Waking Up the Golden Dawn

Does Exposure to the Refugees Increase Support for Extreme-Right Parties?

Name Last Name*

Abstract

The 2015 refugee crisis was the largest displacement in Europe since World War II, yet its political consequences remain contested. This article asks whether sudden exposure to refugees increased support for Golden Dawn, Greece's extreme-right party. Leveraging a natural experiment created by geography, I analyze four elections (2012–2015) with difference-in-differences and event-study models. Results show that even brief exposure—without sustained contact or competition—raised Golden Dawn's vote share by about two percentage points (44%). The findings highlight the "flash potential" of refugee crises to reshape politics and challenge established theories of contact and conflict.

This document is designed as a didactic model for how to structure and write a quantitative research paper using Quarto, LaTeX, Jabref, and credible identification strategies such as difference-in-differences and event-studies. It demonstrates best practices in framing a research question, engaging with the literature, building theory, and presenting empirical evidence. For reasons of brevity, the paper reproduces only a subset of the original results, serving primarily as a teaching and training resource. The full study and findings are available in the published article:

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Introduction

Context

The refugee crisis is the largest displacement of people in Europe since the aftermath of World War II. Since 2015, millions of asylum seekers—primarily Syrians—have crossed the Mediterranean into Europe (UNHCR, 2017). Host countries have faced humanitarian, economic, and political challenges (Foged and Peri, 2016), including protests and violence against refugees (Editorial Board, 2015). These developments have intensified debates over how exposure to refugees shapes electoral support for extreme-right parties.

Research Question

This article investigates whether exposure to the refugee crisis increased support for the extreme-right party Golden Dawn in Greece. Specifically: *Did municipalities in Greece that received sudden refugee arrivals in 2015 experience higher vote shares for Golden Dawn than comparable municipalities that did not?*

Importance

Answering this question matters both empirically and theoretically. While a large literature shows that labor migration often fuels anti-immigrant parties (Barone et al., 2016; Mendez and Cutillas, 2014; Halla et al., 2015; Brunner and Kuhn, 2014; Becker and Fetzer, 2016), less is known about refugees. Refugees differ in motives and in the humanitarian concerns they evoke (Bansak et al., 2016). Recent studies in Austria and Denmark reach mixed conclusions (Steinmayr, 2016; Dustmann et al., 2016), leaving a gap in our understanding—especially for frontline states like Greece, which received more than half of all arrivals in 2015 (UNHCR, 2016).

Methods and Data

The analysis leverages a natural experiment created by geography: some Aegean islands near the Turkish coast received massive inflows of refugees, while nearby islands with similar characteristics did not. This quasi-random exposure enables causal identification. The geographic distribution of arrivals is shown in Figure 1, which highlights the stark contrast between municipalities that were

exposed and those that were not. Electoral outcomes across four Greek parliamentary elections (2012–2015) are analyzed using difference-in-differences (Bertrand et al., 2004).

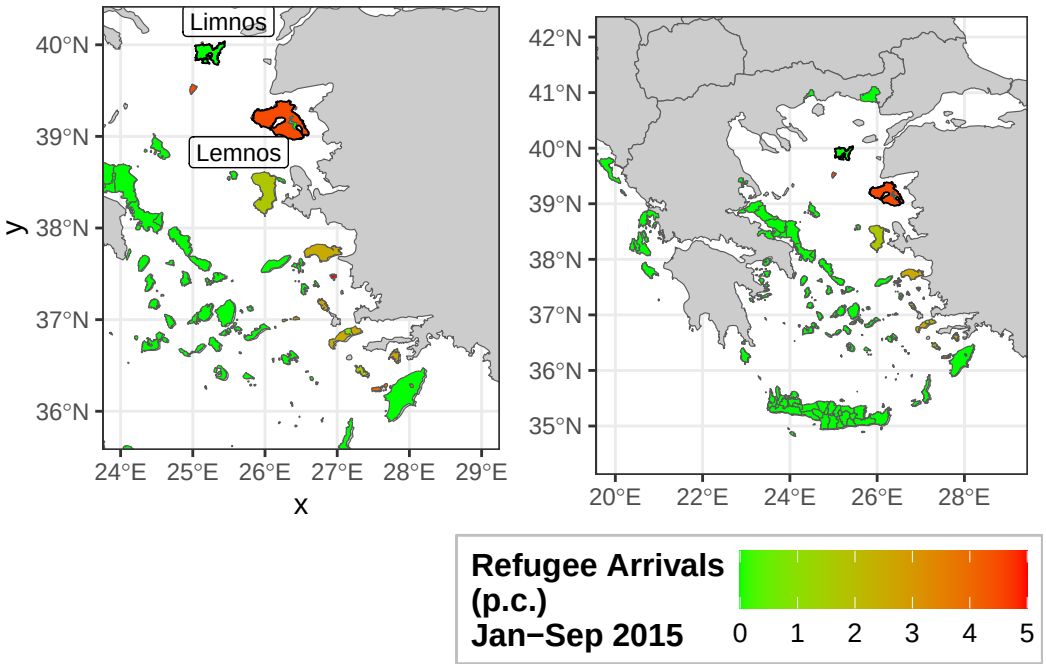

Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of Regugee Arrivals

Findings and Contribution

Results show that exposure alone, even without sustained contact or competition for resources, increased support for Golden Dawn by around 2 percentage points—a 44 percent rise relative to its baseline. Refugees' presence on islands was typically very brief (Capon, 2015), making these findings difficult to reconcile with contact theory (Allport, 1979) or realistic group conflict theory (Campbell, 1965). Instead, they support arguments about the "flash potential" of refugee crises to reshape politics (Sniderman et al., 2004; Hopkins, 2010).

Structure of the Paper

The following sections situate the case in the broader European context, describe the data and identification strategies in detail, present the empirical results, and conclude by discussing their theoretical and political implications.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Debate

The relationship between migration and support for extreme-right parties has been widely studied, but the findings differ depending on whether the focus is on labor migration or refugee migration. While much of the literature documents a positive association between immigration and support for far-right parties, fewer studies isolate the specific effects of refugee inflows. This distinction matters because refugees are perceived differently from labor migrants: their arrival is often framed in humanitarian rather than economic terms (Bansak et al., 2016).

Labor Migration and Electoral Backlash

A large body of research links labor migration to electoral gains for anti-immigrant parties. Studies across Spain, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland find that increases in immigration correlate with stronger support for the far-right (Barone et al., 2016; Mendez and Cutillas, 2014; Halla et al., 2015; Brunner and Kuhn, 2014; Becker and Fetzer, 2016). These works often emphasize competition over jobs, housing, and welfare resources, consistent with realistic group conflict theory (Campbell, 1965). The underlying claim is that immigration intensifies competition, leading natives to support exclusionary parties.

Refugees as a Distinct Category

Refugee inflows differ from labor migration in both scale and framing. Humanitarian concerns can make host populations more sympathetic (Bansak et al., 2016), potentially moderating backlash. Recent work has directly examined refugees' political effects, though findings remain mixed. For Austria, exposure to refugees reduced support for the far-right, consistent with contact theory, which argues that sustained interaction with out-groups reduces prejudice (Steinmayr, 2016; Allport, 1979). By contrast, in Denmark, exposure to refugees increased hostility and electoral support for the far-right (Dustmann et al., 2016). These contradictory results suggest that context and mechanisms of exposure matter: whether refugees are seen as temporary transients or potential long-term residents, and whether natives have opportunities for meaningful interaction.

The Greek Case and Existing Gaps

Despite its centrality to the refugee crisis, Greece has received little systematic study. In 2015, more than half of all asylum seekers entering Europe passed through Greek islands (UNHCR, 2016). Yet the political consequences of this unprecedented inflow remain underexplored. The existing literature leaves two critical gaps.

1. **Case Gap**: Greece, one of the most affected countries, has not been studied in depth, even though it is home to Golden Dawn, the most extreme-right party represented in a European parliament at the time (Heinö, 2016).
2. **Mechanism Gap**: Prior work often conflates exposure and contact. Yet in contexts where refugees are only briefly present—such as the Aegean islands, where most continued to the mainland within 48 hours (Capon, 2015)—contact theory cannot apply. This makes it possible to isolate the effect of exposure alone, independent of sustained interaction or direct competition for resources.

Contribution

This paper addresses these gaps by studying Greece during the 2015 refugee crisis. It introduces new evidence from a natural experiment in the Aegean, where islands were differentially exposed to refugee arrivals depending on their proximity to Turkey. By using a difference-in-differences strategy (Bertrand et al., 2004), the study provides causal estimates of refugee exposure on extreme-right support. The contribution is threefold. First, it shows that mere exposure—even without contact or competition—can increase far-right vote share. Second, it clarifies why previous studies have produced contradictory findings: the mechanism of exposure (contact vs. transient presence) matters. Third, it expands the comparative scope by analyzing Greece, a frontline country and unique test case for the "flash potential" of refugee crises to reshape politics (Sniderman et al., 2004; Hopkins, 2010).

Theory and Argument

Key Concepts

The dependent variable in this study is electoral support for Golden Dawn (GD), Greece's extreme-right party that combined ultranationalist rhetoric with anti-immigrant and xenophobic appeals (Heinö, 2016). The independent variable of interest is exposure to refugees, defined as the sudden and localized presence of asylum seekers on Greek islands during the 2015 refugee crisis. Importantly, "exposure" here refers to the physical arrival and temporary presence of refugees, rather than long-term settlement or integration.

Theoretical Framework

Two dominant theories in the literature offer competing expectations about how refugee inflows affect political behavior.

- Contact theory argues that intergroup contact under appropriate conditions reduces prejudice (Allport, 1979). When natives and refugees interact meaningfully, hostility may decrease.
- Realistic group conflict theory suggests that competition over scarce resources—jobs, housing, welfare—fuels intergroup hostility and boosts support for exclusionary politics (Campbell, 1965).

Yet the Greek case challenges the assumptions of both frameworks. Refugees were present on the islands only briefly, often less than 48 hours (Capon, 2015). This limited duration precluded sustained interaction (undermining the scope of contact theory) and prevented meaningful resource competition (limiting the applicability of conflict theory).

Argument

This article argues that *exposure alone*—even without contact or competition—can increase support for the extreme right. The mechanism lies in the symbolic and perceptual shock created by the sudden arrival of large numbers of refugees. Even temporary visibility may be sufficient to trigger perceptions of cultural threat, insecurity, or loss of control. Refugee arrivals can thus activate latent nationalist and xenophobic predispositions, making extremist parties more attractive.

Hypotheses

- **H1 (Exposure Hypothesis)**: Municipalities exposed to refugee arrivals will experience an increase in Golden Dawn's vote share relative to non-exposed municipalities.
- **H2 (Dose-Response Hypothesis)**: The effect will be stronger in municipalities with higher per-capita refugee arrivals.

Causal Framework (DAG)

The causal logic can be represented as follows:

- **Treatment (IV)**: Refugee Arrivals (driven by proximity to Turkey)
- **Mediator**: Perceptions of Threat (cultural, security, symbolic)
- **Outcome (DV)**: Golden Dawn Vote Share

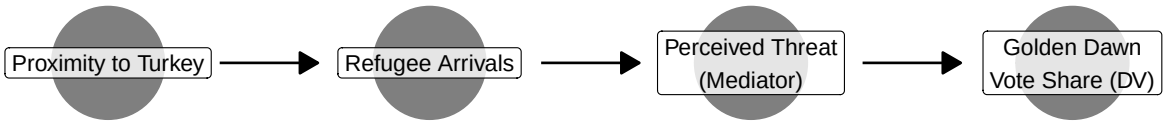

Figure 2: Causal Framework (DAG)

Scope Conditions

The argument applies under specific conditions:

- **Temporal scope**: Situations of sudden refugee crises, rather than gradual, long-term migration.
- **Spatial scope**: Frontline states where arrivals are geographically concentrated and highly visible (e.g., Greek islands, Italian coastal towns).
- **Political scope**: Contexts with viable extreme-right parties able to mobilize around issues of national identity and security.

Methods

Research Design

This study uses a quantitative research design to estimate the causal effect of refugee arrivals on electoral support for Golden Dawn (GD). The research design exploits the fact that geography determined which Greek islands were exposed to sudden inflows of refugees in 2015. Islands closer to the Turkish coast received large numbers of arrivals, while other islands with similar social and economic characteristics received few or none. This quasi-random exposure provides a natural experiment that allows for causal inference.

The central strategy is a difference-in-differences (DID) design, complemented by an event-study analysis. DID compares changes in GD vote share between exposed and non-exposed municipalities before and after the refugee crisis. The event study further assesses the validity of the parallel trends assumption and the dynamics of the effect over time.

The unit of analysis is the municipality (N = 95). The temporal domain covers four national parliamentary elections between 2012 and 2015, which are coded as four consecutive periods:

- May 2012 = 2012
- June 2012 = 2013
- January 2015 = 2015
- September 2015 = 2016

Data

Two primary sources are used:

1. **Electoral outcomes**: Official election returns from the Greek Ministry of Interior and Public Administration, at a municipality level, for all four elections.
2. **Refugee arrivals**: Monthly data from the UNHCR, aggregated to the municipal level and expressed as arrivals per capita. I truncate the measure at five arrivals per resident (the 99.7th percentile of the non-zero distribution) to prevent extreme values from skewing results.

The dependent variable is the vote share of Golden Dawn at the local level. The independent variable is exposure to refugee arrivals, coded either as a binary treatment (any arrivals vs. none) or as the

per capita number of arrivals.

Difference-in-Differences Model

The baseline DID model is specified as:

$$GD_{st} = \gamma_s + \lambda_t + \delta_{DID} T_{st} + u_{st}$$

where:

- GD_{st} is the vote share for Golden Dawn in municipality s at election t
- γ_s is a unit fixed effect controlling for time-invariant characteristics of each municipality
- λ_t is an election fixed effect controlling for shocks common to all units in a given election
- T_{st} is the treatment indicator (binary or continuous exposure to refugee arrivals)
- u_{st} is an idiosyncratic error term

The coefficient of interest, δ_{DID}, captures the causal effect of refugee arrivals on GD vote share.

Event-Study Model

To probe the validity of the DID design and assess dynamic effects, I estimate an event-study specification:

$$GD_{st} = \gamma_s + \lambda_t + \sum_{k \neq -1} \delta_k \, D_{t=k} \times Treatment_s + \alpha_s t + u_{st}$$

Here, $D_{t=k}$ are dummies for election periods, with $k = -1$ (January 2015) as the baseline. The interaction terms capture how treated and untreated municipalities evolve across time. Unit-specific linear trends ($\alpha_s t$) allow each municipality to follow its own trajectory, thereby accounting for unobserved local factors. Event-study plots (see Figure 3) show that treated and untreated areas followed parallel trends before September 2015 and diverged only after the refugee crisis, supporting a causal interpretation.

Findings

Exposure and Electoral Support for Golden Dawn

The analysis shows that exposure to refugees significantly increased electoral support for Golden Dawn (GD). Figure 3 plots average GD vote shares in treated and untreated municipalities across the four elections (2012–2016). Both groups followed parallel trends before the refugee crisis, diverging only in September 2015. In that election, municipalities exposed to refugee arrivals saw GD support increase by nearly two percentage points, while support in non-exposed areas remained flat. This provides strong evidence that the observed effect is driven by refugee inflows rather than by pre-existing differences in political trajectories.

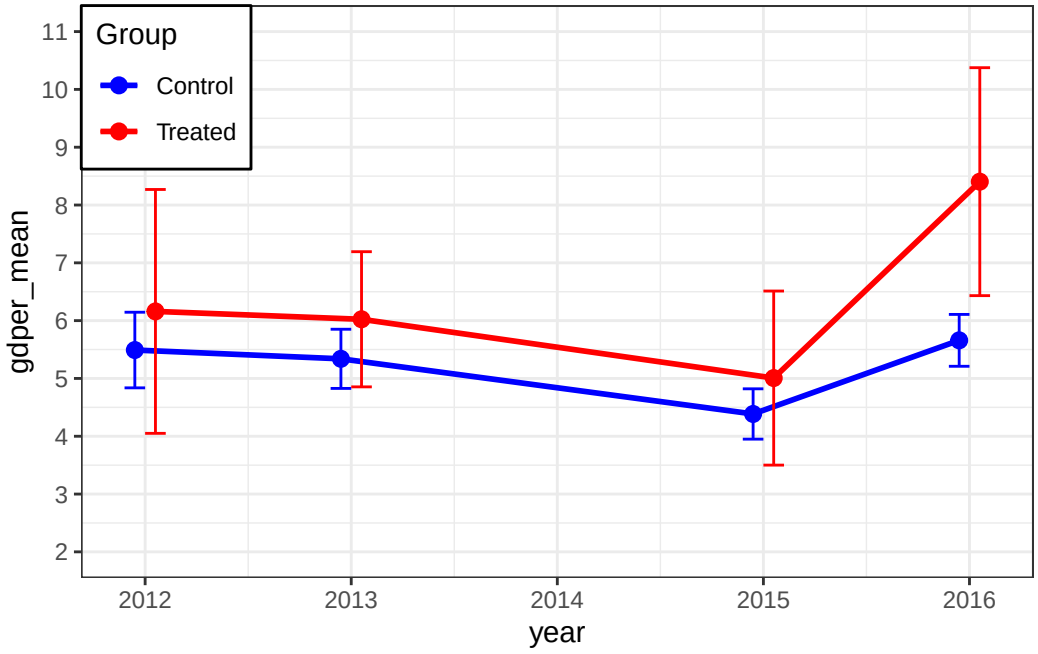

Figure 3: Exposure and Electoral Support for Golden Dawn: Event Study

Main Difference-in-Differences Estimates

Table 1 presents the regression results. Model 1 shows that exposed municipalities experienced a 2 percentage point increase in GD vote share compared to controls. This effect is substantial, representing roughly a 44 percent increase relative to GD's baseline support (4.5 percent in January 2015). Model 2 confirms that the effect is robust to the inclusion of municipality-specific linear trends, ruling out the possibility that smooth local dynamics explain the findings.

Table 1: Main Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Binary treatment	2.079***	2.112**	−0.040	−0.055				
	(0.351)	(0.674)	(0.392)	(0.713)				
Arrivals per capita					0.006	0.002	0.001	−0.009***
					(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Num.Obs.	380	380	285	285	379	379	284	284
RMSE	0.95	0.61	0.95	0.44	1.00	0.64	0.95	0.43
Std.Errors	by: muni	by: muni	by: muni	by: muni	by: muni	by: muni	by: muni	by: muni
FE: muni	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Placebo Tests

To assess whether the effect might be spurious, placebo models use lagged GD vote share as the dependent variable. Models 3 and 4 in Table 1 show no significant association between refugee arrivals and GD support in previous elections, providing reassurance that the September 2015 result is not driven by pre-treatment dynamics.

Intensity of Treatment

Replacing the binary treatment indicator with the per capita number of refugee arrivals yields consistent results. Models 9 and 10 show that a higher ratio of refugees to residents is associated with larger increases in GD support. By contrast, placebo tests using lagged outcomes (Models 11 and 12) show no effect before 2015. This dose-response pattern further supports the causal interpretation.

Robustness: Distance to Turkey

The reduced-form evidence reinforces these findings. Figure 4 shows that the change in GD vote share between January and September 2015 is strongly correlated with proximity to Turkey. By contrast, the placebo comparison (2012–2015) shows no such relationship. Appendix Table S2 and Figure S1 confirm that distance predicted GD support only in September 2015, consistent with the causal role of refugee arrivals.

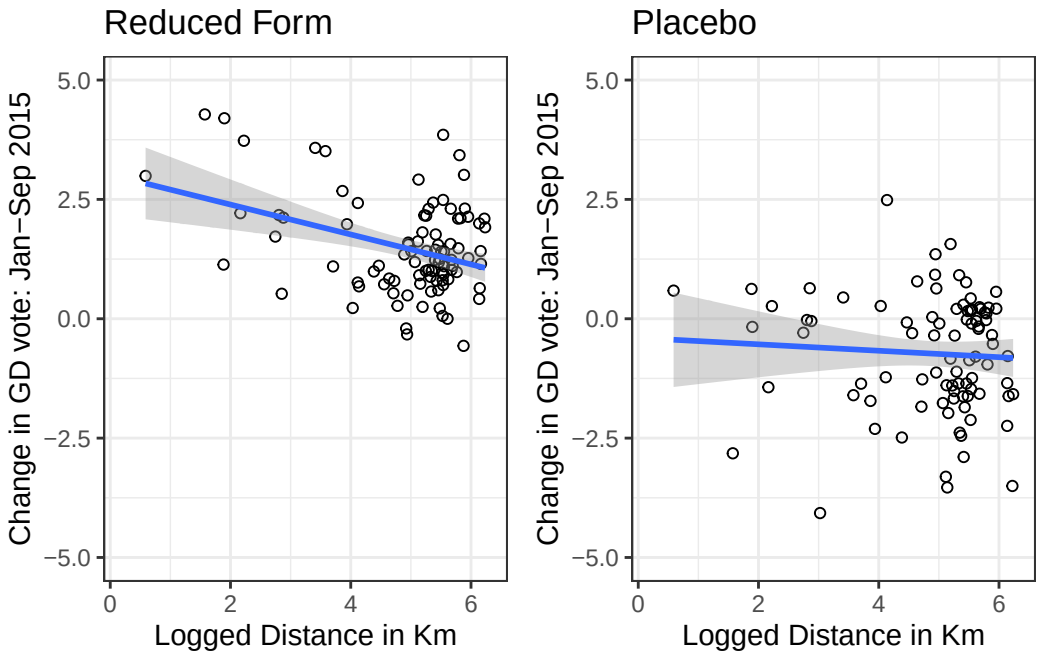

Figure 4: Golden Dawn Vote and Proximity to Turkey

Additional Robustness

The appendix further strengthens the results. Table S1 reports descriptive statistics, showing comparable pre-crisis distributions between treated and control municipalities. Figure S2 demonstrates that the estimated treatment effect remains stable across a wide range of distance cutoffs, alleviating concerns that islands close to Turkey differ systematically from distant ones.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, these results provide clear support for the core hypothesis: brief exposure to refugees, even without long-term settlement or competition, can increase support for extreme-right parties. The DID estimates establish a sharp causal effect, placebo tests confirm validity, and dose-response as well as geographic proximity analyses reinforce the robustness of the results.

In the broader literature, these findings align with Steinmayr's (Steinmayr, 2016) evidence from Austria that exposure can shape voting, but they diverge from Dustmann et al. (Dustmann et al., 2016), who found that contact reduced hostility in Denmark. Greece thus represents a crucial case: where exposure is sudden, highly visible, and short-lived, it increases rather than decreases support for the extreme right.

Discussion

Contribution

The findings show that brief and localized exposure to refugees increased electoral support for Golden Dawn, Greece's extreme-right party. This challenges the dominant focus in the literature on long-term labor migration and resource competition (Barone et al., 2016; Halla et al., 2015; Becker and Fetzer, 2016). Instead, the results highlight how even short-lived encounters—without sustained contact or economic rivalry—can shift political outcomes. In doing so, the study contributes to debates about the "flash potential" of refugee crises (Sniderman et al., 2004; Hopkins, 2010) and demonstrates that refugee inflows must be understood as distinct political shocks rather than extensions of general immigration dynamics.

Broader Implications

These results underline the symbolic and affective dimensions of immigration politics. Refugees' brief passage through Aegean islands was sufficient to trigger electoral backlash, suggesting that perceptions of disorder, security, and national identity may matter as much as economic or demographic pressures. This complicates contact and conflict theories (Allport, 1979; Campbell, 1965), which assume more sustained interaction. It also points to the need for policymakers and scholars to treat refugee arrivals as unique events with the potential to rapidly reshape the political landscape.

Limitations and Future Research

The analysis has three main limitations. First, the study focuses on Greek islands in 2015, so generalizability to mainland areas or other contexts may be limited. Second, while the quasi-experimental design strengthens causal claims, it does not fully identify the mechanisms at work—whether media coverage, perceived loss of control, or nationalist mobilization. Third, the analysis centers on electoral outcomes and cannot capture broader civic or attitudinal responses. Future research should therefore combine cross-national comparisons, survey evidence, and media analysis to explore mechanisms and scope conditions.

Conclusion

Restating the Argument

This article has demonstrated that localized exposure to the 2015 refugee crisis causally increased electoral support for Golden Dawn, Greece's extreme-right party. Even when contact with refugees was brief and resource competition minimal, municipalities receiving arrivals recorded a significant rise in Golden Dawn's vote share.

Contribution to the Literature

These findings contribute to debates on immigration and political behavior by showing that refugees function as a distinct type of political shock. Unlike labor migrants, whose long-term presence tends to shape party competition through economic channels, refugees can trigger immediate political reactions grounded in perceptions of threat and disorder. In doing so, the analysis pushes beyond existing studies of Austria and Denmark to highlight the specific dynamics of frontline states.

Broader Implications

For both scholars and a general audience, the findings underscore the fragility of political systems to sudden demographic disruptions. The refugee crisis was not only a humanitarian and economic challenge but also a catalyst for populist and extreme-right mobilization. This perspective reframes how we think about the link between migration crises and democratic resilience.

Unresolved Questions

Important gaps remain. What mechanisms explain why short-lived exposure produced lasting electoral consequences—media framing, nationalist rhetoric, or voter perceptions of state weakness? Under what conditions might such effects fade, rather than entrench? Future research should extend this analysis cross-nationally, linking electoral outcomes with survey and media data to clarify how refugee crises shape political trajectories.

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Appendix

Summary Statistics

Table S1 displays the descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analysis at the municipality level.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Binary treatment	95	0.126	0.334	0.000	1.000
Arrivals per capita	94	1.613	12.926	0.000	125.311
Log distance	95	4.861	1.240	0.588	6.235
Turnout (%) (Sep 2015)	95	48.405	9.757	18.035	64.035
Turnout (%) (Jan 2015)	95	51.570	13.353	17.791	74.319
GD vote share (%) (Sep 2015)	95	6.018	2.475	0.000	17.513
GD vote share (%) (Jan 2015)	95	4.460	2.129	0.000	11.927
GD vote share (%) (Jun 2012)	95	5.435	2.366	0.483	12.616
GD vote share (%) (Jan 2012)	95	5.585	3.151	0.794	18.839
Nea Dimokratia vote share (%) (Sep 2015)	95	28.513	6.620	12.318	47.500
Nea Dimokratia vote share (%) (Jan 2015)	95	29.836	8.334	13.093	54.145

Table S1: Summary statistics of the dataset

Intention to Treat Test

I examine "Intention to Treat" in Table S2. I specifically interact logged distance with each election-dummy (using the May 2012 election as baseline). I show that distance to the Turkish coast predicts GD vote share only in September 2015, but not in any of the previous elections: May 2012, June 2012 and January 2015 elections.

	(1)
(Logged) Distance	−0.204
	(0.210)
2012 June	−1.074
	(1.492)
2015 January	−0.893
	(1.492)
2015 September	2.769+
	(1.492)
Log Distance × 2012 June	0.190
	(0.298)
Log Distance × 2015 January	−0.048
	(0.298)
Log Distance × 2015 September	−0.481
	(0.298)
Constant	6.574***
	(1.055)
Num.Obs.	380

Table S2: Intention to Treat Test

Intention to Treat Figure

Figure S1 examines "Intention to Treat" displayed in Table S2. Instead of looking directly at how many refugees arrived, I examine the distance to the Turkish coast — because distance is what determined whether an island was likely to receive refugees in the first place.

To do this, I interact (combine) the distance variable with each election period. Think of it as asking:

- In May 2012, was distance related to Golden Dawn's vote share?
- In June 2012, was distance related?
- In January 2015, was distance related?
- And finally, in September 2015, was distance related?

If distance mattered even before refugees arrived, that would be suspicious: maybe islands closer to Turkey were already more right-wing. But the results show the opposite:

- In 2012 and January 2015, distance didn't predict Golden Dawn's vote share at all. Islands near and far from Turkey looked similar in terms of voting.
- In September 2015, right after the refugee crisis, distance suddenly became predictive: closer islands (that actually received the refugees) gave more votes to Golden Dawn.

That's exactly what you'd expect if the effect comes from the refugee arrivals, not from some pre-existing difference. So, Figure S1 shows that distance to the Turkish coast predicts GD vote share only in September 2015, but not in any of the previous elections: May 2012, June 2012 and January 2015 elections.

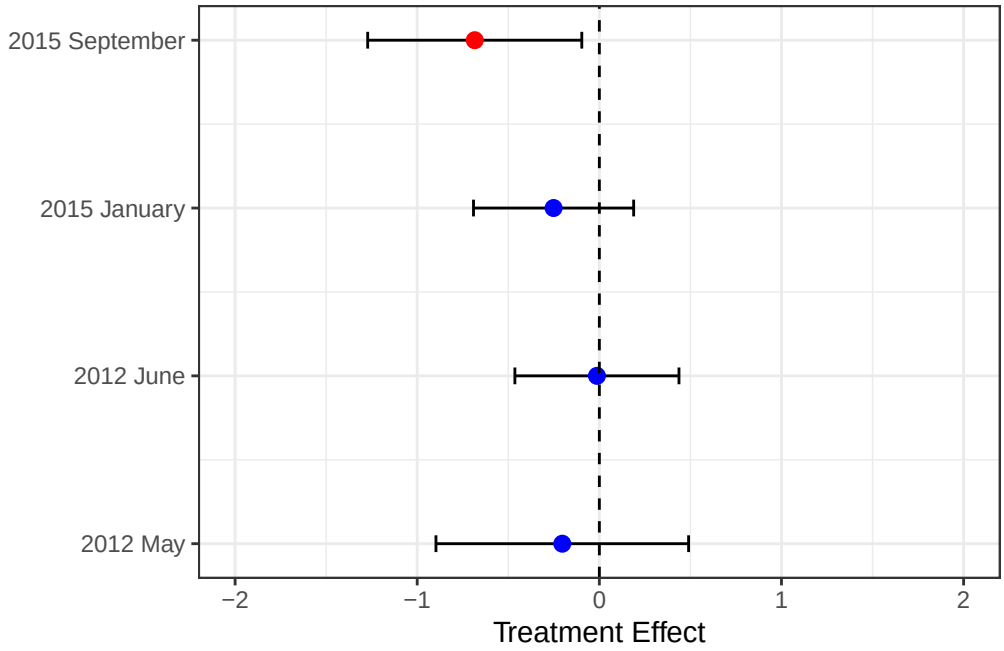

Figure S1: Intention to Treat Test Figure

Proximity to Turkey Analysis

It is problematic to assume that islands very close to the Turkish coast are similar to islands far from the Turkish coast. Distance ranges from a few kilometers to 530 kilometers.

Figure S2 shows how the effect of refugee exposure remains the same irrespective of whether one focuses on islands in close proximity to the border versus far. I use a DID as in the main analysis.

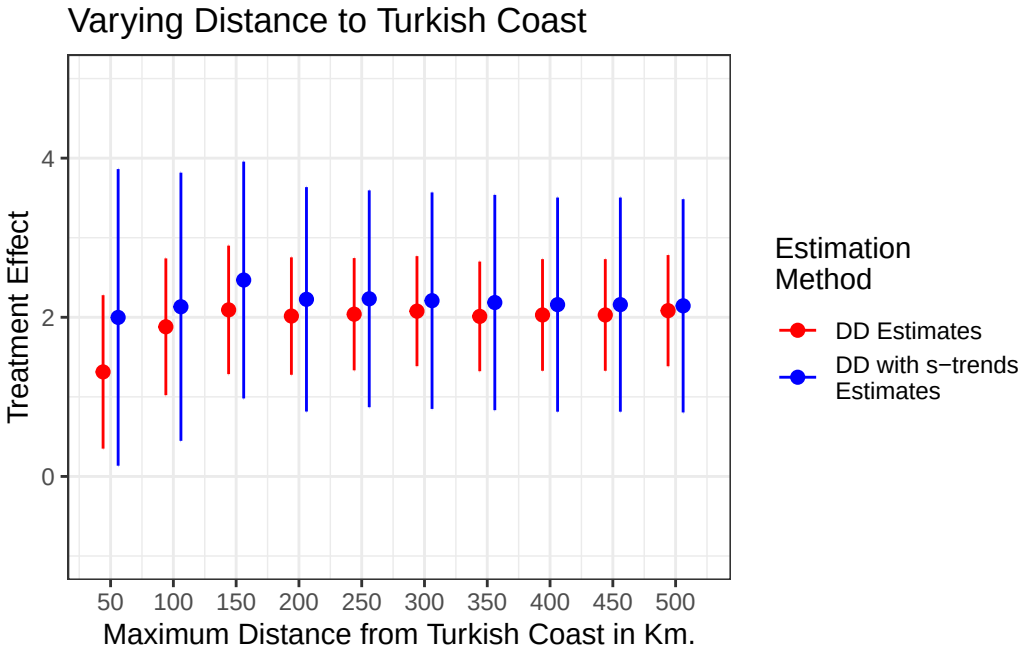

Figure S2: Proximity to Turkey

Example AI Transparency Statement

Use of AI for Writing Support

Artificial intelligence tools were employed in a limited capacity to assist with the refinement of the written text. Specifically, I used AI to correct grammatical and syntactical errors in order to enhance readability and stylistic consistency. These interventions were strictly editorial in nature. The structure of the paper, the central argument, and the review of the relevant literature were developed independently in consultation with the advisor.

Use of AI for Coding Support

AI was also used to resolve syntactical errors in R code. This primarily concerned the specification of regression models and the formatting of graphical output. The role of AI in this context was limited to correcting technical implementation issues, ensuring that the code executed properly. All substantive decisions regarding model choice, robustness checks, coding strategy, and interpretation of results were determined independently.

Intellectual Contribution and Ownership

The intellectual contribution of this paper—including its theoretical framing, methodological design, and empirical analysis—rests entirely with the author. AI assistance was confined to technical and editorial functions, comparable to the support that might otherwise be obtained from proofreading services or coding documentation. I remain solely responsible for the scholarly content, interpretation of findings, and framing the contribution to the literature.