

*“Eventually though, your aspirations
have to be translated in to specific laws and institutional practices.
And that only happens when we elect good people at every level,
who are responsive to our demands.
And that includes local offices like the office of mayor or the office of district attorney.
They don’t get as much attention as a presidential race,
but have the most direct impact on issues, like how communities are policed.”*

*Barack Obama,
Dear Class of 2020*

1 Introduction

The association between extremist parties and the increase in discriminations and acts of violence against minorities is highly debated in newspapers¹ and politics. However, there is little research that empirically shows whether this is actually the case. A recent paper by Müller and Schwarz (2019b) focus on high-level political representatives and shows that Trump’s tweets about Islam-related topics are positively correlated with anti-Muslim hate crimes. However, also local politicians, through their actions and messages, may play an essential role in increasing feelings of hatred within their community. In this paper, I investigate the relationship between local politicians and hate crimes, shedding light on the following question: does the appointment of a far-right mayor affect the probability of hate crimes against immigrants in the municipality?

The setting for the analysis is Italy, a country which is particularly interesting for conducting a study of this nature. On the one hand, Italy (and, in particular, some Northern regions) is characterised for a large and historical presence of local politicians with a strong anti-immigrant stance. On the other hand, a discrepancy between central and local governments has emerged when it comes to policies aimed at preventing the spread of hate crimes. Indeed, a recent report from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) quotes: “A difficult situation in the sense of protecting the rights of minorities has developed in Italy. If at the national level, the law protects their rights, at the regional level, these rights are at the discretion of the local authorities. [...] This situation has led to various problems among Muslims, as the Italian authorities (both local and regional) associate Muslim communities with terrorism and radicalism.” (Ljujic et al., 2016).

¹See, for instance, <https://www.internazionale.it/bloc-notes/annalisa-camilli/2019/02/27/attacchi-razzisti-italia>