensitive planning could mitigate the effect.

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