

How economic hardship fuels support for the far right

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Public Service Deprivation (Distance to Public Service Hubs), 2014. Notes: Dots indicate public service hubs. Colors indicate tertiles of distance from hubs.

Credit: Geography of Discontent: How Public Service Deprivation Increased Far-Right Support in Italy, https://www.unibocconi.eu/wps/wcm/connect/ad1724cd-c386-4573-b98f-564322b6bd3c/Paper_Public_Services-19.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=ofG8tkn

Globalization and economic hardship related to financial crises are known to have boosted support for far-right parties and socially conservative political agendas aimed at restricting the rights of marginalized groups including ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, migrants, LGBTQIA+ people, and women.

When she launched her ERC Consolidator Grant-winning research project LOSS ("Narratives of Loss: Unravelling the Origins of Support for Socially Conservative Political Agendas") in 2020, Catherine De Vries said that "we do not understand why this happens." About midway through the LOSS project, she can now hypothesize at least two channels that link [economic hardship](#) to the electoral success of the far-right.

"Firstly, we've observed that when people experience socio-economic loss and feel their status is diminished, they tend to compensate for it by bringing other parts of their identity to center stage. And since we like to identify with high-status groups, national pride in opposition to the low-status identity of immigrants is likely to emerge."

"Secondly, hardship sparks concern about competition with non-natives over [public resources](#) and fuels demand for parochial, as opposed to universal, redistribution. If the pie is perceived as not large enough to be shared among all those who need it, nationality or religion become convenient distributive criteria. For the same reason, the universalist left-wing loses electoral appeal."

The first part of the project focused mainly on Italy. In [the working paper](#) *Geography of Discontent: How Public Service Deprivation Increased Far-Right Support in Italy*, Professor De Vries and co-authors from the research team she recruited thanks to ERC funding, argue that public service deprivation amplifies the appeal of far-right parties by making people more worried about both immigration and increased competition for those services.

"Specifically," the scholar said, "we examine the link between public services and electoral support for the far-right by looking at the effect of a 2010 Italian administrative reform. The reform, which forced some municipalities to jointly manage local public services, reduced access to a number of the services and boosted the vote share of far-right parties. Residents of the affected areas voiced more concern about immigration, self-identifying as further right on the political spectrum."

In the [ongoing study](#), "Without Roots: How Olive Grove Extermination Strengthened the Far Right in Italy," LOSS researchers examine the electoral consequences of the 2014 outbreak of Xylella, a bacterium that exterminated centuries-old olive groves in Apulia, one of Europe's leading olive oil-producing regions.

"By exploiting the [geographic variation](#) in the spread of the disease and georeferenced municipal-level data, we were able to quantify the economic and social disruption associated with the spread of Xylella and the electoral consequences," Prof. de Vries said.

"The disease has caused income loss and increased suicides as well as youth emigration. This had important political consequences; far-right parties won higher percentages in affected areas due to increases in voter turnout and a far-left electoral loss. The vote share of the regional incumbent, a broad left-leaning coalition responsible for disaster management and relief, remained unaffected."

In the recently launched second phase of the project, the focus will shift to the rest of Europe, with particular attention given to service deprivation in the Dutch context and in the National Health Services of the four U.K. countries.

"We have some preliminary findings at the European level on the consequences of women's participation in the labor market, which seems

to spark more conservative gender attitudes," Prof. de Vries pointed out. An ongoing study finds that for men, increased women labor force participation intensifies competition in the market. For women, it might also be a risk when they are not financially independent, worrying about employment of the men in their household. "We conclude that increased [labor market](#) competition by women has generated a backlash in Europe," Prof. De Vries said, "which is driven not only by men, but also by certain women."

An ERC-funded research project of this scale is managed by a principal investigator, but relies on the work of many collaborators. "Nothing would have been possible without the grant, which allowed me to gather a formidable research group that is doing an exceptional job," Prof. De Vries stated. "They are [young people](#) from all over the globe and are contributing new, unexpected ideas which fit the project perfectly. Sometimes it seems that my most important role is that of mentor."

Provided by Bocconi University

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