The Political Legacy of Displacement: Evidence from the Spanish Exile*

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Abstract

Forced migration is frequently politically motivated, implying that refugees represent a specific set of ideas. We explore the political consequences of displacement when refugees are politically selected. In early 1939, the collapse of the Spanish Republic precipitated the exodus of nearly half a million refugees into France, an event known as *La Retirada*. French authorities, unprepared for the magnitude of the inflow, responded locating the displaced population in internment camps, whose locations were largely determined by logistical availability. This paper exploits the quasi-random placement of these camps to study the political consequences of forced displacement. We examine the impact of refugee camp exposure on political outcomes. Preliminary results suggest that municipalities hosting camps, or located within a few kilometres of them, exhibit less support for the socialist party, in line with political backlash. Meanwhile, there is evidence on a positive effect on the communist party, suggesting the polarisation of the local population. We observe also that municipalities that welcomed refugees also present higher involvement in the resistance against occupation and collaboration with the Nazi Germany, in support with the polarization mechanism.

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1 Introduction

In early 1939, the defeat of Republican forces in Catalonia in the context of the Spanish Civil War precipitated a mass exodus known as La Retirada ("the retreat"). Between late January and mid-February 1939, close to half a million Spanish Republicans fled across the Pyrenees into France. French authorities, unprepared for the magnitude of the flow, treated the flow as a security concern and responded by interning the displaced population. The locations were chosen under extreme time pressure based on logistical availability. Because no permanent facilities had been prepared in advance, the selection of camp sites was improvised. In the South, remote beaches, open plains, and abandoned barracks were selected primarily for their availability and their capacity to confine large numbers of people (Coignard and Maugendre, 2012; Dreyfus-Armand, 2016). The result was a geographically uneven yet plausibly exogenous distribution to immigrant integration variables of refugee exposure.

Spanish refugees were regarded as "undesirable foreigners" and seen as an economic burden. Therefore, propaganda and incentives were used to promote "voluntary" repatriation to Spain or emigration to third countries. By early August, nearly half of those who had crossed the border during the Retirada had gone back (Pérez Rodríguez, 2022). Among those who remained, many were recruited into labour and military service. With the onset of World War II, their situation deteriorated further: some joined the French Resistance, while thousands were captured and deported to Nazi concentration camps. By the end of the World War II, approximately 240,000 Spaniards were living in the country, of whom about 40% were Republican exiles from the 1939 Retirada (Coignard and Maugendre, 2012).

By leveraging this historical episode, the study adopts a quasi-experimental empirical strategy that exploits the improvised nature of camp placement. Using the Historical Archives of Catalonia to geolocate internment sites, we compare municipalities near camps to those farther away on the political landscape of France. These include political outcomes drawn from Piketty and Cagé (2023), as well as the intensity of the resistance using data from the Ministry of the Armed Forces (Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2022). By examining a case of culturally proximate refugees to the native population, but who are strongly politically selected, the study sheds light on how two possible mechanisms: native backlash but also political diffusion. Refugees could be perceived as competitors for jobs, housing, or public services, resulting in exclusionary attitudes. Perceptions of threat could be amplified when the displaced population is politically distant. If this mechanism predominates, we would expect a decrease in the intensity of resistance and a shift toward right-wing parties. By contrast, politically selected refugees could transmit their preferences and organizational to host communities, thereby increasing collective mobilisation. Preliminary results show that both mechanisms may be playing a role. Municipalities that hosted refugees exhibit higher levels of mobilization against the occupation. Neighboring municipalities

also display a positive relationship, suggesting the possibility of spillover effects. In the long run, however, municipalities with refugee internment camps tend to support left-wing parties less and right-wing parties more—possibly reflecting a broader backlash associated with the refugee presence. This underscores the importance of analyzing both short- and long-term effects when studying the political effect of the presence of a displaced population.

Our research relates to the broad literature on the political effect of immigration. Much of the existing literature emphasizes recent immigration trends and their immediate impact on public opinion and political behavior (Halla et al., 2017; Dustmann et al., 2018; Steinhardt, 2018). Steinmayr (2021) demonstrates that the type of contact matters: in Upper Austria, temporary refugee passage towards Germany in 2015 increased far-right voting, whereas longer-term settlement reduced it. In the French context, studies have found that larger immigrant populations tend to correlate with stronger electoral performance for the Front National at the département level (Edo et al., 2019). However, this pattern does not hold at the more localized municipal level, where the relationship appears to be reversed (Della Posta, 2013; Vasilopoulos et al., 2022; Vertier et al., 2023). Dazey and Gay (2024) finds that support for the Front National tends to rise in polling stations located at moderate distances from mosques, but declines beyond that range. We contribute by studying the consequences of an historical event, which allows us to explore the effect in the long-term.

Moreover, our study is also linked to the literature on migration and the transmission of political ideas (Spilimbergo, 2009; Barsbai et al., 2017; Dippel and Heblich, 2021; Calderon et al., 2023; Bazzi et al., 2023). Previous research concentrates mostly on the effect at the origin country, with the exception of Dippel and Heblich (2021), who study how the leaders of the failed German revolution of 1848–1849, expelled to the United States, positively influenced antislavery culture. Since our research is framed within a democratic context, we can distinguish ourselves by analysing the effect on electoral outcomes and controlling for previous political affiliations.

2 Historical Context

The Spanish Civil War starts in 1936 and opposes the Republican forces, composed of left-wing factions such as communists, anarchists, and socialists, and Nationalists groups, led by General Francisco Franco, supported by fascist and conservative groups. The war emerges from deep political divisions within Spain, which are exacerbated by economic instability and social unrest. The Nationalists ultimately win the war in 1939 with the aid of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy after the fall of the renaming Republican groups in Catalonia. The outcome of the war establishes a long-lasting dictatorship under Franco, which ends in 1977. As the Republican forces begin to collapse at the beginning of 1939, between late January

and mid-February 1939, approximately 500,000 Spanish Republicans — comprising both combatants and civilians — seek refuge in France by crossing the Pyrenees. The refugees flows follow the falls of the remaining Republican cities, and the largest flows occurs at the time of the fall of Barcelona in January 1939.

Worn down by economic crisis, plagued by xenophobic sentiment, and increasingly isolationist, French authorities offers Spanish refugees a hostile reception (Coignard and Maugendre, 2012). For French authorities, still reeling from World War I, the priority is to maintain public order and security, especially to prevent the spreading of Republican ideas and radical-left wing ideas from Spanish refugees to local French populations. As a result, the incoming Spaniards are treated less as asylum-seekers and more as a security problem, to be managed through internment and control (Rafaneau-Boj, 2008). This sudden influx, concentrated over a few weeks, overwhelmed the French authorities, who are at the time unprepared for its scale, and French authorities implement a policy of reallocation of Spanish refugees across the territory. Approximately 170,000 people were women, children and elderly, who were dispersed across the country. Families were often separated at the border and the civil population was first transferred to "centres de reccueil" (registration centres) and then received at reception centres (Pérez Rodríguez, 2022). Meanwhile, most men (particularly those of military age) were interned in improvised camps - "concentration camps" as they were officially called - near the border in the south (Dreyfus-Armand, 1999). The legal basis for this camp system had been laid shortly before: in November 1938, the Daladier government passed a decree-law permitting the internment of "undesirable foreigners" under surveillance. The Spanish were the first to suffer the consequences of this new policy aimed at non-native populations (EUROM, 2014).

Because no permanent facilities had been prepared in advance, the selection of camp sites was improvised. The first internment zones were simply segregated sections of beach and field fenced off with barbed wire in the border region (Dreyfus-Armand, 1999). The very first camps were in the Pyrénées-Orientales (French Catalonia) along the Mediterranean coast: notably Argelès-sur-Mer, Saint-Cyprien, and Le Barcarès, all essentially stretches of beach that could be quickly cordoned off (Coignard and Maugendre, 2012). Soon, additional camps were created deeper inside France to alleviate the severe overcrowding. By the spring of 1939, a second ring of internment camps extended across the Pyrenees and southwestern France. Key camps included Gurs (in Béarn, near Pau), Le Vernet d'Ariège (in the Ariège department), Septfonds (Tarn-et-Garonne), Bram (Aude), Agde (Hérault), and Rieucros (Lozère) (Coignard and Maugendre, 2012). In the rest of the departments, the types of accommodations varied widely. In some departments, all available premises were used, whether suitable for hosting people (schools, holiday centres, sanatoriums, barracks, uninhabited houses...) or not initially appropriate (former factories, stud

farms, stables, mills, village halls) (Dreyfus-Armand, 1999).

From the moment the refugees arrived, French policy aimed to reduce the number of Spaniards on French soil. French authorities, concerned about the financial cost, promote "voluntary" return through incentives and coercion. Moreover, around 20,000 people emigrated to other countries, with over 15,000 going to Latin America. As a result, by December 1939, the number of Spanish refugees and political exiles in French territory had reached approximately 180,000 individuals (Rafaneau-Boj, 2008). As World War II approached, France began to see those Spaniards who remained as a valuable labour force for its war effort. In April 12, 1939, the Compagnies de Travailleurs Étrangers (CTE) – Foreign Worker Companies – were established to conscript refugees into labor units (Coignard and Maugendre, 2012). By the end of December, the total number of CTEs reached 180, involving 50,000 to 60,000 Spanish refugees working particularly along the Italian border and on Maginot Line fortifications (Rafaneau-Boj, 2008). In addition to labor units, the French military encouraged Spanish veterans to enlist in the armed forces. Thousands chose to join the French Foreign Legion or other military formations as a way to leave the camps (Pérez Rodríguez, 2022).

When France fell to German forces in June 1940, Spanish exiles faced new dangers. Many men were captured and held as prisoners of war, and thousands of Spanish Republicans were subsequently deported to Nazi concentration camps—most notoriously Mauthausen, where around 7,000 died. Others managed to evade capture and join the French Resistance in significant numbers. It is estimated that up to 15,000 Spaniards participated in the French Resistance or served in the Free French forces between 1940 and 1944 (Rodrigo and Alegre Lorenz, 2022).

3 Data

Information on the locations of refugee camps and centers is drawn from Generalitat de Catalunya (2020). The information in the dataset comes from two original sources in the regional archives: *Dossier on the International Conference for Aid to Spanish Refugees* (Paris, July 15–16, 1939), prepared by the Bureau d'Information (ANC1-511-T-332), and *List of Cities and Towns in France with Camps or Shelters for Spanish Refugees* (ANC1-511-T-349).

In order to measure the participation into the French Resistance during the Second World War, we use public available records from the French Ministry of Armies (Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2022). Namely, we use records of official recognitions of resistance activities (*Titres, homologations et services pour faits de résistance*), and recipients of resistance medals (*Médaillés de la résistance*). These nominative registers provide information on age, nationality, year and place of birth at the municipality level. We locate involvement in the resistance using place of birth, considering the bad quality of the place

of recruitment or death in the dataset. To examine the effects on political outcomes, we draw on city-level electoral data from legislative elections compiled by Piketty and Cagé (2023), who also provides socio-economic variables that serve as controls. The share of individuals with surnames of Spanish origin is constructed using decennial death records from the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (**?**). From these records, we impute the number of births with foreign-origin surnames prior to the arrival of Spanish refugees. To identify which surnames are of Spanish origin, we count the frequency of surnames within the population born in Spain and use this to generate a list of common Spanish surnames.

To explore whether the camp locations predict the settlement of the refugees, we use the census of 1962, which is the earliest census available (Insee, 1962). To measure the intensity of collective actions after WWII, we rely on various archival sources that enable us to compile an inventory of all political activities carried out by Spanish refugees between 1945 and the fall of the dictatorship in Spain in 1977. We mainly gather information on the two main Spanish unions at the time of the Civil War, the *Unión General de Trabajadores* (General Union of Workers, UGT) and the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labor, CNT). For both organizations, we are able to identify local branches of these unions and track their years of activity over time.

For the UGT, we use the documentations from the (Fundación Francisco Largo Caballero, Fundación Francisco Largo Caballero). More precisely, we use an inventory of all UGT activity outside of Spain during the time of the dictatorship. This inventory gives a list of all municipalities that have had a local section of the UGT, with its date of creation. For the CNT, we use data collected from 2 sources. The first one is the (Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo, Fundación Anselmo Lorenzo), from which we use the report of general assembly of the movement in exile in 1948. This document enables us to have a precise list of all municipalities in France were Spanish refugees settled down and wished to organize politically into one new local section of the CNT after WWII. Unfortunately, since this does not allow us to track the activity of sections through time, we complete this first source with documentations from the the archives of the (Centre de Documentació Històric Social, Centre de Documentació Històric Social). From this source, we use a large set of documents, especially meeting reports from local sections in exile. This allows us to determine the years of activity of all local sections. Using the same reports, we are able to infer the number of persons affiliated to each local sections using the subscription of news members.

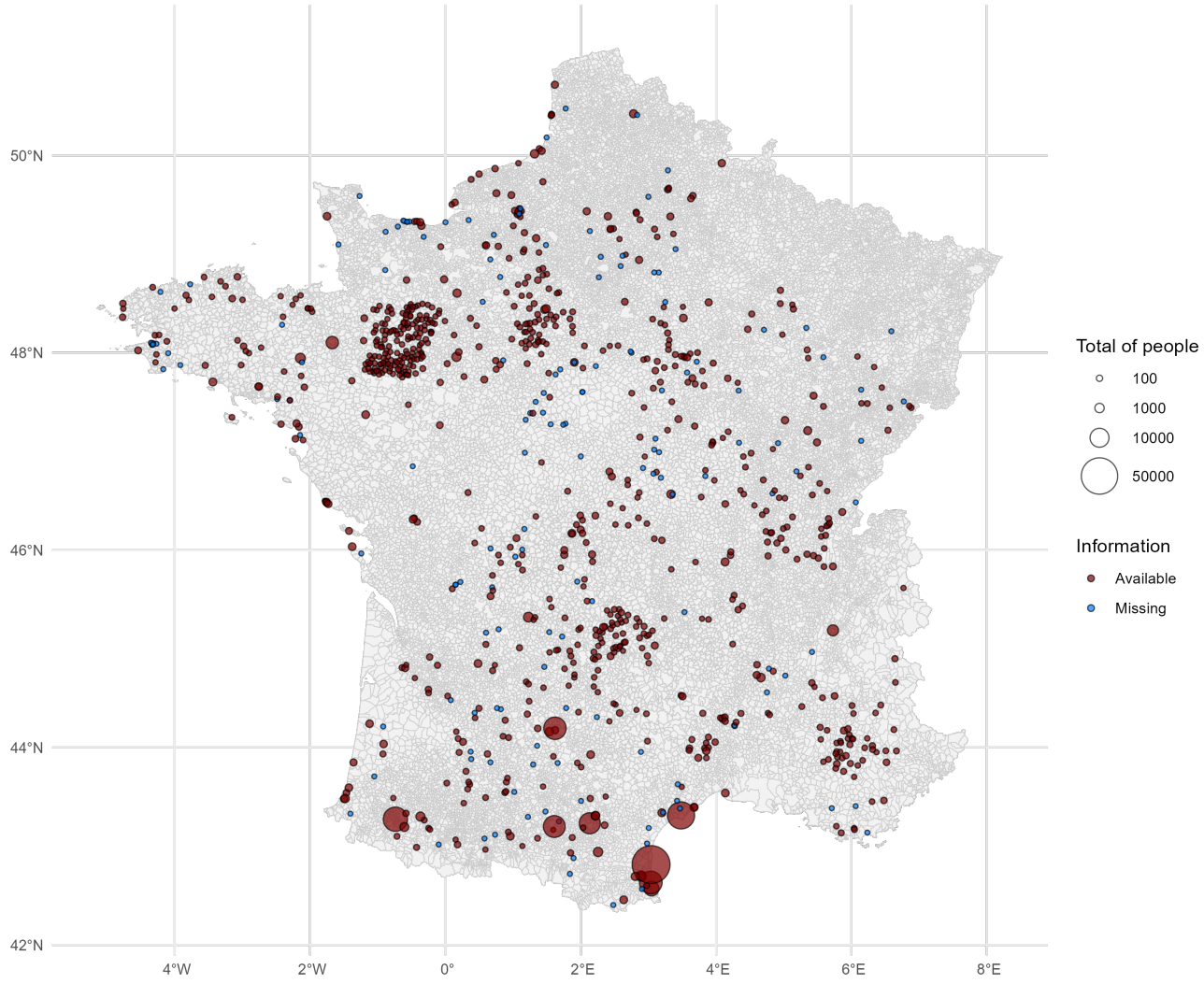
TIME PERIOD

4 Descriptive statistics

According to the data, up to the month of July 1939, there were 990 camps in France, hospitals or shelter centres with Spanish exiles in France. Regarding the refugees, 167,932 were combatants, most of whom were spread over 10 concentration camps, 3 hospitals and 2 refugee centres. The rest, a little over 150,000 people, civilians of both sexes and of various ages, were spread over the numerous refugee centres that extended throughout French territory. Most of these centres were managed by the host country itself, while 73 were subsidised by other countries (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2020). Figure 1 displays the geographical distribution of internment camps across France in 1939. Camps were not concentrated in a single region but spread widely, with notable clusters in the southern departments near the Spanish border as well as in central and western France. The size of the circles reflects camp capacity, highlighting a particularly dense presence in the Pyrenean area where the first wave of refugees entered. This distribution suggests that exposure to refugees varied considerably across municipalities.

Table 1 reports balance statistics for the variables that are most relevant to assessing potential selection in the French dispersion policy. Because refugee placement was negotiated with departmental and municipal authorities, one concern is that more left-leaning municipalities may have been more willing to receive refugees; we therefore compare pre-war political orientation using the 1936 legislative results (Piketty and Cagé, 2023). A second concern is municipality size: larger communes might have had more administrative capacity or available facilities, so we test for differences in population levels using historical census data (INSEE, 2024). Another potential source of bias concerns the presence of other immigrant groups as the authorities may have avoided sending Spanish refugees to municipalities that had already received previous waves of foreigners. Unfortunately, no direct measure of the foreign-born population exists at the municipal level for this period. To approximate pre-existing immigrant presence, we construct a proxy based on national death records from 1970 to 2025 (INSEE, 2025). From these records, we identify French individuals with Spanish, Italian, or Portuguese surnames and recover their municipality of birth. Using this information, we reconstruct the pre-1939 shares of residents with foreign-origin surnames for each municipality. Housing availability may have been another potential determinant of camp locations so we include a measure of buildings constructed by 1939 (INSEE, 1968). Likewise, because the Ministry of the Interior explicitly encouraged cooperation with private organisations such as the Red Cross and local philanthropic associations, we incorporate a measure of associative activity based on the legal registry of organisations (Direction de l'Information Légale et Administrative, 2025). Finally, we include variables capturing geographic and economic structure—altitude, precipitation, and mining activity (Pauling et al., 2006; Ministère de la Transition écologique, 2021). Together, these variables allow us to test whether treated and control municipalities differed along the observable dimensions that could

Figure 1. Location of the refugee camps



plausibly have influenced camp placement under the 1939 dispersion system.

Overall, observable characteristics are broadly similar across the two groups. Treated municipalities exhibit slightly higher support for the SFIO and the PCF, higher share of people with Italian-surnames, higher presence of mines and buildings per capita. Meanwhile, absolute standardized differences are below the conventional threshold of 0.25 (Imbens and Rubin, 2015). The exception is population, what we account for considering share of votes as an outcome with respect to total number of votes.

Table 1. Balance test for municipalities with and without camps

Variable	Mean Treated	Mean Control	Abs. Norm. Diff
SFIO	0.195	0.169	0.134
RAD SOC	0.189	0.191	0.005
DIV	0.002	0.016	0.211
FR URD	0.141	0.163	0.088
DVG	0.003	0.002	0.033
PCF	0.107	0.086	0.170
DVD	0.015	0.022	0.080
AGR	0.007	0.020	0.186
USR	0.071	0.066	0.032
AD	0.270	0.265	0.020
Italian-origin surnames (share)	0.169	0.162	0.127
Spanish-origin surname (share)	0.064	0.063	0.042
Portuguese-origin surname (share)	0.002	0.002	0.008
Associations (per capita)	0.003	0.004	0.186
Presence of mines	0.127	0.095	0.103
Buildings per capita	0.320	0.303	0.155
Altitude	268.107	275.114	0.024
Population	5179.714	1021.631	0.302
Mean rainfall	806.625	819.134	0.078
WWI death rate	3.741	3.983	0.095

Notes: All variables are measured before 1939, except for buildings per capita that includes 1939 due to limitations in the census. Electoral outcomes correspond to the 1936 legislative elections. Pre-existing immigrant presence is proxied using reconstructed pre-1939 shares of individuals with Spanish-, Italian-, and Portuguese-origin surnames derived from national death records (1970–2025).

5 Empirical Strategy

Studying the political effects of immigration requires addressing endogeneity issues that are intrinsic to the topic of immigration: immigrants typically self-select into locations based on local factors related to political outcomes. This historical episode offers a unique opportunity to study the local impact of refugee exposure in a quasi-experimental setting. Because the internment camps were established under severe time constraints, their locations were shaped mainly by logistical considerations. We estimate the effect of exposure to refugee camps on political outcomes using a two-way fixed-effects specification.

The standard estimator for spatially targeted treatments with geocoded microdata compares units located immediately next to the treated area with units situated slightly farther away. The motivation is that, because treated and control units lie in close physical proximity, they should be exposed to similar time-varying shocks. However, this approach depends on correctly identifying the spatial extent of treatment effects. If the treated ring is defined too narrowly, units in the control ring may still be affected by the treatment, so changes among "controls" no longer recover the counterfactual trend. Conversely, if the treated ring is defined too broadly, untreated units are averaged into the "treated"

group, attenuating estimates toward zero.

Butts (2023) formalize how to adjust the two-way fixed-effects estimator to account for such spatial spillovers. We construct concentric 5-kilometre rings to capture municipalities at varying distances from the refugee camps (Figure 7 in the Annex shows as an example the department of Gers). This spatial design allows us to identify the treatment effect separately for each ring in the difference-in-differences framework.

$$y_{it} = \tau D_{it} + \sum_{j=1}^{n} (1 - D_{it}) Ring_{ij} + \mu_i + \lambda_{t \times d} + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

In this specification, y_{it} denotes the political outcome in municipality i at time t. The variable D_{it} equals 1 for municipalities that hosted a refugee camp in periods after treatment, and 0 otherwise. The term $\sum_{j=1}^{n}(1 - D_{it})Ring_{ij}$ introduces a set of distance rings, where $Ring_{ij}$ is an indicator taking value 1 if municipality i lies in ring j (e.g. 1–5 km, 5–10 km, 10–15 km from the nearest camp), and the factor $(1 - D_{it})$ ensures that spillover effects are estimated only among non-treated municipalities. The coefficient τ captures the direct effect of hosting a camp, while the coefficients on the ring indicators measure the average spillover effects at different distances. The term μ_i represents municipality fixed effects, and $\lambda_{t \times d}$ denotes year fixed effects interacted with departement fixed effects to absorb common shocks at the departement-year level. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.

6 Preliminary results

We examine how exposure to refugee camps affected political outcomes. The analysis focuses on the vote share of the SFIO ("Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvri'ere"), the socialist party, because it is the only political group that spans the entire period under study and it does not experience major ideological transformations before and after our treatment. Table 2 shows several difference-in-differences specifications to examine the effect of hosting a camp on the share of votes of the socialist party. In the first column, we compare treated municipalities with the rest of cities as controls. In the second column, we compare units immediately next to treatment to units slightly further away (within 10km). The third column shows the coefficients of Equation (1), our preferred specification, accounting for spatial spillovers. Municipalities exposed to a camp have on average 2 percentage points lower vote share for the socialist party.

Figure 2 shows the results of the event study by buffer size. Before the war, the coefficients suggest no systematic pre-trend. After 1945, however, municipalities exposed to refugee camps record a persistent decline in SFIO support, with estimates becoming increasingly negative through the 1950s. This pattern

Table 2. Impact of refugee camp exposure on socialist vote share

	Canonical TWFE (1)	Spatial classic TWFE (2)	Spillovers (3)
Within 1 km	-0.0173***	-0.0158***	-0.0236***
	(0.0027)	(0.0028)	(0.0031)
Ring 5			-0.0101***
			(0.0021)
Ring 10			-0.0054***
			(0.0020)
Ring 15			-0.0052***
			(0.0020)
R^2	0.707	0.713	0.707
Observations	233,646	134,359	233,646
Municipality FE fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Time-dep FE fixed effects	✓	✓	✓

Note: In the first column, we estimate the two-way fixed effects, restricting the control group to those within 20km. In the second column, the control group are those within 10km. In the third column, we estimate eq. (1). Standard errors (SE) are clustered at the municipality level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

is consistent with a political backlash: exposure to the camps may have deteriorated the image of the socialist left, historically associated with solidarity and internationalism, eroding their electoral support. The figure also shows significant spillovers effects to nearby municipalities.

Right-wing parties are not comparable before and after our treatment because there is no single party that exists continuously throughout the entire period of analysis.[1] We include the results on right-wing support in the Annex using the aggregation done by Piketty and Cagé (2023), which shows a positive and significant effect, in line with our main results.

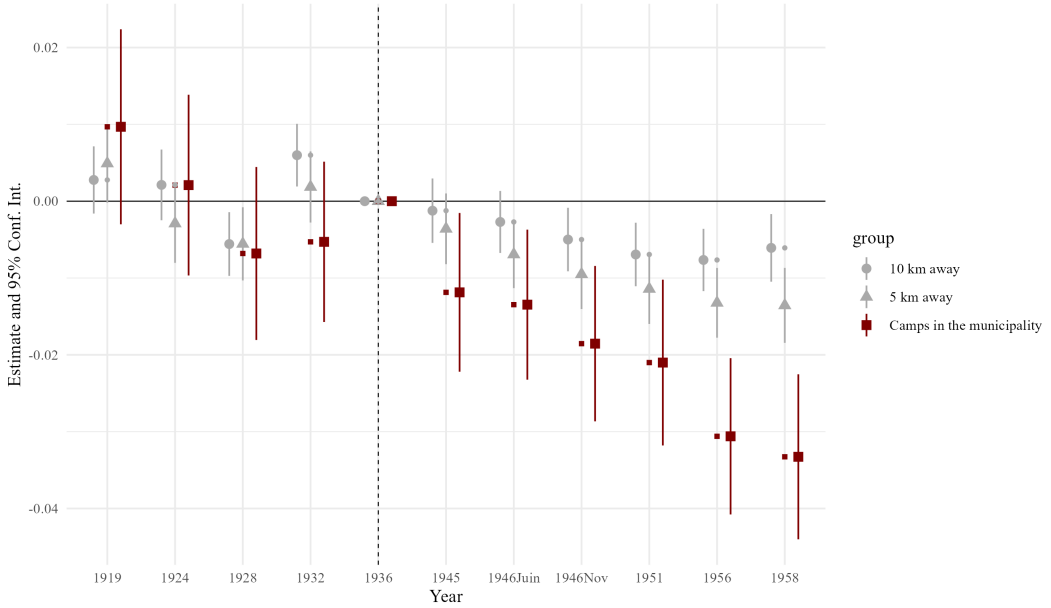
COMENT THIS TABLE AND POLARIZATION?

7 Mechanisms

Figure 3 plots the estimated coefficients from regressions of refugee camp exposure on the total number of resistants. The specification includes political and socio-economic controls as well as department fixed effects. Each point represents the coefficient estimate for a given distance to a refugee camp. The estimates suggest that the effects of refugee camp exposure are strongest in municipalities that hosted camps or are located very close (within 1–3 km).

[1] Throughout the interwar and post-war years, the composition of the French right changed substantially. Key parties present before the war—such as the Fédération républicaine or the Alliance démocratique—either disappeared, were absorbed, or were replaced after 1945 by entirely new formations like the MRP or, later, the Gaullist RPF.

Figure 2. Impact of Refugee Camp Exposure on Left-wing party by buffer size



Notes: This graph reports the estimates of Equation (1). Error bars plot the interval confidence at 95%. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.

Table 3. Impact of refugee camp exposure on the Communist Party shares

	Canonical TWFE (1)	Spatial classic TWFE (2)	Spillovers (3)
Within 1 km	0.0034	0.0016	0.0078***
	(0.0025)	(0.0025)	(0.0029)
Ring 5			0.0083***
			(0.0020)
Ring 10			0.0030
			(0.0018)
Ring 15			0.0027
			(0.0018)
R^2	0.811	0.819	0.811
Observations	187,003	107,575	187,003
Municipality FE fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Time-dep FE fixed effects	✓	✓	✓

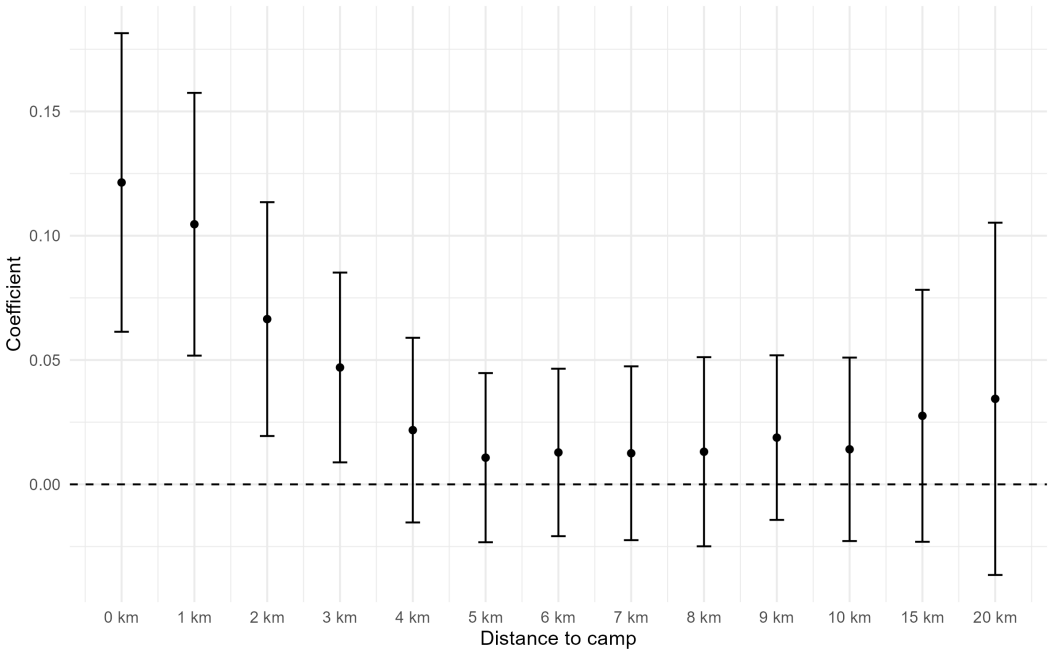
Note: In the first column, we estimate the two-way fixed effects, restricting the control group to those within 20km. In the second column, the control group are those within 10km. In the third column, we estimate eq. (1). Standard errors (SE) are clustered at the municipality level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

INTERPRET COEFFICIENT POISSON REGRESSION

COMENT GRAPH

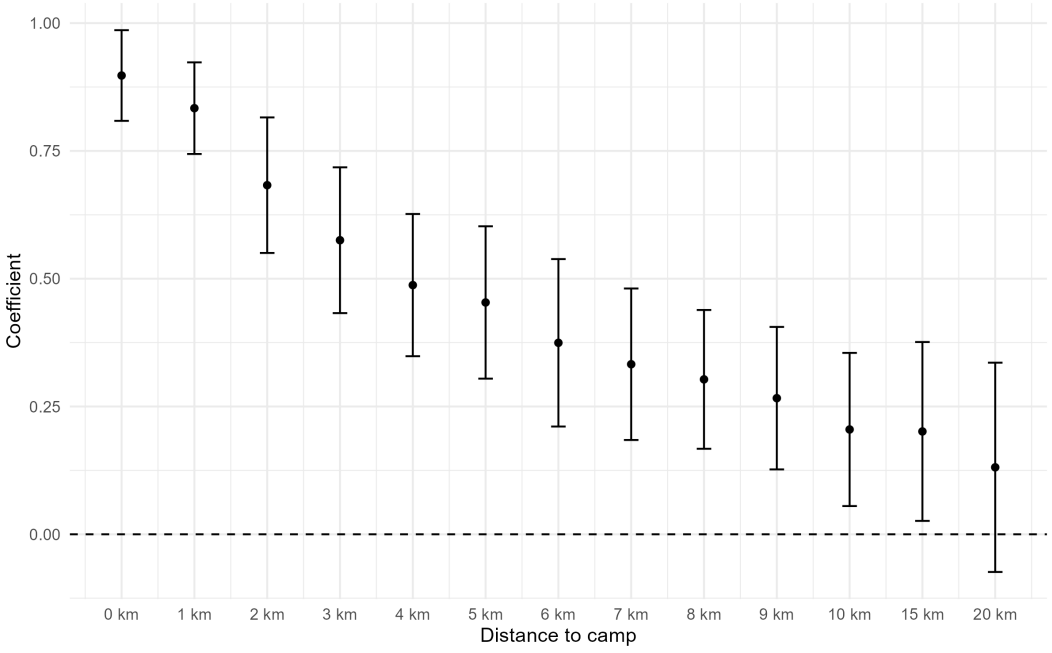
The results cannot be attributed to the electoral behaviour of the Spanish Republican refugees them-

Figure 3. Effect of Refugee Camp Exposure on Resistance, by Distance



Notes: This graph reports the estimates of Poisson regressions on the number of resistants against Nazi Occupation. Error bars plot the interval confidence at 95%. Standard errors are clustered to account for spatial correlation using Conley (1999).

Figure 4. Effect of Refugee Camp Exposure, by Distance



Notes: Error bars plot the interval confidence at 95%. Resistance intensity is measured in logarithmic scale. Standard errors are clustered to account for spatial correlation using Conley (1999).

selves. Legislative suffrage was restricted to French nationals, and the Vichy regime had dismantled the pre-war naturalization regime. Following the Liberation, the Ordinance of 19 October 1945 imposed a five-year residence requirement for naturalization, with eligibility additionally granted upon reaching majority after residing in France since age sixteen, or through marriage to a French national—although only 15% of Spanish marriages between 1945 and 1950 were mixed (Angoustures, 1997). Code of 19 October 1945 also waived the residency requirement for volunteer enlistees, veterans of the two wars and members of the Resistance. Considering this framework, merely 6,400 Spaniards acquired the French nationality in 1946 (Spire and Thave, 1999). Between 1956 and 1970, fewer than 13% of Spanish refugees registered with the French Office for the Protection of Refugees acquired French nationality—slightly more than 11,000 individuals (de Comunicación de Galicia en el Mundo, 2009). Moreover, newly naturalized individuals remained subject to legal incapacities: they were excluded from the electoral rolls for five years after naturalization and barred from holding elected office for ten years (??, cod). For these reasons, the settlement of Spanish refugees could not have mechanically translated into direct electoral participation.

This historical setting enables us to examine the political consequences of forced displacement through two primary mechanisms. First, the arrival of Spanish refugees may have triggered political backlash among the native population. This reaction could stem from concerns over cultural and ideological differences, fears of political radicalization, or perceived competition for limited economic and social resources. To isolate this mechanism, we will conduct a sentiment and salience analysis of the local press at the time of the refugee flow. This allows us to capture not only how frequently the refugee issue appeared in the press, but also how it was framed.

ALSO THE ASSOCIATIONS IDEA

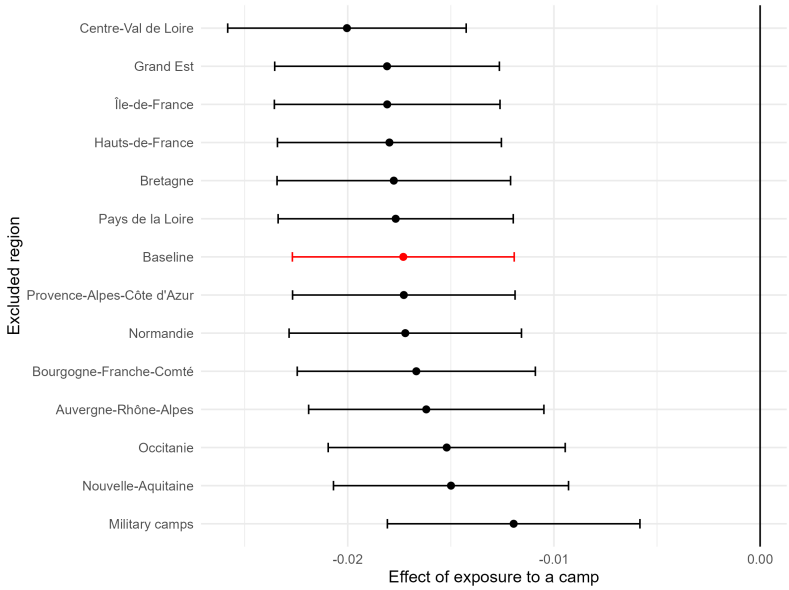
8 Robustness checks

We discuss in this section the robustness of our results.

We first show that the backlash phenomenon that we measure is consistent between French geographical regions. To do so, we re-estimate our preferred specification on a series of sub-samples in which we sequentially exclude each broad region from the analysis.We display these results in Figure 5. Dropping the regions in the North of France, the estimated backlash effect becomes larger in magnitude. This is consistent with the fact that Northern camps were, on average, less visible, of a smaller size and generated fewer local tensions. It is also consistent with the difference in the composition of the hosted population: Northern camps and centres welome a higher share of women and children, which plausibly reduces the magnitude of the backlash effect we measure. Consistently, when we exclude regions in the South, the estimated coefficient moves towards zero and the implied backlash is smaller, in line with the idea that

camps in the South were more visible and politically salient. The qualitative pattern of our results is nevertheless preserved across all teave-one-out specifications: the sign of the estimated effect remains unchanged. Overall, this suggests that no single region is driving our main results.

Figure 5. Effect on socialist vote share - Leave one out results



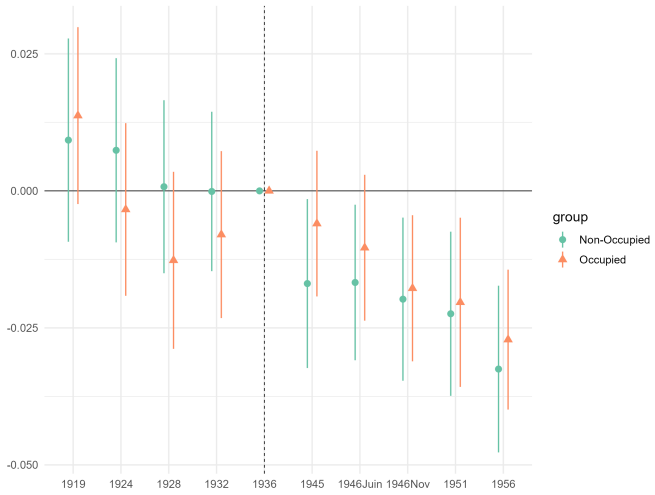
Notes: This graph reports the estimates leaving one region out at the time of the spatial classic TWFE. Error bars plot the interval confidence at 95%. Standard errors are clustered at the municipal level.

Similarly, we verify that our results are not driven by differential dynamics between the part of the country occupied by the German forces (*zone occupée*) and the municipalities under the authority of the Vichy government (*zone libre*). Exploiting this historical division also allows us to use occupation status as a proxy for the local intensity of the Second World War and to check whether our estimates are simply capturing the areas most directly affected by the conflict.

In order to do so, we re-estimate our baseline specification separately for municipalities located in the occupied and in the non-occupied zones. Figure 6 shows the results. Trends between treated and control municipalities are similar when we restrict the sample to the occupied zone and when we restrict it to the non-occupied zone, indicating that our main findings are not specific to one side of the demarcation line. If anything, the estimated backlash is of a larger magnitude in the non-occupied areas, where the largest camps and soldiers refugee settlements are located. If the intensity of the war were driving our results, one would instead expect stronger effects in the occupied zone. This pattern reinforces the interpretation that our estimates capture a backlash mechanism linked to the presence of the camps rather than to wartime violence.

We finally perform a set of "placebo exercises" to ensure that our findings are not mechanically driven by the way we define treatment or by changes in the composition of the electorate. First, we randomise

Figure 6. Effect on socialist vote share - Occupied vs Non-Occupied areas



Notes: This figure reports difference-in-differences estimates separately for the Nazi-occupied zone and the non-occupied Vichy zone. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.

the location of camps across the territory and reconstruct buffer zones around these random locations following exactly the same procedure as in our baseline specification. Re-estimating our main equation using these placebo treatments yields non-significant and close to zero coefficients, which indicates that the effect we measure does not arise from spurious spatial correlations.

Finally, one might worry that our findings simply reflect the extension of suffrage to women that occured in 1944[2]. We thus construct an alternative placebo treatment that captures differences in the gender composition of the population rather than exposure to camps. Using the distribution of the share of women in each municipality, we define a dummy equal to one for municipalities in the upper part of this distribution (and zero otherwise) and replace our baseline treatment with this binary variable. If the entry of women into the electorate in the 1945 elections were driving our results, we would expect to find similar effects using this placebo treatment. The estimated coefficients are non-significant.

[2] *Ordonnance du 21 avril 1944*. Women thus participated voted for the first time during the elections of 1945.

9 Conclusion

This paper investigates the political consequences of the 1939 mass displacement of Spanish Republicans into France, exploiting the quasi-random placement of internment camps as a natural experiment. The improvised nature of camp siting allows us to isolate the local effects of refugee exposure on both resistance activity during World War II and subsequent electoral outcomes. Our preliminary evidence suggests that these effects were localized, concentrated in municipalities hosting camps or situated within a few kilometres of them, with stronger mobilization among younger cohorts.

By documenting these patterns, the study contributes to the broader literature on migration and the transmission of political ideas. Unlike many other refugee contexts, cultural distance between the displaced and host populations was relatively small, while political selection was particularly strong. This setting therefore provides a unique opportunity to distinguish between backlash effects and the diffusion of political ideals. Looking beyond the war years, we will also show how initial refugee dispersion shaped the long-term settlement of Spanish communities and their collective mobilization through political associations.

At the same time, the analysis reveals evidence of a political backlash in host communities. Municipalities that hosted camps experienced a persistent decline in support for the socialist SFIO after 1945, mirrored by an increase in right-wing voting. These shifts suggest that the negative experiences associated with the camps—overcrowding, disease, and the burden of managing displaced populations—may have fostered resentment and eroded support for the left, traditionally associated with solidarity and internationalism in the long-term.

Overall, our findings underscore the importance of historical refugee shocks for understanding the roots of political behaviour and collective action. They also highlight how the legacies of forced migration can persist across decades, shaping both local political dynamics and the broader integration of refugee populations.

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Appendix

A Additional Tables and Figures

Figure 7 plots how the buffers are defined using as an example the department of Gers. The darker areas represent municipalities located within 1 km of a camp, while the lighter areas correspond to those between 1 km and 5 km.

Figure 7. Refugee Camps and Exposure Buffer – Département of Gers (32)

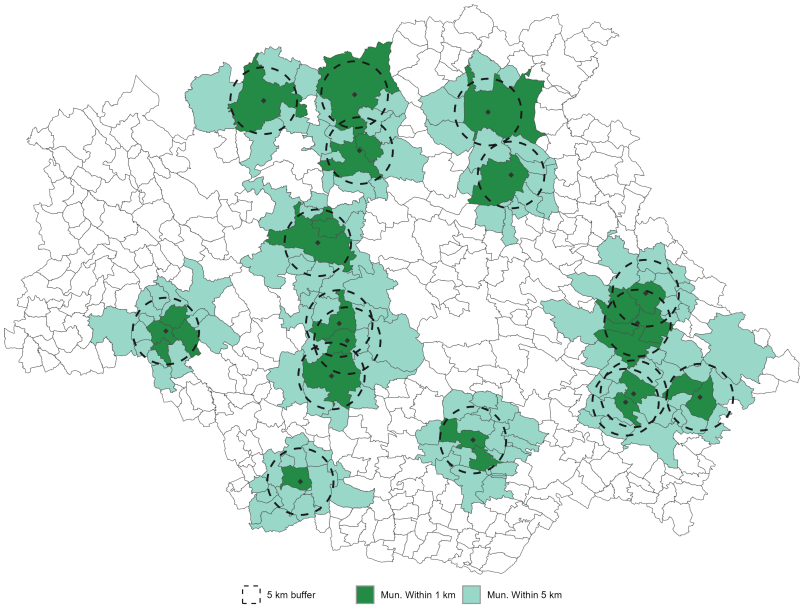

Table 4. Impact of refugee camp exposure on right-wing support

	Canonical TWFE (1)	Spatial classic TWFE (2)	Spillovers (3)
Within 1 km	0.0083***	0.0067**	0.0085**
	(0.0031)	(0.0031)	(0.0036)
Ring 5			0.0033
			(0.0026)
Ring 10			-0.0003
			(0.0025)
Ring 15			-0.0041
			(0.0025)
R^2	0.727	0.736	0.727
Observations	233,803	134,554	233,803
Municipality FE fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Time-dep FE fixed effects	✓	✓	✓

Note: In the first column, we estimate the two-way fixed effects, restricting the control group to those within 20km. In the second column, the control group are those within 10km. In the third column, we estimate eq. (1). Standard errors (SE) are clustered at the municipality level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

B Historical Context

B.1 The Arrival and Welcoming of the Refugees

The Spanish Civil War and the Different Migrations Flows

The large majority of the migrations flows from Spain, related with the Civil War, occur between 1936 and 1939. The timing of the migrations is directly related with the victories of the Nationalist groups over the Republicans. Dreyfus-Armand (2002) identifies three major waves of Spanish refugees to France between 1936 and 1939.

1. The first one occurs in August 1936 and corresponds to the fall of the Republican force in the Basque Country. This wave is mainly composed of civilians, although soldiers also entered in French territory, mainly in order to reach Perpignan and then the Republican zone in Catalonia. Most of the refugees at this time are encouraged to come back to Spain. This wave represents around 15,000 refugees.

2. The second wave occurs in 1937. The violence of the fighting between Republican and the Nationalists, especially the final assault against Bilbao, led the Republican authorities to evacuate the city. With the collaboration of the French authorities, more than 120,000 individuals, both soldiers and civilians.

3. The last and biggest flow of refugees occurs in January 1939. This flow is known as "La Retirada" (*The Retreat*) and occurs after the Fall of Barcelona. This flow is both composed of soldiers but also civilians fleeing the intensive bombings. Most of the refugees cross the border by the Pyrenees, for instance in Le Perthus. Estimations of this amount of persons who cross the border differ. In March 1939, the French Assembly, through the Commission of Foreign Affairs, estimated that 450,000 refugees have crossed the border. At the same period, the French Ministry of Interior estimates that 300,000 soldiers and 214,000 civilians crossed the border.

French Authorities, specially after 1938, initiate several policies in order to encourage the repatriation of refugees. For instance, at the end of 1938 and before the *Retirada*, only 45,000 Spanish are still in France[3].

[3]from this number, a quarter are children according to J. Rubio, La Emigracion de la guerra civil de 1936-1939 (1982).

The Internment Camps

Since the beginning of the Civil War, the guiding principle of the French Governments is to encourage repatriations of refugees. In a context of growing political tensions in Europe, the presence of thousands of refugees, some of who are politically very active, is considered as a major source of instability by the authorities. In Febuary 1939, France signed the Berard-Jordan Agreement with Franquist Spain, in order to facilitate the repatriation of refugees. As a consequence, between April 1rst 1939 (end of the Civil War) and the end of the year, thousands of refugees returned to Spain. During this time, the repatriation of refugees have been used several time by Franco to put pressure on the French Government, especially in order to push France to respect the terms of the agreement. (for instance on the restitution of goods that had been transferred to France during the War).
In May-June 1939, evaluations estimates the number of refugees in France to be around 350,000 (including 155,000 civilians), and 250,000 in August of the same year[4]. At the end of 1939, French authorities estimated the number of refugees to be of 180,000 individuals (including 45,000 women and children)[5].

The welcoming of refugees essentially considered as "improvised", and refugees, both soldiers and families, are often put in old factories or closed down prison[6]. Concentration camps are built for the first time in January 1939 when the largest amount of refugee starts to cross the border after the victories of Nationalists in Barcelona.

B.2 The Second World War and the Political Exile

The Involvement during WWII

The Post-War Exile until the Fall of Franco

The exodus from Spain with the Civil War goes on after the Second World War and France Liberation. Estimations evaluate that around 10,000 immigrants from Spain have entered France each year between 1947 and 1949.

The Political and Cultural Transmission

[4] Archive du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, série Europe 1918-1940), sous-série Espagne, vol. 189.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Les camps sur la plage, un exil espagnol (avec Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand), Autrement, 1995

B.3 The Political Context in France

Main parties during the interwar period

The French Left during the interwar period was structured around three major political forces alongside several smaller organizations. The central pillars were the Radical-Socialists (RAD-SOC) —who, despite their name, occupied a space closer to liberal centrism—the Socialist Party (SFIO), and the Communist Party (PCF). Among the minor parties, the Republican Socialist Union held particular relevance, positioned ideologically between the Radicals and the Socialists, while a faction of dissident communists formed the Proletarian Union (Pickersgill, 1939)

In 1924, most of the left-wing parties (with the exception of the Communists) created an electoral alliance known as the Cartel des Gauches. This coalition achieved notable success in the legislative elections of 1924. Its cohesion weakened in 1928 and the the conservatives and moderates return to power under the leadership of Raymond Poincaré. The elections of 1932 once again give a majority to the Radicals and the Socialists. The Communists, however, remained outside of this arrangement until 1935, when the Third International urged communist parties across Europe to collaborate with democratic forces in the fight against fascism. This strategic shift laid the foundations of the Front Populaire, which brought together the full spectrum of left-wing parties (Pickersgill, 1939). Léon Blum, leader of the Socialist Party, becomes Prime Minister and his government implements a series of major social reforms as the introduction of the forty-hour work week (Reference).

Following the classification of Piketty and Cagé (2023), we divide the political forces present in the 1936 legislative elections in ten main forces. (Reference) for the explanation of the parties.

Left-wing parties :

PCF: French Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français) and organizations close to the communists. Created in 1920 during the Tours Congress, when a majority of the SFIO decides to join the Third International (Comintern). At the time, it positions itself on the far left with a revolutionary and internationalist agenda. Its main leaders include Maurice Thorez and Jacques Duclos.

SFIO: Socialist party (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière) and organizations close to the socialists. Created in 1905, it represents the Socialist movement. It adopts a Marxist orientation in theory but acts reformist in practice. Its most notable leaders are Léon Blum and Paul Faure.

RAD-SOC: Candidates presented by the Radical Party (Parti Radical et Radical-Socialiste) and organizations close to the radicals. Founded in 1901, it occupies a center-left position. Its

main leaders include Édouard Herriot and Camille Chautemps.

DVG: candidates presented by parties and organizations close to the communist or socialist movement (Proletarian Union, Communist Socialist Union, etc.).

USR: candidates presented by the Republican Socialist Union and by related organizations (Independent Socialists, Independent Left, dissident Radical Party – Camille Pelletan, Young Republic, Frontist Party, etc.).

Right-wing parties :

AD: candidates presented by the Democratic Alliance and affiliated parties and organizations as Republican Left, Independent Radicals, Popular Democrats (Parti Démocrate Populaire), Independent Republicans, etc. Parti Démocrate Populaire (PDP) is founded in 1924, embodies Christian democratic and center-right values. One of its most important leaders is Auguste Champetier de Ribes. The PDP can be seen as the precursor to the postwar Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP).

FR-URD: candidates presented by the Republican Federation (Fédération Républicaine) and the Republican and Democratic Union (as well as the National Republican Party). the Fédération Républicaine was founded in 1903 and defends conservative and pro-business interests.

AGR: candidates presented by various Agrarian and Peasant parties, Independent Agrarians, Agrarian Republicans, etc.

DVD: miscellaneous right-wing candidates: Social Action Republicans, Independent Popular Action, Independent Social Action, Catholics, Conservatives.

Others :

DIV: miscellaneous unclassifiable candidates (Regionalists, etc.).

The interwar period in France is also characterized by the emergences of far-rights movements. The *Action Française*, founded in 1899 by Charles Maurras, promotes monarchism and antisemitism. The Parti Social Français (PSF) emerges in 1936 out of the transformation of the veterans' league Croix-de-Feu, following the dissolution of paramilitary leagues by the government of the Front Populaire. Under the leadership of Colonel François de La Rocque, the PSF becomes the first mass party of the French right, with hundreds of thousands of members across the country. It defends conservative, nationalist, and authoritarian values while rejecting both parliamentary instability and revolutionary extremes. The party was not formed by the time of the legislative elections in 1935 and the outbreak of the war prevented it from consolidating (Reference).

B.4 The Non-Intervention Policy of the Front Populaire and the Spanish Refugees

The experience of the *Front Populaire* was relatively short-lived. Divisions within the government, economic difficulties, and rising international tensions gradually undermined cohesion among the left-wing parties. The refusal of the Communist Party to participate directly in government, combined with the eventual withdrawal of the Radicals, left the Socialists increasingly isolated. By 1938, under the mounting threat of war in Europe and with the Spanish Civil War polarizing public opinion, the *Front Populaire* government collapsed.

The fall of the *Front Populaire* was due in part to the government's response to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The policy of non-intervention adopted by the French government was decided by the head of government, Léon Blum, in the summer of 1936. More broadly, historians characterize French policy towards the conflict in Spain as one of "non-intervention." This policy was rapidly adopted by the French government in August 1936, and then by the British authorities, with the explicit aim of avoiding direct involvement in the conflict and preventing its spillover into France (Monier (2016)).
In practice, however, the stance of the French government during the conflict, although officially restrictive, has led some historians to speak of a policy of "soft non-intervention"[7] (Salmon (2024)). This expression captures the shifts in the French position with regard to the Spanish Civil War, from strict control of military supplies to periods during which weapons transiting through French territory (mainly from the Soviet Union) were effectively allowed to enter Spain. In this sense, the Blum government, while formally committed to non-intervention, at times turned a blind eye to arms trafficking in favour of the Republicans at the border.

The perceived position of the different left-wing parties towards the Spanish Civil War and the refugees, although all member of the same electoral coalition in 1936, is quite different.

The Socialist from the SFIO are taken responsible from both the choice of the non-intervention since Léon Blum refused to provide direct military support to the Republican forces against Franco. The choice of non-intervention proved politically costly for the French government, particularly for the SFIO and Léon Blum, who publicly assumed full responsibility for this decision. Thiebaut (2008) argues that, in public opinion, this choice remained "a legacy difficult to assume" for the *Front Populaire* and continued to "poison the collective memory," especially among those who saw themselves as "close to the socialist movement."

[7] *Non-intervention relâchée* in French.

The position of the Radicals, are the less incline to both get involved into the conflict and to welcome the refugees. Although personally inclined, like the communists, to support military intervention in favour of the Republican forces, Blum ultimately accepted non-intervention in order to preserve the support of the Radicals and maintain the fragile coalition. After the end of the *Front Populaire*, Edouard Daladier (RAD-SOC) became the head of the government with the support of the right-wing parties in 1938. They kept on the line that they were already defending at the time of the *Front Populaire*, advocating for the minimal intervention into the conflict. The strict policy chosen by the Radicals towards the refugees during the *Retirada*, are often seen as a concession made to the numerous xenophobic stereotypes of the public opinion Laborie (2008). It has to be noted, that the competition between the left-wing forces is fierce, especially in the South of France with regards to the issue of the Spanish Civil war. The Radicals, afraid of the arise of the SFIO and the Communists, were willing to be seen as the "party of the order", against the willingness of the Communist to get more involved in the conflict. In 1939 for instance, the radical press largely paid tribute the the welcoming policies of the Daladier government, while the communist one soon characterized the refugees installations as "concentration camps" Nicolas (2009).

The French Communist party on the contrary to the two other components of the *Front Populaire*, led a broad campaign advocating French intervention, played an active role in organizing the reception of Republican refugees in France, and saw thousands of communist militants enlist in the International Brigades to fight in Spain Monier (2016).

The political landscape after the Second World War

Compared to the legislative elections of 1936, the PCF, SFIO, and RAD-SOC remained present in the political landscape, while other parties underwent certain transformations or newly emerged Piketty and Cagé (2023).

Left-wing parties :

DVG: the classification refers now to new parties close to the communist or socialist movement, as the Parti Communiste Internationaliste, Union Progressiste, Trotskystes, socialistes hors SFIO, etc.

UDSR: candidates presented by the Democratic and Socialist Union of the Resistance (Union Démocratique et Socialiste de la Résistance) and other independent organizations emerging from the Resistance.

AUG: Candidates presented by various parties and organizations of the non-communist 'other left' (Trotskyists, Internationalist Communists, etc.

Right-wing parties :

MRP : candidates presented by the Popular Republican Movement (Mouvement Républicain Populaire) and affiliated organizations. In November 1944, left-wing Christian members of the Resistance founded the Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP). Paradoxically, however, its electorate leaned more to the right, a trend confirmed in the 1951 elections, when the party lost a significant share of its voters to the Rassemblement du Peuple Français (RPF), the Gaullist party created in 1947. The MRP eventually dissolved in 1966, giving way to the Centre Démocrate.

ADPAYS : lists presented by various moderate right-wing candidates (former members of the pre-war Democratic Alliance (Alliance Démocratique), independent republicans, independents and peasants, etc.).

URDDVD : lists presented by various right-wing candidates (former members of the pre-war Republican and Democratic Union (Union Républicaine et Démocratique) or Republican Entente (Entente Républicaine), as well as other conservative right-wing candidates).

PRL : candidates presented by the Republican Party of Liberty (Parti Républicain de la Liberté) and affiliated organizations.

REP : various lists of Republican Concentration, Republican Defense, and Republican Union.

Table 5. Mean vote shares by party and year

Party	1936	1945	1946Juin	1946Nov
AD	23.01	–	–	–
SFIO	20.65	20.91	21.44	18.23
RADSOC	15.23	6.37	1.97	0.64
PCF	15.22	26.40	26.21	28.48
FRURD	12.46	–	–	–
USR	7.10	–	–	–
DVD	3.05	3.37	3.38	4.51
DIV	1.59	1.49	0.04	1.02
AGR	0.92	–	–	–
DVG	0.77	3.82	0.26	–
RG	–	0.42	–	–
AUG	–	0.05	–	–
PCFSFIO	–	0.14	–	–
UDSR	–	2.10	0.58	–
REP	–	0.97	–	–
MRP	–	23.61	27.81	25.90
ADPAYS	–	4.19	–	–
URDDVD	–	3.94	–	–
PRL	–	2.24	7.68	3.64
RGR	–	–	7.98	9.34
GAUL	–	–	0.40	4.13
INDPAYS	–	–	2.25	2.99
PCI	–	–	–	0.28
GAULG	–	–	–	0.84

Note: A dash (–) indicates that the party did not run in that election. Political labels are those used by Piketty and Cagé (2023): SFIO – French Section of the Workers' International (socialist), RAD SOC – Radical and Radical-Socialist Party, DIV – Various independents or unaffiliated candidates, FR URD – Republican Federation / Republican and Democratic Union (conservative right), DVG – Miscellaneous left (non-SFIO left), PCF – French Communist Party, DVD – Miscellaneous right (independent right), AGR – Agrarian or peasant lists, USR – Republican Socialist Union, AD – Democratic Alliance (republican right).

Source: Piketty and Cagé (2023).