

The Ballot and the Riot: South-South Migration, Elections and Violence in South Africa¹

Biniam Bedasso² and Pascal Jaupart³

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Abstract

Little is known about the political consequences of immigration in low and middle income countries. In this paper, we estimate the effect of exposure to immigration on election outcomes, protests and violence against foreigners in South Africa. Our analysis is based on municipality panel data and an instrumental variable strategy exploiting historical migrant settlement patterns. We find that local immigration concentration has a negative impact on the performance of the incumbent African National Congress, whereas support for the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, is found to increase in municipalities with a larger immigrant presence. The presence of immigrants also benefits the main challenger opposition party. Our results indicate that the number of xenophobic protests and violent events increase with immigration as well. In terms of mechanisms, competition over jobs and local public services as well as initial exposure to foreigners and diversity influence how immigration affects election outcomes and protests. These findings are robust to a broad range of sensitivity checks. They provide evidence that immigration can be a salient issue in middle income countries. They also show that immigration can affect election results in contexts where there is no single issue anti-migrant party.

Keywords: immigration, elections, protests, violence, South Africa

JEL codes: D72, F22, F68

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² Collaborative African Budget Reform Initiative (CABRI).

³ Blavatnik School of Government and Centre for the Study of African Economies, University of Oxford. Corresponding author. Email: pascal.jaupart@bsg.ox.ac.uk.