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A More Conservative Country? Asylum Seekers and Voting in the UK

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Abstract

This paper provides the first causal evaluation of the political impact of asylum seekers in the UK. Although they are *dispersed* across areas on a no-choice basis, political bargaining between central and local governments introduces potential endogeneity in their allocation. We address this concern with a novel IV strategy that exploits predetermined public-housing characteristics. Focusing on 2004-2019, we estimate a sizeable increase in the Conservative-Labour vote share gap in local elections: a one within-area standard deviation increase in *dispersed* asylum seekers widens the gap by 3.1 percentage points in favour of the Conservatives. We observe a similar shift to the right in national elections and longitudinal survey data on voting intentions, along with an increase in the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum. Electoral gains are observed for UKIP as well, although this finding is less robust. No effect is detected for *non-dispersed* asylum seekers, who forgo subsidised housing and make independent residential choices. Turning to mechanisms, voters move to the right without becoming more hostile towards foreigners. Leveraging the universe of MPs' speeches, we show that representatives from more exposed areas emphasise asylum and migration more, with no systematic change in tone or content. This heightened salience appears to shape voters' choices, with Conservative MPs particularly effective at channelling discontent.

JEL Codes: F22, D72, J15

Keywords: Refugees, Elections, Brexit, MP speeches.

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1 Introduction

A widespread but simplistic view of the migration-politics nexus posits that exposure to immigrants and refugees inevitably fuels hostile attitudes among natives, shifting their votes towards parties on the right – and often the far-right – of the political spectrum. While such a pattern has been observed in some studies (Barone et al., 2016; Hangartner et al., 2019; Edo et al., 2019; Tabellini, 2020; Campo et al., 2024), closer inspection of this literature reveals a far more heterogeneous and nuanced set of findings (Alesina and Tabellini, 2024). First, immigration exposure does not translate mechanically into support for the right. Not only the effects may often be negligible – as concluded by a recent meta-analysis of these estimates (Cools et al., 2021) – but observing a reduction in natives' support for anti-immigration parties is not an infrequent finding in this literature (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). Several influential studies have reached the conclusion that differences in the characteristics of migrants and natives – as well as in the nature of their interaction – can lead to opposite effects on voting choices (Halla et al., 2017; Dustmann et al., 2019; Steinmayr, 2021; Mayda et al., 2022; Moriconi et al., 2022; Gamalerio et al., 2023; Docquier et al., 2025). These mixed empirical findings are backed by alternative, yet equally plausible and not mutually exclusive, theoretical arguments. Attitudes may shift towards hostility if the increased presence of out-group members triggers feelings of perceived threat among in-group members, as predicted by *group threat theory* (Blumer, 1958); conversely, more favourable views among voters may emerge if natives and foreigners engage in peaceful and constructive interactions, consistent with *contact theory* (Allport, 1954). Second, even in contexts where immigration unequivocally shifts native preferences to the right, the extent to which this benefits far-right movements rather than traditional right-wing parties depends on the electoral system (Becher et al., 2023), as well as on the relative capacity of each to harness public discontent – either by mobilising it with vehemently anti-immigration rhetoric or by incorporating it into mainstream platforms (Meguid, 2005; van Spanje, 2010; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). Finally, the notion that observed shifts in voting behaviour towards right-wing parties necessarily reflect underlying changes in immigration attitudes has also been challenged by recent evidence. While parties with xenophobic and openly hostile stances on immigration have been gaining increasing electoral consensus across European countries, evidence from panel survey data shows that Europeans' attitudes towards migrants and refugees are remarkably stable over time (Kustov et al., 2021; Bansak et al., 2023). If citizens' attitudes are not systematically worsening, the observed shift to the right in votes may be better explained by the heightened salience of migration issues in the public debate. Indeed, the degree to which migration occupies public attention appears to vary independently of underlying attitudes –

both at the aggregate and individual level (Hatton, 2021). Greater prominence of migration issues has been shown to strengthen support for politicians with anti-immigration agendas – even when their narratives are based on fabricated claims (Barrera et al., 2020) – and to reduce backing for policies favourable to immigrants (Alesina et al., 2023). This role of salience highlights the influence of political actors in shaping the electoral consequences of immigration, as highlighted by recent work on the supply side of this relationship (Alrababah et al., 2024; Campo et al., 2024; Edo et al., 2025).

Our paper provides the first evaluation of the impact of local exposure to asylum seekers on electoral outcomes in the United Kingdom, a major destination for both refugee and migrant flows, and a setting where migration and asylum issues dominate the public debate (Hatton, 2017). We thoroughly explore voting behaviour by analysing local elections – as well as national elections, longitudinal survey data and the 2016 Brexit referendum – over the period 2004-2019, during which the central government switched from Labour to Conservative rule, and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) sought to challenge the Conservatives' leadership from the right. We begin our analysis in the aftermath of a major rise in asylum claims in the UK, which led the Labour government to introduce a *dispersal policy* aimed at distributing asylum seekers across the country (Bell et al., 2013). Although the policy is exogenous to asylum seekers' residential preferences – who are assigned housing on a no-choice basis – we show that the allocation is not orthogonal to local political majorities. Areas governed by local Labour administrations are more likely to be selected as dispersal locations at the policy's inception, and the allocation mechanism is persistent over time. Our identification strategy, therefore, does not simply rely on the dispersal policy – setting our work apart from other studies in the literature (Dustmann et al., 2019; Campo et al., 2024). We develop an original instrumental variable strategy that predicts the local presence of asylum seekers using predetermined public housing characteristics interacted with national inflows of asylum claims; importantly, the instrument is orthogonal to baseline electoral performance.

Our main empirical analysis focuses on local elections and uncovers several notable findings. First, we identify a clear shift to the right of vote shares in areas with higher concentration of *dispersed* asylum seekers. Specifically, our IV estimates imply that a one standard deviation rise in the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers generates a 3.1 percentage point increase in the Conservative-Labour vote share difference. An examination of party-specific vote shares indicates that this pattern reflects a significant electoral setback for the Labour Party, accompanied by gains for Conservative candidates. We also observe significant electoral gains for the Green Party and the UKIP, although these do not fully materialise - unlike from the two major parties - into changes in the number of elected local councillors,

owing to the majoritarian electoral system. Further, we find that the presence of *dispersed* asylum seekers does not affect voter turnout. When assessing whether these effects change systematically after 2010 – when the Conservative Party replaced Labour in government – we observe even larger electoral gains for the Conservatives, consistent with a genuine shift of voters' preferences to the right, rather than a retaliation against the incumbent government. Our estimates are robust across a range of model specifications and sensitivity checks. Further, we leverage an institutional feature of the British dispersal policy – which allows asylum claimants with existing networks in the UK and sufficient economic resources to opt out of the scheme – to show that the significant local impact on voting we observe for *dispersed* asylum seekers is absent for *non-dispersed* asylum seekers (instrumenting the latter with a standard migration network IV). The coexistence of these two different asylum regimes allows us to conclude that the electoral impact is driven by the group of claimants who are more spatially concentrated in public housing areas and attracts more media and political attention. To explore effects heterogeneity, we show that the political shift is particularly pronounced in areas hosting *dispersed* asylum seekers from Middle Eastern and North African countries and those who arrived without accompanying family members. Our findings for local elections are fully supported by evidence from other types of elections and alternative data sources on voting behaviour. In particular, we identify a shift in votes towards the Conservative Party in response to local exposure to asylum seekers across the five general elections held during the period we study. Additionally, longitudinal survey data on voting intentions confirm that residents in areas with greater presence of asylum seekers are more likely to switch their voting intentions towards the Conservative Party. Notably, this latter finding is obtained by combining our main IV strategy with individual fixed effects, identifying a causal impact on within-individual changes in political preferences. The electoral gain for UKIP caused by exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers is confirmed in national elections, but not in survey data. Finally, we observe heightened support for Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum in areas with higher exposure to asylum seekers.

To better understand the mechanisms underlying our main results, we explore demand- and supply-side evidence. First, we study whether local exposure to asylum seekers triggers more hostile views of immigrants among native citizens, using longitudinal survey data on economic, cultural and welfare-state-related concerns about immigration. We do not detect a statistically significant effect on average perceptions, while observing only a moderate decline in the most positive views on the cultural and welfare impacts of immigration. Second, we analyse the role of political supply using a unique dataset of all speeches delivered by Members of Parliament (MPs) in the British Parliament between 2004 and 2019. We identify migration-related speeches and link them to MPs' constituencies, creating a time-

varying measure of local migration salience. Our analysis shows that Conservative MPs from areas with higher exposure to asylum seekers are more likely to emphasize migration in their speeches. Notably, our findings for Conservative MP speeches closely mirror those for British citizens: we find effects only for *dispersed* asylum seekers, with no effect for *non-dispersed* asylum seekers, and we detect no change in speech content – measured by sentiment, pro-immigration stance, and universalism – which does not become systematically more hostile to immigrants and refugees. We interpret these results as evidence that heightened salience of asylum seekers in political debate generates shifts in voting behaviour, with the Conservative MPs particularly effective at channelling discontent. This role of salience also reconciles the clear and sizeable shift to the right in votes with the relatively modest increases in local exposure to asylum seekers and the lack of an effect on voters' attitudes – an otherwise puzzling pattern.

Our study contributes to the recent literature assessing the political consequences of hosting asylum seekers and refugees (Dustmann et al., 2019; Steinmayr, 2021; Hangartner et al., 2019; Rozo and Vargas, 2021; Campo et al., 2024; Gamalerio et al., 2023), which complements earlier research on the impact of non-refugee migration on natives' attitudes (see Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) for a review) and voting behaviour (Otto and Steinhardt, 2014; Barone et al., 2016; Halla et al., 2017; Edo et al., 2019; Tabellini, 2020; Mayda et al., 2022; Alrababah et al., 2024).[1] We advance and integrate this evidence in various directions.

Our first main contribution is to combine a comprehensive analysis of electoral outcomes – spanning local and national elections, a referendum, votes and turnout, aggregate and survey data – with an identification strategy that integrates and enhances previous approaches in the literature. In particular, we challenge the view that a dispersal policy, which, like ours, fully controls for the endogenous sorting of asylum seekers into local areas, would provide an exogenous source of identifying variation for studying the impact on local political outcomes. While such allocation schemes offer compelling quasi-experimental settings for analysing migrants' individual outcomes – such as labour market integration (Edin et al., 2003; Damm, 2009; Glitz, 2012) or participation in crime (Bell et al., 2013; Damm and Dustmann, 2014) – they may be unsuitable for studying natives' voting behaviour if political actors influence policy design and implementation. To address this concern, we combine the UK dispersal

[1]Migrants seeking humanitarian protection may generate a different impact on natives' attitudes compared to other types of migrants. On the one hand, they may find more acceptance because they are perceived as individuals who deserve to be hosted and helped. On the other hand, they may trigger a more negative response, as they are perceived as reliant on welfare, harder to employ, and arriving in large and sudden waves. The higher visibility of refugee flows relative to other migrant movements may also lead to a more negative impact of the former.

policy with an instrumental variable strategy – a first in this literature. Unlike previous approaches that rely on past residential choices of migrants – potentially problematic due to persistent effects interacting with current exposures (Jaeger et al., 2018) – our instrument exploits variations in public housing stock predetermined at the time the dispersal policy was introduced. Our IV approach shares similarities with the "group accommodation" strategy used in cross-sectional studies such as Steinmayr (2021) and Gamalerio et al. (2023), but we implement it within a panel framework that controls for time-invariant local unobservables through area fixed effects. Note that when we explore longitudinal data on voting intentions we further strengthen our identification strategy by conditioning on individual fixed-effects, which allows us to demonstrate that exogenous exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers leads to within-individuals changes in voting behaviour.

Our second key contribution is to provide the first causal analysis of the impact of exposure to asylum seekers on British citizens' votes and attitudes. We fill a somewhat surprising gap in a literature that has largely overlooked a major migration destination such as the United Kingdom, apart from unpublished work on the impact of Eastern migration on UKIP votes (Shamsi, 2024) and the arrival of undocumented migrants via "*small boats*" on citizens' attitudes (Bhatiya and Kadam, 2025). More developed is the analysis of the Brexit referendum, which has so far focused on the role of socio-economic determinants (Becker et al., 2017; Alabrese et al., 2019), austerity cuts (Fetzer, 2019) and exposure to trade (Colantone and Stanig, 2018), yet failed to uncover a correlation between exposure to immigration and the Leave vote (Becker et al., 2017; Colantone and Stanig, 2018). We contribute to this latter strand of evidence by showing that the presence of asylum seekers affects both turnout and voting outcomes at the Brexit referendum. Our contribution, however, extends well beyond the study of a new country. The UK setting enables us to investigate several causal mechanisms in the migration-politics nexus that have been not considered in the literature yet. First, the coexistence of two asylum regimes allows us to separate the effects of individuals who are exogenously allocated to *dispersal* areas from those who make their own residential choices. Our findings suggest that citizens do not uniformly react to the presence of asylum seekers: their resentment arises only toward asylum seekers allocated by the central government. Second, we can carefully analyse the interaction between local and central governments in managing asylum seekers and its electoral effects. We study both national and local elections over 15 years – during which the UK central government changed from Labour to Conservative – and are able to assess whether the dispersal policy was politically biased and whether the increased support for the Conservative Party reflects a genuine rightward shift of political preferences or rather a reaction against the central government. Third, exposure to asylum seekers remained relatively limited in the British setting, even during

the 2015-16 refugee crisis, implying that salience – rather than scale – likely determines the sizeable effects of local exposure to asylum seekers that we estimate. Our analysis of parliamentary speeches confirms this interpretation. By examining how MPs adjust their discourse in response to local exposure to asylum seekers, we highlight the role of the supply side in shaping the migration-politics nexus – an aspect that has received limited attention in the literature, with a few recent exceptions (Alrababah et al., 2024; Campo et al., 2024; Edo et al., 2025). Our analysis of salience speaks to an emerging and growing literature that explores politicians' speeches to characterize the political debate in various policy areas (Osnabrugge et al., 2021), including migration (Card et al., 2022; Bhatiya, 2024). Finally, the British case allows us to focus on the margin between the traditional right and the radical right, studying how far to the right British votes move in response to asylum seekers. We finds that voters clearly channel their discontent toward the mainstream Conservative Party – which strategically makes the issue salient – but also towards UKIP, although its electoral gains appear constrained by the majoritarian system.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 outlines the institutional context in the United Kingdom. Section 3 describes the data. Section 4 introduces the main estimating equation, illustrates key empirical challenges, and details our identification strategy. Section 5 presents the main empirical findings, and Section 6 discusses additional results. Section 7 explores the mechanisms underlying the observed effects. Finally, Section 8 provides concluding remarks.

2 Politics and Asylum Seekers in the UK

2.1 Local and National Politics in the UK

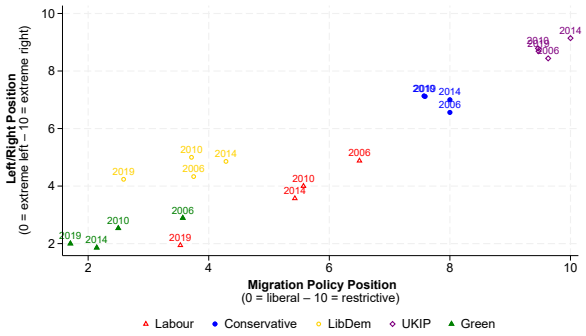
Main Parties and Political Stances on Migration. The UK has a plurality voting system and a multiple-party political landscape dominated by two parties – the Labour Party on the centre-left and the Conservative Party on the centre-right – which have alternated in power over the last century. During our study period (2004-2019), Labour held office until 2010, when a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition won the national elections. In 2015, the Conservatives secured a parliamentary majority and formed a single-party government.

Under Tony Blair's leadership, the Labour Party adopted a relatively liberal stance on economic migration – exemplified by the decision not to impose transitional restrictions on workers from New Member States after the 2004 EU enlargement – which it maintained also while in opposition. In contrast, the Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, intensively

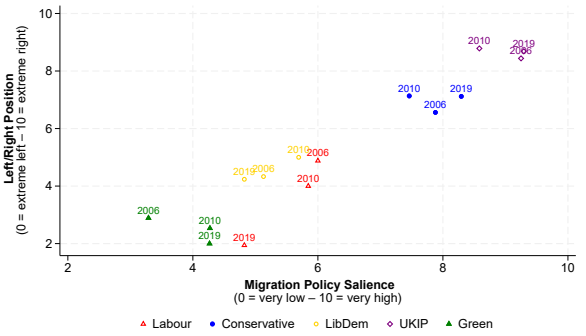
campaigned on reducing net migration to the UK, making immigration a central issue in the 2010 elections and a priority in their policy-making once in power. Beyond these two dominant parties, three others played a relevant role during the period we study. First, the Liberal Democrats consistently advocated for European integration and pro-immigration policies, but suffered electorally from participating in the coalition government with the Conservatives. Second, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) gained prominence with its anti-EU rhetoric, significantly shaping political discourse – particularly during the Brexit campaign, when its leader, Nigel Farage, portrayed the refugee crisis as a key threat to the UK. Finally, the Green Party maintained a progressive, pro-immigration stance throughout the period. The positioning of these five parties in the left-right ideological spectrum, as well as on migration policy issues, is illustrated in Figure 1, based on four waves of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey.[2] The Green party is consistently placed to the left of both Labour and the Liberal Democrats, which are ideologically close to each other. The Conservative Party appears further to the right, while the UKIP is clearly positioned in the far-right area. As expected, right-wing positioning strongly correlates with a more restrictive approach to migration (Figure 1a) and with greater emphasis on the issue (Figure 1b). Similarly, Appendix Figure OA.1 shows that right-wing parties express stronger opposition to multiculturalism and to a common EU asylum policy.

Figure 1: **Main British Parties: Ideological Stance and Migration Policy**

(a) Migration Policy Position



(b) Migration Policy Salience



Notes: The graphs display scatter plots of data from the 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). In both panels, the vertical axis reports the overall ideological stance of each party on a ten point scale (0 = Extreme left 5 = Center 10 = Extreme right). The horizontal axis reports parties' positions on migration policy (0 = strongly favors a liberal policy on immigration : 10 = strongly favors a restrictive policy on immigration) in Panel 1a and salience/importance of migration policy (0 = Not important at all 10 = Extremely important) in Panel 1b. The question on migration policy salience was not collected in 2014. Source: our elaboration on CHES data (variables: *LRGEN*, *IMMIGRATE_POLICY*, *IMMIGRATE_SALIENCE*).

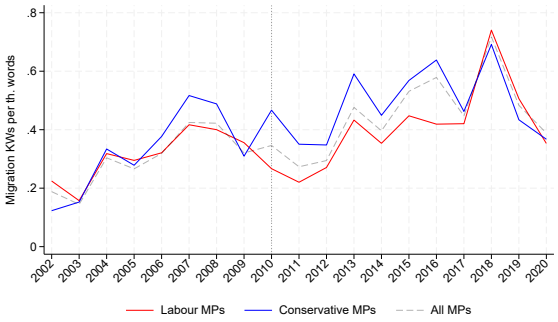
Using Eurobarometer data, Hatton (2017) shows that British respondents reported the highest levels of immigration salience in the European Union in nearly every year between

[2]The Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES) estimate party positioning on ideology and policy issues, and international relations for national parties in countries across the world. Website: https://www.chesdata.eu/.

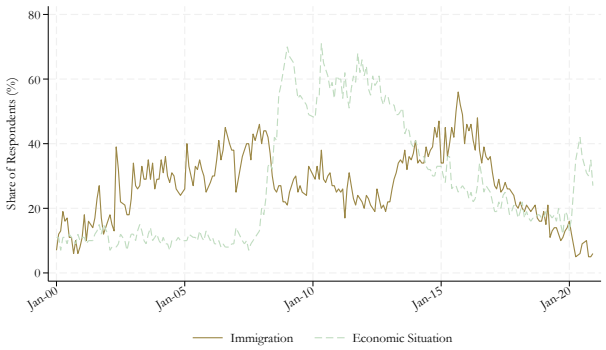
2003 and 2015. The salience of asylum seekers and migration and its increasing relevance in the British political discourse is illustrated in Figure 2, exploring alternative and higher-frequency data sources. Panel 2a tracks the occurrence of asylum- and migration-related topics in parliamentary speeches by Members of Parliament (see Section 7.2 for a detailed discussion of these data). The figure reveals a clear upward trend over the period considered and highlights the consistently greater emphasis placed on migration by the Conservative Party relative to the Labour Party.[3] Panel 2b displays the share of respondents indicating "immigration" (continuous line) as the most important issue facing Britain between 2000 and 2020, benchmarking it with the share of those indicating the "economic situation" (source: Ipsos Mori UK). The increase in salience of migration issue over the period considered is clearly visible in the graph, with the share of respondents focusing on immigration increasing from about 10-15% in the early 2000s, to over 40% in the following decade, and then displaying ample fluctuations linked to the Great Recession and the Brexit events.

Figure 2: **Salience of Migration Issues**

(a) **MP Speeches on Migration and Asylum Issues**



(b) **Main Issues Facing Britain Today?**



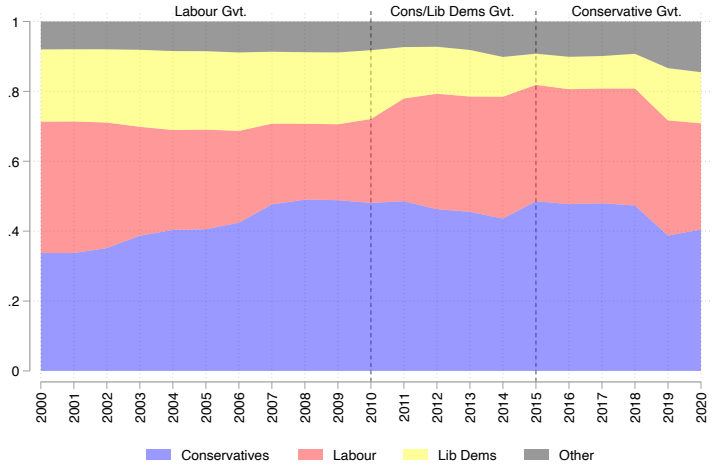
Notes: The Figure displays alternative measures of migration salience in the political and public debate in the UK. Panel 2a reports the average number of occurrences of asylum- and migration-related keywords in speeches at the British Parliament by all MPs (dashed line), Labour MPs (red line) and Conservative MPs (blue line). See Section 7.2 for a detailed description of these data. Panel 2b reports the share of respondents to the Ipsos Mori UK "Issues Index" survey (https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/important-issues-facing-britain) who reported "Immigration" (brown line) or the "Economic Situation" (green dotted line) as the most important issues facing Britain.

Local and National Elections. Local government in the United Kingdom is administered by Local Authorities (LAs) which manage a specific geographic area. Despite some institutional heterogeneity, LAs are generally responsible for delivering a broad range of public

[3]Survey evidence for the period 2011-2020 reveals a similar partisan divide among voters (see Appendix Figure OA.2): a majority of Conservative supporters identify migration and asylum as among the most pressing national issues, whereas respondents aligned with the Labour Party appear significantly less concerned with these topics (and their attitudes are remarkable similar to those of Lib-Dem supporters). To benchmark these responses, Appendix Figure OA.2 also presents the proportion of respondents who focus on the state of the British economy, which is the single issues most frequently mentioned by respondents in all survey waves.

services, including education, social services, transport, public housing, and waste collection. They are primarily funded through national government grants and transfers, although a significant share of their revenue comes from local taxation (Fouirnaies and Mutlu-Eren, 2015).[4] The main governing body of each LA is the local council, whose members are elected for four-year terms under a first-past-the-post system. LAs are subdivided into smaller electoral units called wards, each of which elects between one and three councillors. The total number of council seats in each LA varies with the size of its resident population. Local elections in the UK are typically held in May, but the timing and structure of electoral cycles differ across LAs: Some councils elect all members simultaneously every four years, while others follow staggered cycles in which a portion of council seats is contested every two or three years (Dipoppa and Grossman, 2020).[5]

Figure 3: **Party Composition of Local Councils (2000-2020)**



Notes: The figure plots the average party composition of local councils across the 281 LAs in our sample from 2000 to 2020. Dotted vertical lines indicate key national government transitions: from a Labour majority to a Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition following the 2010 general election, and then to a Conservative majority after the 2015 election.

The organization and functions of local government vary across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Our study focuses on England - which host approximately 86% of the British population - rather than the entire UK to ensure greater data consistency and main-

[4] In 2005/06, for instance, approximately 75% of LA budgets came from central government transfers, with the remaining 25% raised through local sources such as council tax, rents, and service charges (Adam et al., 2007).

[5] A few studies have examined local elections in the UK. Besley and Preston (2007) show that gerrymandering in favour of a given party leads that party to adopt policies benefiting its core supporters rather than swing voters. Lockwood and Porcelli (2013) demonstrate that introducing performance-based incentives for local governments improved service quality and increased local taxation. Fouirnaies and Mutlu-Eren (2015) find that politically aligned LAs receive greater transfers from central government. Gavazza et al. (2019) show that broadband internet penetration displaced higher-content traditional media, leading to reduced turnout and lower local expenditure and taxation.

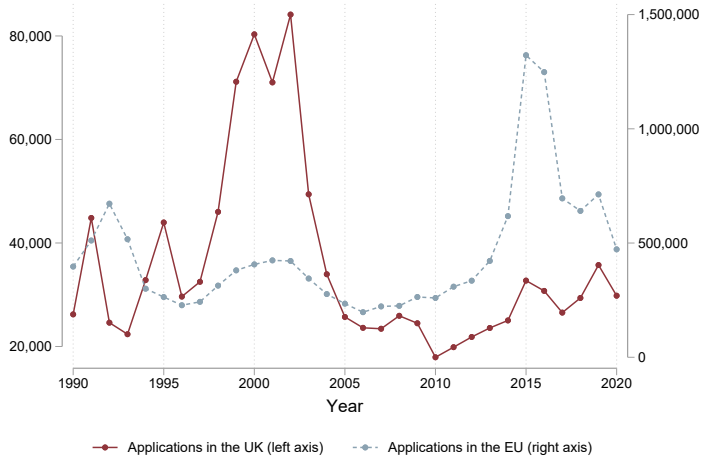
tain political comparability by avoiding regional political movements that are particularly influential in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Despite differences between local and national political agendas – often allowing room for single-issue parties and independent local lists – the vast majority of councillors in England (92% in our sample period) are affiliated with one of the three main national parties (Fouirnaies and Mutlu-Eren, 2015). Figure 3 illustrates the average party composition of local councils between 2000 and 2020. During the 2000–2010 period – under the Labour national government – local councils experienced a steady shift in composition in favour of the Conservative Party, with no notable change in the share of seats held by Liberal Democrat representatives. Following the formation of the first Conservative-led government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010, Labour's representation in local councils increased significantly, largely at the expense of the Liberal Democrats and, to a lesser extent, the Conservatives. Finally, towards the end of the second Conservative government and following the 2016 Brexit referendum, the Conservative Party experienced a decline in local representation. The core of our empirical analysis focuses on local elections for three main reasons. First, the dispersal policy is implemented at the local-authority (LA) level (see Section 2.2), making local electoral contests the natural setting in which to evaluate political responses. Second, data on *dispersed* asylum seekers are reported at the LA level, which corresponds to the administrative units where local elections are held. In contrast, general elections are organised by parliamentary constituencies, whose boundaries do not perfectly align with those of LAs. Third, local elections occur more frequently, allowing us to capture political shifts at a finer temporal scale. In addition to the local elections, however, we also consider voting outcomes from five general elections (held in 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019), voting intentions elicited in a large-scale longitudinal survey, and the 2016 Brexit Referendum.

2.2 Asylum Seekers and The Dispersal Policy

As Figure 4 shows, UK patterns of asylum applications over the period 1990-2020 often contrasts with broader EU trends. While applications in the UK remained relatively stable after 2005 – showing no major increase even during the 2015-16 period, when the rest of Europe was coping with the so-called European refugee crisis (Dustmann et al., 2017) – a sharp and idiosyncratic rise in claims is visible in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In response to this surge, and amid growing concerns over the perceived excessive generosity of the UK asylum system compared to other European countries, the Labour government enacted the Immigration and Asylum Act (IAA) in 1999. A key provision of the IAA was the introduction of a *dispersal policy* for asylum seekers – which is still in place today – aligning the UK with

other European countries that had already implemented similar schemes (Fasani et al., 2022).

Figure 4: **Asylum Applications in the UK and the EU (1990-2020)**



Notes: The figure reports the number of asylum applications submitted in the UK (left axis) and in the EU 27 (right axis) between 1990 and 2020. Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics, Eurostat.

According to the IAA, asylum seekers in the UK are entitled to a limited financial allowance (currently set at approximately £7 per day per person), free healthcare and access to education for their children. As in several other EU countries (Fasani et al., 2021), asylum seekers are prohibited from engaging in paid employment while awaiting a decision on their refugee status.[6] Asylum seekers who lack adequate accommodation and the economic means to obtain it, are also entitled to free public housing provided by the government. Upon applying for housing support, asylum seekers are initially placed in temporary accommodation centers across the UK for a few weeks. They are then assigned to a specific LA, which is responsible for placing them in available housing units until their refugee status is determined.[7] If granted refugee status, applicants must leave their assigned accommodation and can apply for social housing but are bound by a "local connection rule", which requires them to apply in the LA where they were *dispersed* and thus reinforces the persistence of their initial geographic allocation. In contrast, rejected asylum seekers with no remaining appeal rights are required to free the assigned accommodation and leave the UK.

Importantly for our empirical strategy, the UK dispersal policy denies asylum seekers

[6]Although the UK government aims to process asylum applications within six months, significant delays are common: between 2010 and 2017, an average of 45% of applicants waited more than six months for a decision, according to Home Office records. The employment ban lasts for 12 months, after which they may apply for a work permit; however, permission is not automatically granted and is restricted to occupations listed in the government's Shortage Occupation List.

[7]We discuss how LAs are designated as "dispersal areas", the bargaining process with the central government and its political economy when presenting our empirical strategy (see section 4.2) and, in more detail, in Appendix Section O.A.1.

any say in the choice of their destination, aiming to place them away from areas with high concentrations of foreign-born residents and into locations with available and affordable public housing. Officials in charge of the allocation are instructed: "*You must not have regard to the persons' preferences. The overriding principle when allocating accommodation is that it is offered on a no-choice basis and as a general rule is provided outside London and the South East and only in areas of the UK where the Home Office has a ready supply.*" (Home Office, 2016). These rules are also clearly communicated to applicants (Appendix Figure OA.3). While asylum seekers can opt out from government-assigned housing, doing so means forfeiting any housing support and surviving on the meagre benefit they receive. Consequently, only a relatively minor proportion – an average of 18.6% over the study period, with a declining trend – chooses to do so. In our empirical analysis, we refer to asylum seekers allocated to public housing by the government as "*dispersed*" and those who opted for a private accommodation in an area of their choice as "*non-dispersed*".

3 Data and Sample

3.1 Data Sources

Our analysis combines multiple datasets, each described below.

Elections and Survey Data. Records on local council election outcomes (2004-2019) are provided by the Elections Centre at University of Exeter (https://electionscentre.uk/). For each election, we collect party vote shares and turnout data.[8] To conduct placebo tests, we also gather data from elections preceding the reallocation policy. Additionally, we use General Election results at the parliamentary constituency level and Brexit referendum results, both sourced from the UK Parliament Website. Further, we analyse longitudinal individual-level data on UK voters' political attitudes and behaviour from the British Election Study (BES, https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/), a long-term panel survey initiated in 2014.

Asylum Seekers. We use administrative quarterly records from the Home Office's Immigration Statistics on the stock of *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* asylum seekers residing in each LA from 2004 to 2019. These series begin in late 2003, when the dispersal policy became fully operational, and report the stock at the end of each quarter. Since UK local elections are held in May, we focus on asylum seeker counts in the second quarter of each year. This choice allows us to capture changes in the number of resident asylum seekers occurring in the weeks immediately preceding election dates, which are potentially more salient to voters.

[8] Turnout data for local elections are provided by Local Government Inform (LG Inform) – an online UK government-funded platform for local data transparency (https://lginform.local.gov.uk) – and are available for the period 2004-2018.

The drawback is that it may also reflect changes taking place after the elections, thereby introducing some noise into our estimates. Using instead the stock at the end of the first quarter yields virtually identical results.

Other LA Controls. We collect LA time-varying characteristics (resident population, unemployment rate, etc.) from the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Public Housing. We retrieve data on public housing availability and quality from the Local Authority Housing Statistics (LAHS). We focus on two categories that identify low-quality public housing: (i) *Difficult to let dwellings*: properties frequently rejected even by applicants in urgent need, often due to poor conditions or undesirable characteristics; and (ii) *Undesirable dwellings*: clusters of at least 50 units with high refusal rates, frequent vacancies, high tenant turnover, or requiring special marketing efforts. These indicators form the basis of our instrumental variable strategy (see Section 4.3). Our main source for these records is the earliest available report, which captures housing characteristics as of April 2002. Additionally, we use information on vacant public housing, which is available since 1998.

MPs Speeches. We extract data from the universe of speeches delivered by MPs at the British Parliament between 2004 and 2019, amounting to more than 840,000 speeches after removing those shorter than ten words (stop words excluded). Speeches are provided by Commons Hansard (`https://hansard.parliament.uk/about`) and include proceedings in the Commons Chamber and Westminster Hall, as well as written ministerial statements, petitions and ministerial corrections (Odell, 2021). See Section 7.2 and Appendix Section O.A.2 for more information about these data.

3.2 Sample and Descriptive Statistics

We present descriptive statistics in Appendix Table A.1. Our sample includes 281 English LAs whose geographic boundaries remained stable over the 16-year study period and for which complete data on all relevant variables are available. These LAs represent nearly 90% of all LAs in England and account for 86% of its population. The first two panels of the table report vote shares at local and national elections for the two major political parties, Labour and Conservative. On average, the Conservative Party maintained a significant electoral advantage over the Labour Party at both the local and national level throughout the study period. The third panel shows that the LAs in our sample hosted, on average, 80 *dispersed* and 21 *non-dispersed* asylum seekers per year over the 2004-2019 period. The table also highlights substantial variation across LAs in the total number of asylum seekers hosted, ranging from zero to 2.8 thousand and 1.7 thousand for *dispersed* and *non-dispersed*

asylum seekers, respectively. Once normalized by 10,000 resident population, the average local exposure to *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* asylum seekers drop to approximately 3 and 1 (with a maximum of 59 and 74), respectively. These relatively modest figures suggest that, in the setting we are studying, electoral effects – if any – are unlikely to result from real impact that asylum seekers may produce on local community but rather by the salience of the issue in affected areas. We will extensively discuss this issue in our empirical analysis. Appendix Figure A.1a shows the geographic distribution of *dispersed* asylum seekers across the country, reporting the average share of *dispersed* asylum seekers per 10,000 residents in each English LA between 2004 and 2019. The map clearly show that placements are geographically concentrated in a limited subset of areas: almost 50% of the LAs in our sample were not assigned any *dispersed* asylum seeker over the period we consider. These LAs, however, are less densely populated than the *dispersal areas*, accounting for just about 30% of the total resident population. In our empirical analysis, we will discuss how LAs get designated as dispersal areas (Section 4.2) and, while conducting our empirical analysis on the full sample of LAs, we also report estimates in the robustness check which condition on (the likely endogenous) participation in the dispersal policy. For comparison, Appendix Figure A.1b presents the distribution of *non-dispersed* asylum seekers: once allowed to freely choose they residence, asylum claimants appear far more spread across the whole English territory and a substantially larger fraction of them select LAs in the South of England. Finally, the bottom panels of Appendix Table A.1 summarize some of the characteristics of the LAs (i.e. resident population, unemployment rate, real GDP p.c. and share of residents aged over 65) used in our empirical analysis, as well as information about public housing. The data reveal substantial variation in both the total number of public dwellings and the proportion of low-quality units, which ranges from 0 to 86%.

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Estimating Equation

We estimate the following equation:

$$Pol_{lt} = \beta AS_{lt} + \gamma X_{lt} + \tau_t + \phi_l + \epsilon_{lt}, \tag{1}$$

where: Pol_{lt} represents a political outcome in LA l in year t, AS_{lt} is the stock of asylum seekers (per thousand population) residing in LA l in year t, and X_{lt} is a vector of time-varying LA controls (i.e. total population, the share of residents aged over 65, GDP per capita, and the unemployment rate). The terms τ_t and ϕ_l denote year and LA fixed effects,

respectively. Standard errors are clustered at the LA level, and all observations are weighted by the LA resident population. The analysis covers the period from 2004 to 2019. Our main dependent variable is the gap in vote share at local elections between the Conservative and Labour parties, defined as the Conservative share minus the Labour share (hence, taking positive values when the Conservatives obtain a larger share). Using this measure as our primary outcome has two key advantages in our setting. First, under first-past-the-post with two dominant parties, it captures the politically consequential margin – that is, the reallocation of votes between the two principal competitors. Second, it provides a single, compact metric to estimate main effects, conduct robustness checks, and study heterogeneous impacts, while also facilitating comparisons between local and national elections. At the same time, the measure has limitations: it masks absolute movements in the two parties' vote shares – revealing only their relative performance – and is uninformative about shifts affecting third parties. We therefore complement the analysis with alternative outcomes – party-specific vote shares, the party composition of elected councillors, and turnout – which make these margins explicit.

4.2 Identification Issues, the Dispersal Policy and its Limitations

The parameter of interest β in equation (1) captures the effect of within-LA changes in local exposure to asylum seekers on residents' voting behaviour. However, two main endogeneity concerns prevent a causal identification of this coefficient using a fixed-effects panel regression. First, omitted variables may influence both the presence of asylum seekers and local voting outcomes. The inclusion of LA fixed effects accounts for any such time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity, while time-varying LA-level controls capture local demographic and socio-economic trends that may affect voting behaviour. In some specifications, we also include LA-specific linear trends to account for additional area-specific changes over time. However, conditioning on all these controls may only partially address unobserved time-varying confounders, which could still bias estimates of the parameter β. These unobserved dynamics also give rise to a second key identification challenge: reverse causality. If asylum seekers respond to perceived local hostility, they may avoid areas with rising xenophobic sentiment, thereby confounding the relationship between their presence and local political outcomes.

To the extent that it prevents asylum seekers from choosing their place of residence, the UK's dispersal policy appears *prima facie* well suited to addressing these identification threats. Its "no-choice" rule ensures that the allocation of *dispersed* asylum seekers is not driven by their personal preferences (see Section 2.2), ruling out concerns about endogenous

sorting into politically distinct local areas. Measuring local exposure to asylum seekers with the number of those *dispersed* in each LA – as we do throughout our empirical analysis – is thus a strong element of our identification strategy. This feature, however, does not preclude potentially endogenous decisions made by national and local governments which are responsible for designing and implementing the policy. These actors may influence the allocation of asylum seekers on the basis of political considerations or other factors correlated with local political outcomes. In particular, the implementation of the dispersal policy in the UK involves a bargaining process between central and local governments. LAs may receive fiscal benefits for voluntarily housing asylum claimants, but the negotiation takes place under the implicit threat of unilateral allocation decisions by the central government. A key tension in this process arises from the central government's strategic calculus. On the one hand, the potential electoral costs of hosting asylum seekers may create incentives to direct them towards non-aligned areas. On the other hand, aligned local councils may be more willing to cooperate with the central authority, facilitating the dispersal of asylum seekers in those areas. The possibility that the central government and LAs are "playing politics" in the allocation process is a recurrent theme in the political and media debate in the UK (see Appendix Figure OA.4). In Appendix Section O.A.1, we discuss evidence of political considerations shaping the UK dispersal policy, as well as the broader political economy of the process. Our empirical assessment reveals a clear pattern. First, LAs ruled by the Labour Party when the dispersal policy was introduced (by a Labour government; see section 2.2) were far more likely to receive *dispersed* asylum seekers than those controlled by the Conservative Party (see Appendix Figure OA.5). Second, the disproportionate allocation of asylum seekers to LAs initially controlled by the Labour Party was persistent over time, irrespective of changes in the central government (see Appendix Figure OA.6). Since the allocation is not orthogonal to the political positioning of local governments at the beginning of the period we observe, differences in unobservable political trends between Labour- and Conservative-led LAs prevent the identification of a causal impact by exclusively relying on the dispersal policy. To address this concern, we develop a novel instrumental variable strategy.

4.3 IV Strategy: Predetermined Quality of Public Housing

The rationale behind the instrument we propose is to exploit predetermined, supply-side features of the public housing stock as an exogenous determinant of LA participation in the dispersal policy. More specifically, our instrument predicts that LAs with a relatively poorer

stock of public housing would be assigned more asylum seekers.[9] Specifically, we construct our instrument as the product of the pre-dispersal policy share of low-quality local public housing – measured as the ratio of substandard public housing dwellings to total public units in each LA in 2002 – and the national stock of asylum seekers (*dispersed* and *non-dispersed*) with pending applications (measured in the second quarter of each year, as our local exposure variable; see Section 3):

$$\text{Low Quality IV}_{lt} = \frac{\text{Low quality public dwelling}_{l,2002}}{\text{Total public dwelling}_{l,2002}} * \text{Total AS}_{t} \tag{2}$$

In the UK setting, political discretion of both central and local governments in deciding on asylum seekers' allocation is constrained by the availability of suitable public housing for several reasons. Firstly, the presence of vacant public dwellings directly affects LA's capacity to accommodate new arrivals. Second, a larger inventory of unoccupied public housing reduces the political cost of hosting asylum seekers – by limiting competition with natives – and increases the economic incentives for LAs to lease these properties to the central government rather than leave them unused. Further, for LAs reluctant to participate in the policy, holding a substantial volume of vacant public housing may also heighten the risk of being compelled to do so, given the central government's power to unilaterally designate "reception zones" for asylum seekers (Appendix Section O.A.1). If local vacancy rate of public dwellings seems a good predictor of the allocation of *dispersed* asylum seekers – as shown in Appendix Figure OA.7a – its exogeneity is questionable. Vacancy rates are determined by the interaction of housing supply, its characteristics, and local demand. The latter one may be endogenous in our setting, as local economic factors affecting demand – such as poverty, unemployment, or industrial decline – may also shape attitudes and political views. To address this concern, our instrument is designed to isolate the supply-side drivers of vacancy rates that were predetermined at the onset of the policy. Specifically, low-quality or deteriorated public housing is more likely to remain vacant, as it tends to be less attractive to prospective tenants (as shown in Appendix Figure OA.7b). The presence of low-quality public housing can thus predict the allocation of *dispersed* asylum seekers, as graphically illustrated for both the pre-2010 and the post-2010 periods in Appendix Figures OA.7c and OA.7d. By relying on predetermined housing conditions, our instrument avoids potential endogeneity arising from LAs' reactive decisions – such as expanding capacity through new

[9]The widespread utilization of severely substandard public housing to host *dispersed* asylum seekers has been recently and openly admitted by the Home Affairs Committee – a cross-party committee of MPs responsible for scrutinising the work of the Home Office and its associated bodies – in a 2018 report which argued that the government is "*failing asylum seekers housed in degrading accommodation*" (link: https://committees.parliament.uk/work/3161/asylum-accommodation-inquiry/news/100572/government-failing-asylum-seekers-housed-in-degrading-accommodation/).

acquisitions or construction – in response to the dispersal policy.[10] The rationale of our instrument is illustrated in the Directed Acyclic Graph in Appendix Figure OA.8. Our preferred definition of the instrument combines the indicators *difficult to let* and *undesirable dwellings* (see data Section 3) to construct the share of poor-quality public housing. In our empirical analysis, we demonstrate that each of these two measures individually predicts the allocation of *dispersed* asylum seekers (Figure 5a) and test the robustness of both our FS and 2SLS estimates to alternative definitions and construction of our instrument (see Section 5.3). Furthermore, we estimate a placebo first stage to show that the quality of public housing does not predict the allocation of *non-dispersed* asylum seekers (Figure 5b).

Our instrument is a specific case of a *shift-share instrument*, comprising a single aggregate shift (i.e. the national inflow of asylum seekers) and an exogenous baseline exposure to that shift (i.e. the local share of low-quality public housing), as discussed in Borusyak et al. (2025).[11] The *exclusion restriction* for our instrument requires pre-determined public housing quality to be uncorrelated with subsequent political trends, conditional on LA fixed effects and time-varying LA controls.[12] To empirically assess the plausibility of this assumption, we report balance tests in Appendix Table A.2, examining the cross-sectional correlation between public housing characteristics and political preferences at baseline. In columns 1-4, the dependent variable is the share of low-quality public housing in each LA in 2002, while columns 5-8 and 9-12 separately consider the two sub-components of our instrument (*undesirable* and *difficult-to-let* dwellings). The controls for baseline political preferences are dummy variables equal to one if the LA in 2002 was governed by a Conservative (*Cons. Maj (2002)*), Labour (*Lab. Maj (2002)*), or Liberal Democrats (*LD. Maj (2002)*) majority. The omitted variable is *NOC* ("No Overall Control"), which occurs in more than a third of the cases. While we observe some significant unconditional correlations between political majority of the local government and the share of low-quality public dwellings in 2002 (Cols. 1, 5 and 9), their magnitude shrinks when regional fixed effects are included (Cols. 2, 6, and

[10] While our main instrument relies on measures of public housing quality collected in 2002 – which is the first year in which those records are available – we report alternative estimates using public housing vacancy rates measured in 1998 in the robustness checks (see Section 5.3).

[11] The *shift component* of our instrument is defined as the total annual number of asylum seekers – comprising both *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* claimants – in order to ensure exogeneity with respect to potentially endogenous decisions to opt out of the policy. As a robustness check, however, we also construct an alternative IV based solely on the total number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (see Section 5.3).

[12] The UK's public housing stock reflects two historical developments: (i) four decades of post-WWII construction that expanded social housing to about one-third of the total stock by the early 1980s, and (ii) the 1980 Right-to-Buy (RtB) policy, which sold off the most desirable units and raised home-ownership by about 10 percentage points by the late 1990s (Disney et al., 2023). Since the early 2000s, the stock has been stable. The initial distribution of social housing – at least in London –has been linked to WWII bombing patterns (Dericks and Koster, 2021), while the local intensity of RtB sales was orthogonal to Conservative vote shares in 1980 (Disney et al., 2023).

10), and even more so when we condition on LA controls (Cols. 3-4, 6-7, and 11-12). In these latter specifications, the correlations are both statistically and economically negligible. This lack of correlation strongly supports the validity of the *exclusion restriction* underpinning our instrumental variable strategy.

5 Main Results: Local Government Elections

5.1 First-Stage Estimates

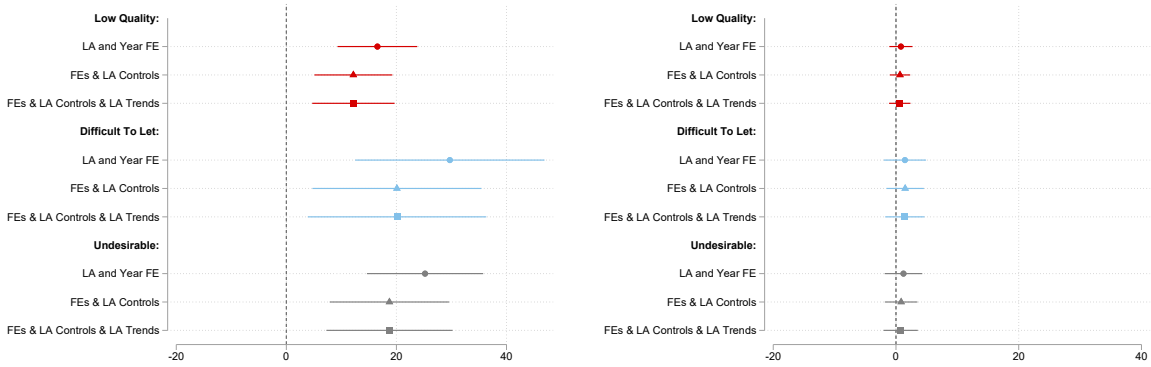
In the first-stage regressions, we regress the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita – standardised using the within-LA standard deviation (equivalent to 3 asylum seekers per 10,000 residents) – on our proposed instrument (*Low Quality*). We progressively include LA and year fixed effects, LA-level controls (resident population, the share of residents aged 65 and over, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita) and LA-specific linear trends. Estimated coefficients from these three specifications, with 95% confidence intervals, are reported in Figure 5a (red markers). The graph clearly demonstrates that our proposed instrument is a strong predictor of the allocation of *dispersed* asylum seekers. These estimated coefficients – all positive and significant at the 1% confidence level – are also reported in Panel B of Table 1, together with the corresponding F-statistics. Across specifications, the inclusion of LA controls reduces both the estimated coefficient and the F-statistic (from 20.2 to 11.4), while the addition of LA linear trends has negligible effects. Throughout our empirical analysis, we will thus consider the second specification – conditioning on year and LA fixed effects and the full set of LA controls – as our main specification. As expected from the discussion in Section 4.3, the positive first-stage coefficients imply that LAs with larger shares of low-quality public housing in the pre-dispersal policy period, are systematically assigned more asylum seekers when the national inflow of claimants increases during the period 2004-2019. Our empirical approach employs a just-identified IV estimator with a single endogenous variable: in this setting, consistency between the sign of the first-stage coefficient and the theoretical rationale for the instrument helps mitigate concerns about finite-sample bias in the IV estimates (Angrist and Kolesar, 2024). Figure 5a further reports first-stage coefficients from specifications using the two sub-components of our main instrument: the *Difficult to let* IV (blue markers) and the *Undesirable Dwellings* IV (grey markers). Both instruments individually predict the allocation of *dispersed* asylum seekers across LAs.

Figure 5b reports estimated coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) for a set of placebo first-stage regressions that attempt to predict *non-dispersed* asylum seekers using the same set of instruments (*Low Quality*, *Difficult to let* and *Undesirable Dwellings*). Since this

Figure 5: **First-Stage Regressions**

(a) **Main FS:** ***Dispersed*** **Asylum Seekers**

(b) **Placebo FS:** ***Non-Dispersed*** **Asylum Seekers**



Notes: The graph reports estimated coefficients (with 95% confidence intervals) on alternative instrumental variables – *Low Quality* (red), *Difficult to let* (blue) and *Undesirable Dwellings* (gray) – from first stage regressions in which the outcome is the (standardised) number of *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* asylum seekers per capita (panels 5a and 5b, respectively). For each instrument, we report estimates from three alternative specifications which progressively include LA and year fixed effects, LA-level controls (resident population, the share of residents aged 65 and over, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita) and LA-specific linear trends. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Sample: 2,775 observations. Regressions are weighted by LA population. Standard errors are clustered at the LA level.

group of asylum seekers does not receive publicly provided accommodation, there is no reason to expect their residential distribution to be correlated with public housing quality. Consistent with this expectation, the estimated coefficients are close to zero and statistically insignificant across all specifications. This placebo test has two important implications for our empirical analysis. First, it indicates that the instrument is not capturing some general unobserved characteristic of LAs that might make them particularly attractive to foreign nationals, which could otherwise bias our estimates through correlation with unobserved political trends. Second, the lack of correlation between our instrument and the number of *non-dispersed* asylum seekers implies that our IV approach successfully isolates the effects of *dispersed* asylum seekers, ensuring that the presence of other foreign citizens does not confound our analysis of the political consequences of the dispersal policy.[13]

5.2 Vote Shares and Elected Councillors

Vote Shares. Panel A of Table 1 reports 2SLS estimates of our main estimating equation (1). The outcome variable is the vote share difference between the Conservative and the Labour Party in local elections and we instrument the local share of *dispersed* asylum seekers with the *Low Quality* IV (see equation (2)). We first condition on LA and year fixed effects (Col. 1), and we then add time-varying LA-level controls (Col. 2) and LA-specific linear time

[13]We return to the distinction between *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* asylum seekers in Section 5.4, where we separately estimate the impact of the two groups on local electoral outcomes, instrumenting the latter one with a standard migrant network instrument.

trends (Col. 3). Across all specifications, the estimated effects are positive and statistically significant, implying a clear relative gain for the Conservative Party from the allocation of asylum seekers in the area. Our preferred specification in Column 2 indicates that a one-within-LA standard deviation increase in the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers leads to a 3.1 percentage point increase in the gap between Conservative and Labour vote shares in local elections. The estimated effects are consistent across specifications, ranging from 2.6 to 3.1 percentage points. This is a sizeable effect relative to an average difference of approximately 11.5 percentage points observed during our sample period.[14]

Table 1: **Local Elections: Cons.-Lab. Vote Share Gap (2SLS and FS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Cons-Lab Vote Share Gap		
	Panel A - 2SLS Estimates		
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.026***	0.031***	0.030**
	(0.007)	(0.011)	(0.012)
	Panel B - First-Stage Estimates		
Low Quality IV	16.546***	12.179***	12.185***
	(3.681)	(3.599)	(3.803)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	-	Y	Y
LA Linear Trend	-	-	Y
Mean DV	.115	.115	.115
FS F-stat	20.2	11.45	10.26

Notes: Panel A reports 2SLS estimates from regressing the vote-share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in local elections on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"). This latter variable – measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as in equation (2). First-stage estimates are shown in Panel B. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

We next empirically explore these findings along two main directions. First, we examine the interplay between local and national politics by assessing whether the effect identified

[14]Corresponding OLS estimates are reported in Appendix Table OA.1. These results likewise indicate that greater local exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers is associated with a relative electoral gain for the Conservatives over Labour. However, the effect is substantially smaller – and only marginally significant in the first specification – than in the 2SLS estimates. This attenuation suggests that asylum seekers were disproportionately allocated to areas where unobserved political trends were less adverse to Labour, and/or less favourable to Conservatives, relative to their national trends (see Figure 3). This interpretation is consistent with the evidence discussed in Section 4.2 showing that localities receiving more asylum seekers were initially Labour strongholds. Moreover, Labour-led local authorities may also have exhibited relatively less hostile trends in attitudes towards foreign citizens than other areas, as argued by Steinmayr (2021), who reports OLS coefficients that substantially underestimate the causal effect of refugee exposure on natives' voting behaviour.

in Table 1 over the full sample period (2004-2019) changes systematically once the Labour Party left central government in 2010. If voters' behaviour in local elections partly reflects an intention to punish the national government responsible for implementing the allocation of asylum seekers, we would expect to observe losses for Labour and corresponding gains for the Conservatives before 2010, with a possible reversal thereafter. By contrast, a genuine rightward shift in response to local exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers should persist beyond 2010. To test this conjecture, we modify our baseline specification by including the asylum share and its interaction with a post-2010 indicator, instrumenting the former with our main instrument and the latter with the interaction between the instrument and the post-2010 indicator. Second, to better understand how these dynamics play out across the political spectrum, we report estimates for the impact of *dispersed* asylum seekers on vote shares for each of the five main parties (Labour, Conservative, Lib-Dem, Green, UKIP) and for a residual "other" category. In this case, the interaction term with the post-2010 period allows us to trace more precisely the effects of local exposure to asylum seekers on each party before and after the change in majority at Westminster.

Estimates are reported in Table 2.[15] Column 1 shows that the effect of exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers on the Conservative-Labour vote share gap does not change systematically after the Conservatives won the national elections: the coefficient on the interaction term is close to zero and not statistically significant. This suggests that voters are not strategically punishing the party in central government for administering the dispersal scheme; rather, they continue to respond to the policy by reducing support for Labour and increasing support for the Conservatives. Columns 2 and 3 confirm this pattern: Labour's vote share declines over the full sample period (-2.5 p.p., a 10.2% fall relative to its average of 26.5%), while the Conservatives gain votes before 2010 and even more thereafter (roughly 0.6 p.p. pre-2010 and 1 p.p. post-2010), consistent with a persistent rightward shift in voting preferences. Since the Conservative Party does not entirely absorb the Labour's loss, the following columns in Table 2 document how vote shares are reallocated across the rest of the party system. The Liberal Democrats do not gain before 2010 and experience a statistically significant decline thereafter (col. 4). By contrast, the Green Party and UKIP both experience substantial increases in their vote shares over the sample period, with the effect for UKIP doubling after 2010 (cols. 5 and 6). Finally, we estimate no significant effect on the residual "other" category (col. 7). Clearly, this pattern in our estimates does not imply that all voters who stopped supporting Labour necessarily switched to other parties. While some

[15]OLS estimates are reported in Appendix Table OA.2 – as well as in Appendix Table OA.3 for the 2SLS estimates presented in Table 3 below. In all cases, OLS estimates indicate smaller negative impacts on Labour and smaller gains for the Conservatives (and other parties) than the corresponding 2SLS estimates, as discussed in footnote 14.

realignment towards ideologically proximate options – such as the Green Party (see Figure 1) – is consistent with the results, the evidence is equally compatible with a combination of disgruntled Labour voters choosing to abstain and other voters – possibly, those sympathetic to UKIP – being mobilised to vote in response to the arrival of *dispersed* asylum seekers. To shed some light on this issue, in column 8 of Table 2 we consider the effect on electoral turnover and we fail to detect any significant effect of local exposure on this outcome. This latter finding suggests that the changes in vote share we observe may reflect reallocations of votes across parties rather than shifts in the composition of participants, although offsetting inflows into and outflows from abstention of similar magnitude cannot be ruled out.[16]

In discussing results for the Green Party and UKIP, we need to account for the fact that these two parties do not stand in all LA-election years. In Table 2, we code vote shares as zero whenever a party does not participate, so the estimates combine the extensive margin (entry) and the intensive margin (support conditional on entry). Note that we consider only the five main parties, each of which receives a strictly positive vote share whenever it stands. In Appendix Table OA.4, we instead drop LA-election years in which the party does not run for election, thereby identifying the intensive margin. For the three major parties (Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats), which contest almost all elections, results are unchanged across approaches (Cols. 1-3). For the Green Party and UKIP, the conditional sample is smaller, so we estimate the two margins separately: (i) a vote-share equation conditional on entry, and (ii) a participation equation estimated as an LPM using the same IV. For the Green Party, despite a reduction of over 600 observations, the conditional vote-share effect is virtually unchanged (Col. 4), and the participation estimates are tiny and statistically insignificant (Col. 6). For UKIP, neither margin is individually significant, but the point estimates are positive and non-negligible (Cols. 5 and 7), suggesting that local exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers increases both UKIP's participation in local elections and its support. Taken together, these estimates align with the overall positive and statistically significant effects reported in Table 2 (Col. 6).

Shares of Elected Councillors. After discussing the effects of the dispersal policy on party vote shares, we next examine how these shifts affected the composition of local councils. While vote shares capture the direct behavioural response of residents, changes in council composition reveal the political consequences of these shifts. LAs in England are divided into wards, each represented by one or more councillors elected under a first-past-the-post system (see Section 2.1). As a result, changes in vote shares do not translate mechanically

[16] We return to these two margins of response to exposure to asylum seekers – see Moriconi et al. (2022) for a formal discussion – in Section 6.2, where we analyse longitudinal data on voting intentions.

Table 2: **Local Elections: Vote Shares and Turnout – Pre- and Post-2010 (2SLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
				Vote Shares:				**Turnout**
	Cons.-Lab. Gap	**Labour**	**Conserv.**	**Lib-Dem**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Other**	
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.031***	-0.025***	0.006**	0.002	0.007**	0.006*	0.004	0.004
	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.003)	(0.007)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.003)
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD) × Post 2010	0.001	0.004	0.004**	-0.012***	0.001	0.006**	-0.003	-0.002
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.001)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,541
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.115	.265	.38	.179	.041	.058	.078	.425
FS F-stat	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.61
FS F-stat inter.	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.2	20.95

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing various local election outcomes – the Conservative-Labour vote share gap (Col. 1), individual party shares (Cols. 2-7) and voter turnout (Col. 8) – on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"), both alone and interacted with a post-2010 dummy variable. The variable "*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)" – measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV", constructed as in equation (2). An interaction of the instrumental variable with the post-2010 dummy is also included in the first stage regressions. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019 (2004-2018 for turnout; see footnote 8). The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

into seat allocations. The impact depends on the spatial distribution of votes: losses in safe wards have little effect, whereas small declines in marginal wards can produce disproportionately large changes in council composition. Table 3 reports 2SLS estimates of the effect of *dispersed* asylum seekers on the share of councillors elected from each party, using our preferred specification and including the interaction between *dispersed* asylum seekers and the post-2010 indicator as in Table 2. The results confirm and amplify the patterns observed for the two major parties: increased exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers significantly reduces Labour's share of elected councillors, while benefiting the Conservative Party. The magnitude is substantial: a one-within-LA standard deviation increase in *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita is associated with a 5.4 percentage point decline in Labour's seat share, alongside a gain of 2.5 percentage points for the Conservatives. Notably, these effects do not systematically change after 2010. As for the other parties, we observe a significant increase in seats for the Liberal Democrats in the pre-2010 period, which is close to zero thereafter; effects for the Green Party are not statistically significant, while there is a marginally significant positive impact on UKIP's elected councillors. These latter findings likely reflect the electoral system: despite gaining more electoral support, smaller parties may obtain little political representation under first-past-the-post.

Table 3: **Local Elections: Share of Elected Councillors, by Party – Pre- and Post-2010 (2SLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Share of Elected Councillors:					
	Labour	**Conserv.**	**Lib-Dem**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Other**
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	-0.054***	0.025***	0.022*	0.003	0.005*	0.000
	(0.018)	(0.009)	(0.013)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD) × Post 2010	0.012	0.009	-0.021***	0.001	0.001	-0.001
	(0.010)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.291	.475	.154	.01	.012	.059
FS F-stat	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.93	8.93
FS F-stat inter.	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.2	24.2

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing party shares of elected councillors in local elections on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"), both alone and interacted with a post-2010 dummy variable. The "*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)" variable – measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV", constructed as in equation (2). An interaction of the instrumental variable with the post-2010 dummy is also included in the first stage regressions. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5.3 Robustness Checks

In this section, we present a series of robustness checks on our main results for local elections, varying the construction of the instrumental variable and of the local exposure measure, performing a placebo test on the pre-dispersal policy period, and applying a range of geographical and temporal restrictions to the sample.

Unpacking Our Main IV. We first disaggregate our main IV into its two components – *difficult-to-let* and *undesirable* dwellings (both measured in 2002) – and report the corresponding first-stage and 2SLS estimates in Appendix Table OA.5. Estimates obtained from our main instrument are shown in Column (1) for reference. We then instrument *dispersed* asylum seekers using only one housing quality indicator at a time: the share of *difficult-to-let* dwellings (Col. 2) and the share of *undesirable* dwellings (Col. 3), each divided by the total number of public dwellings in the LA. Each variant of the instrument exhibits a strong first-stage relationship, while the second-stage estimates remain remarkable stable across specifications. In Column 4, we include both components simultaneously, resulting in an over-identified model, and we report the p-value from a Sargan-Hansen test of over-identifying restrictions. The high p-value indicates that we cannot reject the null hypothesis of joint instrument validity.

Alternative IVs and Measures of Local Exposure. In Appendix Table OA.6, we further test the robustness of our results using alternative measures of local exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers and alternative instrument definitions. Instead of the per capita standardised measure ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)") used in the previous tables, the main independent variable is the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (in thousands; "*Dispersed* AS (1'000)") in Columns (1)–(4), and the non-standardised per capita measure ("*Dispersed* AS p.c.") in Columns (5)–(8). For both measures, we first report first-stage and 2SLS estimates using our main IV (Cols. 1 and 5). We then vary the *share-component* of our instrument: first, by using local low-quality dwellings as a share of national low-quality dwellings, rather than of local public housing (Cols. 2 and 6); and, second, by replacing the 2002 share of low-quality dwellings with the 1998 share of vacant dwellings (Cols. 3 and 7). While potentially more vulnerable to endogeneity – as we argue in Section 4.3 – the records on vacant LA public housing are available for a longer period of time, enabling us to shift the baseline year further back in time, where the variation may plausibly be more exogenous. Finally, we vary the *shift-component* of our IV exclusively using the national number of *dispersed* asylum seekers rather than the sum of *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* ones. Remarkably, all these variations deliver similarly strong first-stage and second-stage estimates.

Placebo Test Using Pre-Dispersal Policy Years. To rule out the possibility that our instrument correlates with pre-existing trends in local political preferences, we perform a placebo test using data on local elections before the dispersal policy's announcement and implementation. Because records on the geographical distribution of asylum seekers are unavailable for the pre-policy period, we estimate reduced-form regressions of our main outcome – the Conservative-Labour vote share gap – on the *low-quality* instrument, separately for the pre-policy (1990-2001) and post-policy (2004-2019) periods. The instrument for the pre-policy period is constructed by interacting the time-invariant share of low-quality public dwellings in each LA (measured in 2002) with the annual national number of asylum seekers, as in the post-policy period. Results in Appendix Table OA.7 confirm that the instrument predicts electoral outcomes only *after* the policy's introduction: estimates for the pre-policy period are near zero and statistically insignificant (Col. 1), but positive and significant thereafter (Col. 2).

Sample Restrictions. Finally, Appendix Table OA.8 assesses the robustness of our main estimates under alternative sample restrictions. Column (1) excludes the London and South East regions, which were formally exempt from the dispersal policy – although, notably,

our data indicate that a non-trivial number of asylum seekers were nevertheless allocated to these areas. Column (2) drops the post-2015 period, thereby excluding years characterized by heightened political attention to asylum and immigration, including the 2015 European refugee crisis and the 2016 Brexit referendum. Column (3) restricts the sample to LAs that hosted asylum seekers at least once during the study period, excluding those that never received *dispersed* individuals (see Section 3 and Appendix Figure A.1). Across all specifications, our results remain stable, confirming that the main findings are not driven by regional idiosyncrasies, politically charged periods, or non-participating LAs.

5.4 Heterogeneous Effects

***Dispersed* and *Non-Dispersed* Asylum Seekers.** While our main analysis focuses on the political impact of *dispersed* asylum seekers, this section investigates whether *non-dispersed* asylum seekers also influence voting behaviour in host communities. Unlike the former, members of this latter group choose their LA of residence autonomously, making their location potentially endogenous (see Section 2.2 and Appendix Figure A.1). As shown in Figure 5b, our instrument for *dispersed* asylum seekers has no predictive power for the residential choices of *non-dispersed* ones. We therefore construct a separate, standard shift-share instrument for this group, based on historical settlement patterns of migrants from the same origin countries (Card, 2001).[17] Table 4 presents 2SLS estimates for both groups – each instrumented separately – on the Conservative-Labour vote share gap. The estimates for *dispersed* asylum seekers are closely aligned with those reported in Table 1, whereas the coefficients on *non-dispersed* asylum seekers are consistently small and statistically insignificant. This indicates that *non-dispersed* asylum seekers have no discernible impact on local political outcomes. A plausible explanation is that they are less visible to the public – since they live in private accommodations rather than in concentrated public housing – and may

[17]More precisely, we calculate the share of all UK residents born in each world geographical area who lived in each LA in 2001. For each LA, we then multiply the total yearly inflow of *non-dispersed* AS from that area by the corresponding 2001 share to obtain the predicted number of *non-dispersed* AS from that geographical area settling in the LA. Summing across all areas gives the total predicted number of *non-dispersed* AS in each LA. In other words, our instrument estimates how many *non-dispersed* AS would have moved to each LA if their location choices had mirrored the pre-existing distribution of residents from the same birthplace observed in 2001. We use the same geographical area aggregation as defined in the 2001 Census, which identifies the most represented nationalities individually and groups less represented ones into broader categories. The geographical areas are the following: EU countries, Rest of Europe, North Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Other Central and Western Africa, Kenya, Somalia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Other South and Eastern Africa, Iran, Iraq, Other Middle East, China, Hong Kong, Other Eastern Asia, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Other Southern Asia, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Other South-East Asia, All Central American countries, All South American countries, Jamaica Other, Caribbean, Australia and New Zealand, and Other Australasia.

be relatively better off, thereby attracting far less attention and concern in the local public debate. We return to this issue in Section 7.2 when analysing the impact of *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* asylum seekers on migration salience in political discourse. Crucially, including *non-dispersed* asylum seekers in the model does not alter the estimates for the *dispersed* ones, reinforcing the validity of our focus on the latter group.

Table 4: **Local Elections: Cons.-Lab. Vote Share Gap – *Dispersed* and *Non-Dispersed* Asylum Seekers (2SLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Cons-Lab Vote Share Gap		
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.026***	0.031***	0.030**
	(0.007)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Non-Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.006	-0.004	-0.004
	(0.008)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	-	Y	Y
LA Linear Trend	-	-	Y
Mean DV	.115	.115	.115
FS F-stat Disp.	15.93	9.77	8.75
FS F-stat Non-Disp.	45.63	37.03	33.04

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing the vote-share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in local elections on the number of *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA. Both these variables are measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. *Dispersed* asylum seekers are instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as in equation (2), while *non-dispersed* asylum seekers with a shift-share IV based on historical settlement patterns of migrants by country of origin (see footnote 17). All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Asylum Seekers' Characteristics. In this section, we examine whether the characteristics of *dispersed* asylum seekers – namely, area of origin and application type (single vs. family) – influence their impact on host communities' voting behaviour. We group asylum seekers into three broad regions: Middle East and North Africa (26% of all *dispersed* asylum seekers), Sub-Saharan Africa (33%), and all other regions (41%). We also distinguish between single and family applications, with single individuals accounting for 28% of all applicants. Estimation results are reported in Appendix Figure A.2. As explained in the figure notes, data limitations prevent us from estimating 2SLS coefficients; we therefore present reduced-form estimates obtained by regressing the Conservative-Labour vote share gap directly on our main *Low Quality* instrument. The results indicate that the shift in political preferences towards the Conservative Party observed in earlier tables is driven primarily by asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa (left panel) and by single applicants

(right panel).[18]

6 Further Results: National Elections, Longitudinal Survey Data, and the Brexit Referendum

Our main empirical analysis of local elections shows that the allocation of asylum seekers to LAs leads to a shift in both vote shares and council seats from the Labour to the Conservative Party. In this section, we examine whether similar patterns can be observed also in other sources of data on voting behaviour: national elections (Section 6.1), longitudinal data on voting intentions (Section 6.2) and the Brexit referendum (Section 6.3).

6.1 National Elections

Table 5 explores whether the shift in electoral preferences observed at the local level extends to the five national elections which were held in the UK – in 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019 – over our sample period. Due to imperfect overlap between LAs (the geographical unit where asylum seekers are dispersed) and Parliamentary Constituencies (the geographical unit for national election outcomes), we restrict the sample to the 245 LAs that can be accurately linked to corresponding Parliamentary Constituencies, covering approximately 90% of the sample population.[19] The 2SLS estimates reported in Table 5 display a similar pattern to those we presented in Tables 1 and 2 for local elections. We find that one within-LA standard deviation increase in *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita leads to a 10.2 percentage point rise in the Conservative-Labour vote share gap (Col. 1), driven by a 7.7 p.p. decline in Labour support (Col. 2) and a 1.9 p.p. increase in Conservative votes (Col. 3). Further, we observe no significant effect for the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party (Cols. 4 and 5), while UKIP gains 1.1 p.p in its vote share (Col. 6). Similarly to what we observed in local elections (see Table 2, Col. 8), we detect no significant effect on turnout in national elections (Col. 7).

[18]Notably, this latter finding echoes recent remarks by a Conservative MP, who complained that the allocation of asylum seekers to his LA had led to "*huge numbers of lone men hanging around the town centre...*". Source: BBC news (13 June 2025) - https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg59p4qjz8o.

[19]More precisely, we restrict our analysis to constituencies that did not experience boundary changes during the five national elections under consideration and compute population-weighted estimates of electoral outcomes based on ward-level population, limiting the sample to Parliamentary Constituencies in which at least 80% of the population resides within one of the selected LAs. These measurement issues – together with the reduction in sample size and consequent drop in predictive power of our instrument (see FS F-stat in Table 5) – suggest caution in considering these estimates.

Table 5: **National Elections: Vote Shares and Turnout (2SLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
			Vote Shares:				**Turnout**
	Cons.-Lab. Gap	**Labour**	**Conserv.**	**Lib-Dem**	**Green**	**UKIP**	
AS p.c. (SD)	0.102**	-0.077*	0.019*	0.054	-0.003	0.011**	-0.007
	(0.051)	(0.043)	(0.010)	(0.036)	(0.002)	(0.005)	(0.008)
Observations	1,225	1,225	1,225	1,225	980	735	1,225
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.137	.292	.432	.187	.025	.069	.662
FS F-stat	5.16	5.16	5.16	5.16	7.68	7.35	5.16

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing various national election outcomes – the Conservative-Labour vote share gap (Col. 1), individual party vote shares (Cols. 2-7) and voter turnout (Col. 8) – on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"). This latter variable – measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as in equation (2). All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2005, 2010, 2015, 2017, 2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. The sample size for parties observed in all elections is 1,225 observations (245 LAs × 5 elections years); the vote shares for the Green party in 2005 and for the UKIP in 2005 and 2019 are not separately identified in the data due to their low electoral support. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

6.2 Longitudinal Data on Voting Intentions

To further strengthen our analysis, we complement the electoral results with evidence from the British Election Study (BES), a large-scale longitudinal survey of political and social preferences among voters in Britain (see Section 3). A key advantage of the BES is its ability to capture *within-individual variation* in voting intentions in response to exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers in the LA of residence. Including individual fixed effects in our BES regressions further reinforces our empirical strategy and provides a powerful test of whether the dispersal policy shifts the political preferences of exposed individuals or merely alters the composition of those who turn out to vote – an issue that electoral data alone cannot disentangle (Moriconi et al., 2022). Matching BES data to dispersal exposure is straightforward, as the survey records respondents' LA of residence. We link each interview to the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) present in that LA during the quarter preceding the interview. BES's main limitations, however, are that it only began in 2014, thus only partially overlapping with our study period, and its questionnaire experienced frequent changes across survey waves, further restricting the usable sample. In this section, we focus on responses to the question "*Which party do you intend to vote for in the next local/national elections?*". For local elections, this question was asked in only a subset of waves, yielding nearly 47,000 observations covering around 15,200 individuals. By contrast, voting intentions for national elections were collected in most waves, resulting in a larger sample of approximately 232,000 observations from nearly 39,000 individuals.

Table 6 reports 2SLS estimates of voting intentions regressed on the share of *dispersed*

asylum seekers in the respondent's LA, controlling for local characteristics and wave fixed effects. All regressions further include individual fixed effects. Panel A presents results for local elections and Panel B for national elections. In both cases, support for Labour declines, though the coefficients are not statistically significant (Col. 1), whereas we find a statistically significant rise in support for the Conservative Party in response to a higher presence of *dispersed* asylum seekers (Col. 2). Panel B also shows a significant fall in support for the Liberal Democrats (Col. 3). These findings are broadly consistent with results reported in Table 2, where we show that, after the Labour party lost the general elections in 2010, the widening Conservative-Labour vote gap is primarily driven by growing Conservative support, while the Liberal Democrats loses electoral support. By contrast, in Table 6 we detect no shift towards the Green Party and UKIP: estimated coefficients are small and statistically insignificant (Cols. 4-5).

Table 6: **Voting Intentions, by Party – BES Data, 2014-2019 (2SLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Labour	**Conserv.**	**Lib-Dem**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Other**
Panel A - Voting Intentions in Local Elections						
AS p.c. (SD)	-0.006	0.016**	-0.005	-0.004	-0.001	0.000
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.005)
Observations	46,829	46,829	46,829	46,829	46,829	46,829
Ind. FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wave FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.315	.32	.122	.112	.059	.08
N ind.	15270	15270	15270	15270	15270	15270
FS F-stat	29.64	29.64	29.64	29.64	29.64	29.64
Panel B - Voting Intentions in National Elections						
AS p.c. (SD)	-0.001	0.005**	-0.007***	0.001	-0.001	0.004**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Observations	232,713	232,713	232,713	232,713	232,713	232,713
Ind. FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Wave FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.307	.372	.108	.115	.046	.052
N ind.	38982	38982	38982	38982	38982	38982
FS F-stat	42.6	42.6	42.6	42.6	42.6	42.6

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates – based on panel data from the British Election Study (BES) – from regressing the probability that a respondent intends to vote for the specified party in the next local (Panel A) or national (Panel B) election on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"). This latter variable – measured in the quarter preceding the interview and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as in equation (2). All regressions include individual and wave fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2014-2019. The unit of observation is the individual respondent. Estimates are weighted using BES individual weights. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

6.3 The 2016 Brexit Referendum

Finally, we examine whether the UK's asylum dispersal policy contributed to the outcome of the Brexit referendum held in June 23, 2016. While our main identification strategy exploits within-LA variation over time, this approach cannot be replicated here since Brexit votes are purely cross-sectional. Nevertheless, as discussed in Section 4.3, our balancing tests show that – conditional on a rich set of controls – variation in public housing quality is orthogonal to the political preferences of LAs. This supports the validity of a cross-sectional instrumental variable strategy, where the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita is instrumented with the share of low-quality public housing in each LA. Appendix Table A.3 reports our findings. We consider two measures of exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers: the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita residing in the LA in the second quarter of 2016 (Cols. 1–2) and the average number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita up to June 2016 (Cols. 3–4), which captures longer-term exposure. Both measures are instrumented using the share of undesirable or difficult-to-let public dwellings in 2002. All regressions control for LA population, the share of residents over age 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. The results suggest that a one standard deviation increase in the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita led to a 1.1 percentage point increase in the Leave vote share – about a 2% increase relative to the average – and a 0.5 percentage point decrease in turnout (possibly due to Labour voters who decided not to vote). While these cross-sectional estimates should be interpreted with caution, they align with our main findings and indicate that the dispersal policy may have contributed to one of the most consequential political events in recent UK history.

7 Mechanisms: Attitudes and Salience

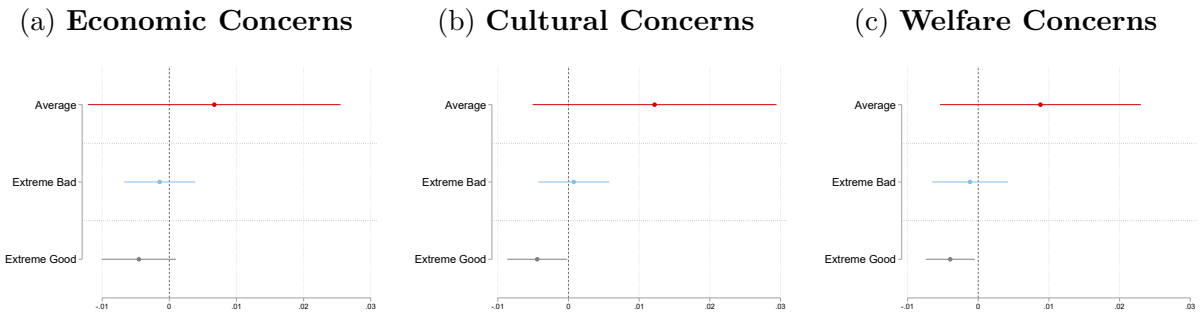
Our analysis shows that areas with greater exposure to asylum seekers experience a relative increase in support for the Conservative Party over Labour. In this section, we explore mechanisms underlying this finding. We first assess whether local exposure to asylum seekers has altered attitudes towards migrants (Section 7.1); we then consider the role of salience by analysing the content of MPs' speeches (Section 7.2).

7.1 Increased Hostility Towards Migrants?

We first asses whether greater hostility towards foreigners, triggered by local exposure to asylum seekers, explains the rise in Conservative support. To investigate this, we use data from the British Election Study (BES), which consistently includes questions on economic,

cultural, and welfare-related concerns about immigration. Although these questions refer to immigration in general, Blinder (2015) shows that a large majority of British respondents think of asylum seekers when asked about "immigrants" and that those who make this association tend to favour lower immigration levels. Since Schneider-Strawczynski and Valette (2025) emphasize that greater prominence of migration issues may leave average attitudes unchanged while polarizing views among both supporters and opponents of immigration, we examine the impact on average attitudes as well as on extremely negative and extremely positive ones. Figure 6 presents the results of this analysis, using our standard instrument and including individual and wave fixed effects. We find only a modest – and marginally significant – reduction in the probability of reporting the most positive attitudes about the impact of immigrants, while average attitudes appear unaffected by exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers. These findings align with recent evidence that public attitudes towards immigration remain remarkably stable over time (Kustov et al., 2021; Bansak et al., 2023) and suggest that greater hostility towards immigrants is not a necessary condition for increased support for right-wing parties. No evidence of polarization emerges in our setting.

Figure 6: **Attitudes Towards Migration - Evidence from BES data (2SLS)**



Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates of individual attitudes towards immigration from the British Election Study (BES), waves 2014-2019. The main explanatory variable is the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the respondents LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"), measured in the quarter preceding the interview and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. This variable is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as described in equation (2). All regressions include individual and wave fixed effects and are weighted using BES-provided individual sampling weights. The main explanatory variable is the (standardized) number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per 1,000 residents in the respondent's LA, measured at the end of the second quarter of the survey year. Each panel refers to a distinct dimension of public attitudes towards immigration: (a) economic concerns, based on responses to the question "Immigration is bad for the economy" (7-point scale); (b) cultural concerns, based on "Immigration undermines/enriches cultural life" (7-point scale); and (c) welfare concerns, based on "Immigrants are a burden on the welfare state" (5-point scale). Higher values correspond to more negative attitudes towards immigration. For each outcome, we report three specifications: "Average" refers to the continuous attitude scale; "Extreme Bad" is a binary indicator equal to 1 if the respondent reports a strongly negative view (scores 6-7 on 7-point scales, 5 on the 5-point scale); "Extreme Good" is a binary indicator equal to 1 for strongly positive views (scores 1-2 on 7-point scales, 1 on the 5-point scale). Point estimates are shown as dots, and 95% confidence intervals are represented by horizontal lines. Standard errors are clustered at the LA level.

7.2 Salience? Evidence from MP Speeches

The results presented so far indicate a sizeable impact of the dispersal policy on residents' electoral preferences. This finding is consistently observed across local and national elections, in the Brexit referendum, and even in survey data when we track within-individual changes in political preferences. Yet it remains somewhat surprising, given that such shifts are trig-

gered by relatively small changes in the per capita number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (see Section 3). These modest placements can hardly generate tangible effects on local communities, and indeed residents do not appear to become more concerned about the economic, cultural, or welfare consequences of immigration (as shown in Section 7.1). Taken together, these findings would be puzzling unless *dispersed* asylum seekers influence the salience of asylum and migration issues and, through this channel, affect residents' voting behaviour in ways that generate disproportionate political effects. The absence of any impact from *non-dispersed* asylum seekers is consistent with their lower visibility. While *non-dispersed* claimants move freely and independently, spreading across areas through family and social networks, *dispersed* asylum seekers are assigned in larger groups and clustered in public housing through a centralized, public political process – making their presence far more salient to local communities.

To investigate this aspect, we shift our attention to the supply side of the political process, examining whether local exposure to asylum seekers influences the salience of refugee and migration issues in political discourse. Specifically, we assess whether Members of Parliament (MPs) are more likely to address these topics when their constituencies experience a greater inflow of *dispersed* asylum seekers. We analyse the full set of speeches delivered in the UK Parliament between 2004 and 2019, which, after dropping speeches shorter than ten words (excluding stop words), comprises over 840,000 speeches. From these data, we construct a measure of migration salience by counting the frequency of selected keywords related to asylum and migration per thousand non-stop words in MPs' speeches.[20] We calculate this measure at the constituency level and then aggregate to the LA-year level, following the same procedure used for national electoral outcomes (see Section 6.1 and footnote 19). Table 7 reports estimates from regressing this variable on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers, instrumented with our main IV, using our preferred specification (LA and year fixed effects and LA controls). Local exposure is measured as the standardized number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per 1,000 population present in each LA in the second quarter of the year. Accordingly, we compute the MPs' migration salience measure from all speeches delivered in the second and third quarters of the year (estimates with alternative timing are shown in Figure 7). Observations are weighted by the total number of speeches in each LA-year cell. In Column 1 of Table 7, we consider speeches pronounced by MPs of any party and we detect a significant positive effect of *dispersed* asylum seekers on the salience measure. The magnitude of the effect is substantial: a one standard deviation increase in *dispersed* asylum seekers within a LA is estimated to raise this measure by 35% with respect to its mean value. When distinguishing between speeches by Labour and Conservative MPs (Cols. 2 and 3),

[20]The keywords are: *refugee, refugees, asylum, migrant, migrants, immigr*, migrat*.*

the estimates indicate that the increase in salience is driven by the latter group (Col. 3). In Columns 4-6, we replicate the same regressions but controlling also for local exposure to *non-dispersed* asylum seekers and instrumenting this variable with a migrant-network shift-share instrument as in Section 5.4. We find fairly precisely estimated zero effects of *non-dispersed* asylum seekers on migration salience in MP speeches, and their inclusion does not affect our estimates for the effect of *dispersed* asylum seekers. Figure 7 tests the robustness of our findings to alternative choices of the time-window for measuring salience in MPs speeches, reporting estimates for each quarter individually. As in Table 7, we report estimates for all MPs (black squares), Labour MPs (red triangles) and Conservative MPs (blue dots), and measure local exposure with *dispersed* asylum seekers residing in each LA in the second quarter. The figure clearly shows that salience responds to the presence of asylum seekers in the second and third quarters of the year, driven by Conservative MPs in both quarters.

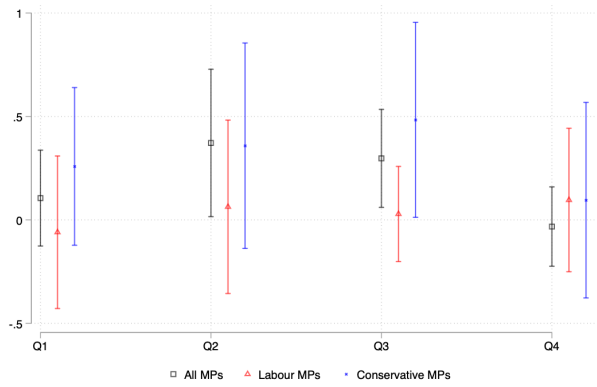
Table 7: **Impact of Asylum Seekers on Asylum/Migration Salience in MPs' Speeches (2SLS)**

	(1) **All MPs**	(2) **Labour MPs**	(3) **Cons. MPs**	(4) **All MPs**	(5) **Labour MPs**	(6) **Cons. MPs**
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.229**	0.015	0.341*	0.221*	0.020	0.341*
	(0.115)	(0.165)	(0.206)	(0.115)	(0.172)	(0.205)
Non-Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)				-0.038	0.006	-0.071
				(0.052)	(0.048)	(0.206)
Observations	4,293	1,811	3,096	4,293	1,811	3,096
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean dep.	.684	.695	.713	.684	.695	.713
First stage F	15.94	7.46	15.33	8.07	4.17	7.69
First stage F non disp	-	-	-	19.09	21.26	16.94

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing various measures of asylum and migration salience in MPs' speeches – the number of asylum- and migration-related keywords per thousand non-stop keywords in MPs' speeches at the British Parliament in the second and third quarters of the year for all MPs (Cols. 1 and 4), for Labour MPs (Cols. 2 and 5), and for Conservative MPs (Cols. 3 and 6) – on the number of *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA. Both these variables are measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. *Dispersed* asylum seekers are instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as in equation (2), while *non-dispersed* asylum seekers with a shift-share IV based on historical settlement patterns of migrants by country of origin (see footnote 17). Speeches with less than 10 non-stop words are excluded from the computation. The reference period is 2004-2019. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects, and control for resident population, share of residents over 65 years old, real GDP per capita, and unemployment rate. Observations are weighted by the total number of speeches in the LA-year (considering all MPs, Labour MPs, or Conservative MPs, depending on the outcome variable). Standard errors are clustered at the LA level. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

After uncovering a significant effect on migration salience, it is natural to wonder whether local exposure to asylum seekers has also influenced the tone and content of political discourse on migration and asylum issues. To explore this possibility, we have constructed three indicators – namely, MPs' sentiment when talking about migration, the likelihood that a speech is pro- or anti-immigration, and the relative frequency of universalistic versus localist terminology (Enke, 2020) (see Appendix Section O.A.2 for further details about these measures). Estimates reported in Appendix Table OA.9 display no significant effect of local exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers on any of these three indicators, showing that the content of Labour and Conservative MPs' speeches is equally unresponsive.

Figure 7: **Impact of Asylum Seekers on Asylum/Migration Salience in MPs' Speeches, by Quarter (2SLS)**



Notes: The figure reports coefficient plots and 95% confidence interval of 2SLS estimates of the effect of *dispersed* asylum seekers on migration salience in MPs' speeches in different quarters of the year. The dependent variable is the total number of asylum- and migration-related keywords in MPs' speeches at the British Parliament (source: Hansard) measured in different quarters of the year. These variables are computed for all MPs, and then separately for Labour and Conservative MPs. The main explanatory variable is the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA. This variable – measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as in equation (2). Speeches with less than 10 non-stop words are excluded from the computation. The reference period is 2004-2019. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects, and control for resident population, share of residents over 65 years old, real GDP per capita, and unemployment rate. Observations are weighted by the total number of speeches in the LA-year (considering all MPs, Labour MPs, or Conservative MPs, depending on the outcome variable).

Overall, these results suggest that salience of asylum and migration issues in the political discourse may effectively establish a link between local exposure to asylum seekers and voting behaviour, amplifying the effect of the former on the latter. Indeed, our analysis of MP speeches reveals patterns that closely mirror those observed among British citizens. First, we exclusively observe an impact of *dispersed* asylum seekers on both local electoral outcomes (Table 4) and MP speeches (Table 7), while we estimate zero effects for *non-dispersed* asylum seekers. Second, in the same way as local exposure does not seem to make residents more concerned about immigrants (Figure 6), we fail to detect any effect on the content and hostility of MPs' speeches (Appendix Table OA.9). Although tentative, these results support the notion that politicians' rhetoric may influence voting outcomes of local residents.[21]

8 Conclusions

This paper provides the first causal evidence on the political consequences of local exposure to asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. Exploiting variation from the national dispersal

[21] Our findings are only partially consistent with the "*politicised places*" hypothesis by Hopkins (2010), which posits that local exposure to foreign residents translate into hostile attitudes (or voting behaviour) only when immigration rhetoric is highly salient nationally. While Alrababah et al. (2024) finds empirical support for this theory in the Swiss context, our estimates show that both local residents and national politicians react directly to local exposure to asylum seekers, and we suggest that the reaction of MPs may in turn shape the behaviour of voters.

policy and an IV strategy based on pre-determined public housing characteristics, we identify a robust electoral impact of *dispersed* asylum seekers over 2004-2019. Across local elections, general elections, and longitudinal survey data, we document a systematic shift of votes away from Labour and towards the Conservative party, substantially widening the gap between the two major British parties. Some electoral gains accrue also to the Green Party and UKIP, although these findings are less robust and do not translate entirely into additional seats under a first-past-the-post system. We also show that *dispersed* asylum seekers increase support for Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum. By contrast, asylum seekers outside the dispersal scheme – those able to make independent residential choices – do not affect electoral outcomes. Delving into mechanisms, we rule out a systematic worsening of natives' attitudes towards immigrants, while our results highlight the political salience of asylum. Analysing parliamentary speeches, we find that Conservative MPs from more exposed constituencies become more likely to emphasise migration, though the tone and content of their speeches do not turn more hostile. This pattern suggests that voters' rightward shift reflects the amplified visibility of asylum in political debate rather than deep attitudinal change. Taken together, our findings contribute to the broader literature on migration and politics by showing how modest increases in local exposure to asylum seekers can reshape political outcomes through salience effects. They also highlight the capacity of mainstream parties, to absorb and mobilise electoral discontent over immigration. According to our results, hosting asylum seekers appears to have made the UK more conservative, closed and self-centred, though not necessarily more extremist.

Although our study ends in 2019, we can examine more recent political developments in the UK through the lens of our findings. The picture that emerges is striking. Since 2019, the Conservative Party has entered a prolonged phase of decline, marked by the appointment of three prime ministers in four years (Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak) and culminating in its 2024 general election defeat to Labour, which returned to power after 14 years in opposition. Yet Labour's momentum quickly dissipated, with PM Keir Starmer's approval ratings falling to exceptionally low levels. By mid-October 2025, opinion polls depict an unprecedented scenario: the two major parties that have dominated British politics for a century now command only about 35% of the vote combined, with Conservatives just above 17% and Labour around 18%. Some voters have shifted to the Greens and Liberal Democrats, each polling around 13%, but a much larger share has moved toward Reform UK, now exceeding 30% support. Reform UK, led by Nigel Farage – the former leader of the UKIP party, which has since effectively vanished – has surged with a vehemently anti-immigration campaign. These political shifts are echoed in society. Following a series of asylum hotel protests across the country, London saw a far-right, anti-immigration march

of 100,000 participants in September 2025, the largest nationalist gathering in decades. The fixation on "small boats" crossing from France and asylum seekers in reception centres highlights how disproportionate their salience remains relative to the phenomenon's actual scale. While the durability of this political realignment is uncertain, it appears that attempts to channel anti-immigration discontent through traditional parties – successfully done by the Conservatives while in power and tentatively pursued by Labour in recent times – no longer work, leaving these hostile narratives as strong as ever.

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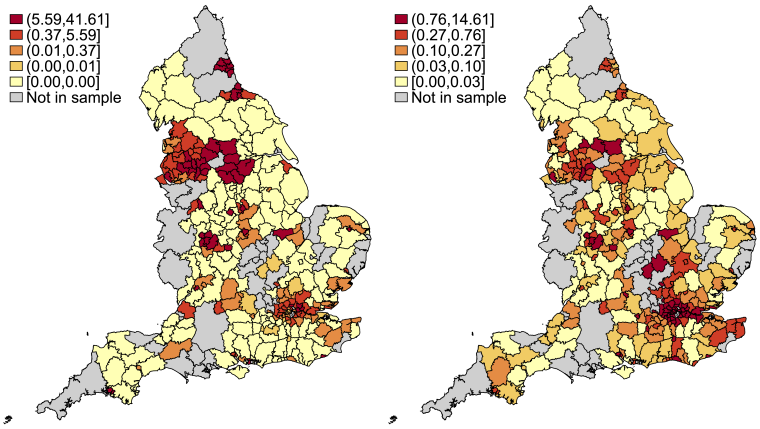
A Appendix

A.1 Appendix Figures

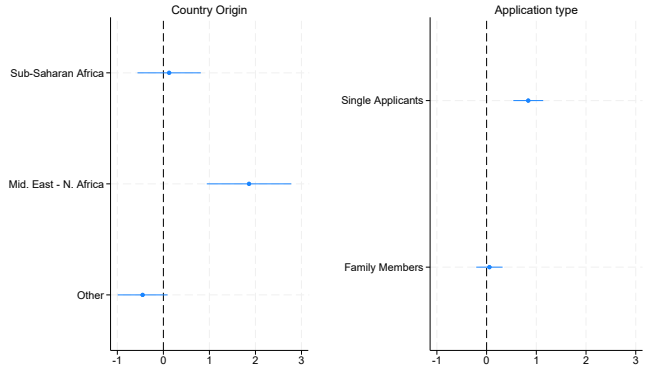
Figure A.1: **Asylum Seekers per 10,000 Residents Across English LAs (Average, 2004–2019)**

(a) ***Dispersed*** **Asylum Seekers** (b) ***Non-Dispersed*** **Asylum Seekers**



Notes: The map shows, for each English LA, the *time-average* number of asylum seekers per 10,000 residents over 2004–2019. *Dispersed* asylum seekers are reported in Panel A.1a and *non-dispersed* in Panel A.1b. For each year in the sample, we compute the annual rate as 10,000 × (dispersed asylum seekers/population) and then take the mean across years within LA. Shading uses quantile bins. LAs in light grey are excluded because their geographic boundaries changed over the 16-year study window.

Figure A.2: **Conservative-Labour Vote Share Gap: Heterogeneous Effects by Origin and Family Type (Reduced-Form Estimates)**



Notes: This figure presents reduced-form estimates of the effect of the "Low Quality IV" on the Conservative-Labour vote share gap, allowing for heterogeneous responses by (i) country of origin (Left Panel: SubSaharan Africa, Middle East & North Africa, Other) and (ii) application type (Right Panel: Single applicants, Family members). See Section 5.4 for more details. Each point estimate is from a separate regression including LA and year fixed effects, the full set of control variables, and is weighted by LA population. Note that information on applicants' country of origin and application type is only available at the annual level, and no data on these characteristics are reported at the LA level. Consequently, we conduct this part of the analysis in reduced form, regressing our main outcome – i.e. the vote share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties – directly on the group-specific instruments. Specifically, we disaggregated the time-varying component of the IV based on applicants' characteristics and origin during each period. For each group, we constructed a separate instrument by interacting the share of low-quality public dwellings in each LA with the number of asylum applications from each macro-region or application type (single Vs family). Years: 2004-2018. Standard errors are clustered at the LA level. Dots represent point estimates, and lines show 95% confidence intervals.

A.2 Appendix Tables

Table A.1: **Descriptive Statistics**

	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	Local Elections (Vote Shares)				
% Labour	2775	26.5	15.3	0	79
% Conservatives	2775	38.0	12.3	0	69
	National Elections (Vote Shares)				
% Labour	1225	29.1	16.8	0	83
% Conservatives	1225	43.4	13.4	8	77
	Asylum Seekers				
Dispersed	4496	80.3	221.3	0	2845
Non-Dispersed	4496	20.9	82.7	0	1675
Dispersed per 10000 people	4496	2.9	7.3	0	59
Non-Dispersed per 10000 people	4496	0.9	3.2	0	74
	LA Characteristics				
Population	4496	160730.4	106446.2	35623	1141816
Unemp. rate	4496	5.4	2.3	2	16
Real GDP p.c.	4496	29972.9	19607.9	12934	302405
% over 65	4496	16.7	4.0	6	32
	LA Public Housing				
Total	281	12991.6	13585.7	1788	118646
Difficult to let	281	892.6	2475.7	0	18963
Undesirable	281	1324.3	3933.4	0	33366

Notes: The table reports descriptive statistics for the 281 local authorities (LAs) included in the study over the 2004-2019 period. The number of observations corresponds to election-years for the first two election panels, years for asylum seekers and LA characteristics, and 2002 for public housing measures. In 20 cases (out of 2,775 LAelection-year observations), the Labour or the Conservative Party did not field a candidate in local elections; these observations are coded as zero vote shares. All estimates are robust to excluding them from the sample.

Table A.2: **Balance Tests: Public Housing Characteristics and Baseline Political Support (2002)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	Low Quality (2002)				**Difficult to Let (2002)**				**Undesirable (2002)**			
Cons. Maj (2002)	-0.060**	0.005	0.018	0.012	-0.037**	0.005	0.014	0.010	-0.023**	0.000	0.004	0.002
	(0.027)	(0.018)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Lab. Maj (2002)	0.100***	0.072**	0.013	0.003	0.064***	0.044**	0.006	0.000	0.036**	0.027**	0.007	0.002
	(0.035)	(0.029)	(0.029)	(0.027)	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.014)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.012)
LD Maj (2002)	0.001	0.037	0.014	-0.007	-0.011	0.013	-0.001	-0.013	0.012	0.024	0.015	0.007
	(0.064)	(0.041)	(0.028)	(0.025)	(0.034)	(0.023)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.031)	(0.021)	(0.014)	(0.012)
Population			0.000***	-0.000			0.000***	-0.000			0.000***	-0.000
			(0.000)	(0.000)			(0.000)	(0.000)			(0.000)	(0.000)
Share over 65			-0.416*	-0.322			-0.342**	-0.286*			-0.074	-0.036
			(0.213)	(0.208)			(0.162)	(0.158)			(0.096)	(0.096)
GDP p.c.			-0.000	-0.000*			-0.000	-0.000			-0.000	-0.000
			(0.000)	(0.000)			(0.000)	(0.000)			(0.000)	(0.000)
Unemployment rate			0.020***	0.005			0.013***	0.004			0.007**	0.001
			(0.007)	(0.006)			(0.004)	(0.005)			(0.003)	(0.003)
Tot. public dwellings				0.000***				0.000**				0.000***
				(0.000)				(0.000)				(0.000)
Observations	281	281	281	281	281	281	281	281	281	281	281	281
Region FEs	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: The table reports OLS estimates from regressing alternative measures of public housing quality on local political variables, regional fixed effects and LA controls. All variables are measures in 2002. Outcome variables: (i) share of *low quality* public housing out of the total public dwellings (Cols. 1-4); (ii) share of *difficult-to-let* public dwellings (Cols. 5-8); (iii) share of *undesirable* public dwellings (Cols. 9-12). LA Controls: (i) political controls: Cons. Maj (2002), Lab. Maj (2002), and LD. Maj (2002) are dummy variables equal to one if the LA in 2002 was governed by a Conservative, Labour, or Liberal Democrat majority, respectively. The omitted variable is the NOC "Not Overall Control" situation; (ii) Other LA controls: resident population, share of populatiob over 65, GDP per capita, unemployment rate, total number of public dwellings; (iii) *Region FEs*: dummies for the 9 English regions. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.

Table A.3: **The 2016 Brexit Referendum: Leave Vote and Turnout (2SLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	% Leave	**Turnout**	**% Leave**	**Turnout**
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.009**	-0.006***		
	(0.004)	(0.002)		
Cumulated *Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)			0.001**	-0.001***
			(0.000)	(0.000)
Observations	281	281	281	281
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.547	.742	.547	.742
FS F-stat	33.82	33.82	50.52	50.52

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing the vote share for Leave and voter turnout in the Brexit referendum (23 June 2016) on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per thousand residents in the LA in the second quarter of 2016 ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)") and on the average number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per 1,000 residents in the second quarter of each year between 2004 and 2016 ("Cumulated *Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"). Both variables are standardized by their within-LA standard deviation and instrumented with the share of low-quality public housing in each LA. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Year: 2016. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

O.A Online Appendix

O.A.1 Politics in the Dispersal Policy

Institutional Setting. Introduced by the Immigration and Asylum Act (IAA) in 1999, the UK's *dispersal policy* was designed to relocate asylum seekers away from areas with high concentrations of foreign-born residents – particularly London and South-East England – and into regions with available and affordable public housing. After spending their first weeks in temporary accommodation centers, applicants are assigned by the Home Office to a specific LA, which becomes responsible for housing them until their refugee status is determined. For an asylum seeker to be allocated to a given LA, however, the LA must first agree to participate in the dispersal scheme and be formally designated as a *dispersal area*. While the IAA granted the central government broad powers to secure local cooperation, public housing availability has remained a central determinant of bargaining outcomes. LAs are required to report their housing inventories, and those with vacant dwellings are expected to contribute to the provision of accommodation for asylum seekers. The Home Office also holds the authority to unilaterally establish reception zones in areas with suitable housing, thereby compelling LAs to comply through enforceable directives. Although these latter powers have not yet been exercised, they represent a credible threat, particularly for LAs with large stocks of unoccupied social housing. In practice, dispersal arrangements result from negotiation: LAs offer unused housing stock and, in return, receive financial compensation from the central government. These negotiations took time to settle following the IAAs introduction, and the dispersal policy only became fully effective from the final quarter of 2003.

Media and Political Debate on the Dispersal Policy. Media coverage and political debate in the UK have repeatedly suggested that the dispersal policy may have been shaped by political considerations. Appendix Figure OA.4 displays a few examples of article titles on the matter from major British Newspapers. The issue has also been repeatedly discussed by Members of the British Parliament. In a Parliamentary debate held in May 2016, for instance, a Labour MP from a dispersal LA questioned the Conservative Immigration Minister arguing that the disparities of treatment between LAs receiving and not receiving asylum seekers were large (he claimed his LA had been "*dumped with an unequal share of the burden*"), driven by political alignment ("*(...) I do not want to be overly partisan, but my office's analysis shows that Labour LAs do take asylum seekers and Conservative LAs do not.*") and by personal interest of politicians in power.[1] A similar complaint, although with inverted political roles,

[1]He suggested that the constituencies of the Prime Minister, Home Office Secretary and Chancellor had been basically shielded from the dispersal policy while receiving more funding that other

was put forward in November 2015 by a Conservative MP from a dispersal LA run by the Labour Party, who accused the local council leader of "playing politics" with Syrian refugees by housing them only in Tory-voting wards.[2]

Empirical Evidence of Politics in the Allocation. To assess potential political bias, we first examine whether the partisan composition of local councils in 2003 predicted subsequent asylum seeker allocations. Figure OA.5 plots on the horizontal axis the difference in council seats between the Conservative and Labour parties in the 2003 local elections, while the vertical axis reports the cumulative number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita allocated between 2004 and 2019. Marker colors denote which party controlled the local council in 2003 (blue = Conservative, red = Labour, black = no overall control or other), and marker size is proportional to the 2003 population of each LA. The figure reveals a strong correlation between the initial partisan balance of local governments and the cumulative inflow of asylum seekers. Councils dominated by Labour in 2003 – located to the left of the zero threshold – systematically received more asylum seekers relative to population, whereas Conservative-led councils – to the right of the threshold – received markedly fewer. Councils under no overall control or other parties fall in between, but closer to Labour-led areas. This descriptive evidence indicates that the dispersal system was not entirely insulated from political considerations: the partisan composition of local councils at baseline strongly predicts the cumulative number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita over the study period.

Additionally, we test whether these allocation patterns persisted over time. Figure OA.6 compares the cumulative number of *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita allocated in the pre-2010 period, when the central government was led by the Labour Party (horizontal axis), with the corresponding number in the post-2010 period under Conservative governments (vertical axis). Each marker represents a LA, with colors indicating council control in 2003 (blue = Conservative, red = Labour, black = NOC/Other) and marker size proportional to the 2003 population. The dashed line reports the fitted regression line, with a correlation coefficient of 0.89 and an R^2 of 0.77. The figure shows remarkable persistence: areas that received relatively more asylum seekers under Labour governments continued to do so under Conservative governments. Labour-controlled councils in 2003 (red markers) consistently appear in the upper-right region of the plot, indicating high allocations in both periods. By contrast, Conservative-controlled councils (blue markers) are clustered near the origin, reflecting persistently low allocations across both decades. NOC/Other councils lie between

LAs far more directly involved in the policy. See: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-05-03/debates/1605032000003/AsylumSeekerDispersalPolicy

[2]See: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/12014604/Labour-council-slammed-for-playing-politics-with-Syrian-refugees-by-housing-them-only-in-Tory-voting-areas.html

these two groups, but closer to Labour-led areas. This evidence demonstrates that the political imprint in the dispersal system was not a short-lived feature of a particular central government. Instead, the geography of allocations established in the early 2000s remained stable over time, with local political composition in 2003 continuing to predict asylum seeker inflows well into the 2010s.

In unreported analyses, we have also empirically investigated whether the allocation dynamically respond to electoral outcomes. In particular, we have studied whether changes in alignment status of LAs determine changes in future allocation of asylum seekers, and failed to find any evidence supporting this conjecture. Analysing the allocation of asylum seekers under the Conservative government, Alonso and Andrews (2021) find evidence of an increased asylum dispersal to Labour Party core LAs, while finding null effects for swing areas.

O.A.2 Further Results on MPs' speeches

In Section 7.2, we present and discuss evidence that MPs' speeches at the British Parliament are more likely to mention asylum or migration issues when their electorate is exposed to a higher inflow of *dispersed* asylum seekers. In this Section, we employ the same methodology using different measures of the content of these speeches to investigate whether MPs respond to increased asylum seekers exposure not just by talking more about asylum/migration, but also by changing the way they refer to it. To do so, we build three different indexes:

1. **Sentiment score**: we identify sentences in speeches that mention migration-related keywords and classify each of these sentences based on the sentiment that it expresses with a compound polarity score ranging from -1 (very negative) to +1 (very positive). To classify sentiment, we employ Vader Sentiment Analyzer (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). Importantly, the sentiment score only captures the emotional tone of these sentences, and not the sentiment of the speaker towards the object of the discussion (i.e. migration). Hence, both negative or positive sentiments may be prevalent regardless of the political stance of the speech with respect to migration. For instance, an MP may speak against migrants by praising restrictive policies while expressing a positive sentiment.

2. **Pro/Anti immigration stance**: to gauge the political stance of the speeches, we employ a generative artificial intelligence model to classify all sentences that include a migration-related keyword based on their stance towards migration and building a pro-migration score ranging from -1 (anti-immigration) to +1 (pro-immigration). Sentences

that are neither pro- or anti-immigration are assigned a score of 0. More precisely, we classify these sentences using chatGPT 3.5-turbo with the following prompt: "Classify the overall sentiment of the speaker on immigration policies, with a focus on their intent and whether they support or oppose the presence of immigrants (including refugees and asylum seekers). Ignore emotionally charged or critical phrases that do not reflect their true stance on immigration. Return +1 if the speaker supports immigration policies, 0 if neutral, -1 if they oppose immigration, and -9 if unsure.".

3. **Universalist Vs Communal moral**: we follow Enke (2020) and compute the relative frequency of universalist vs. communal moral terminology in MP speeches. More precisely, the measure is computed based on the Moral Foundation dictionary, that identifies a list of keywords associated with five moral foundations. These are further classified by Enke (2020) as pertaining universalist (Care/Harm, Fairness/Reciprocity) or communal moral values (In-group/Loyalty, Authority/Respect). The index is computed as the frequency of keywords in the universalist domain relative to the frequency of keywords in the communal domain, normalized by the number of keywords in each domain. The measure is then standardized into a z-score and multiplied by 100.

As for our proxy for migration salience, these measures are computed from the universe of all speeches given by MPs at the British Parliament, are collected and distributed by Hansard.[3] As in our main analysis, we exclude speeches with fewer than 10 non-stop words and focus on the second and third quarters of the year, i.e., the two quarters before and after our measure of local exposure to *dispersed* asylum seekers. The sample period covers 2004-2019. As in Table 7, we regress each of these three measures on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers in the MPs' constituencies. Results are presented in Online Appendix Table OA.9: we fail to detect any significant impact of local exposure on MPs' sentiment, stance towards migration, and use of universalist terminology.[4]

[3]Data Source: `https://hansard.parliament.uk/about`

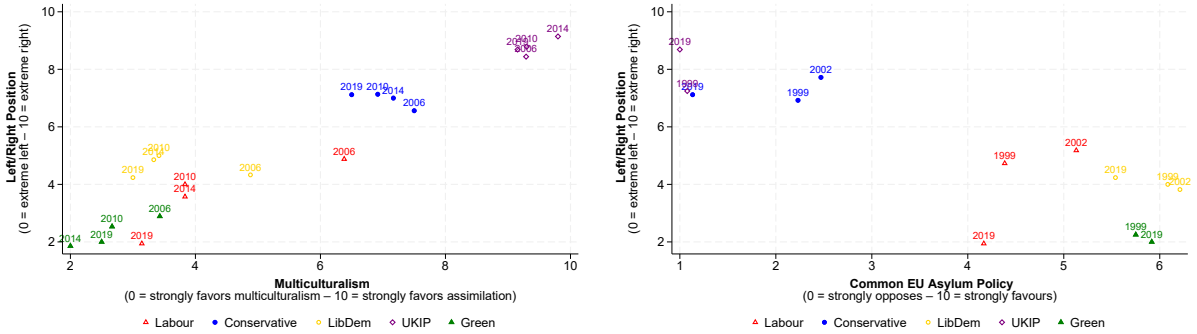
[4]Bhatiya (2024) explores the same records on MPs' speeches, though over a different period (i.e. 1972-2011), to study whether migrants' enfranchisement affects British politicians' stances on immigration. Using a standard migrant network IV design, he finds that MP from constituencies with larger enfranchised migrant populations discuss immigration issues more frequently and are more likely to adopt a positive tone in their discourse.

O.A.3 Online Appendix Figures

Figure OA.1: **Main British Parties: Ideological Stance, Multiculturalism and EU Asylum Policy**

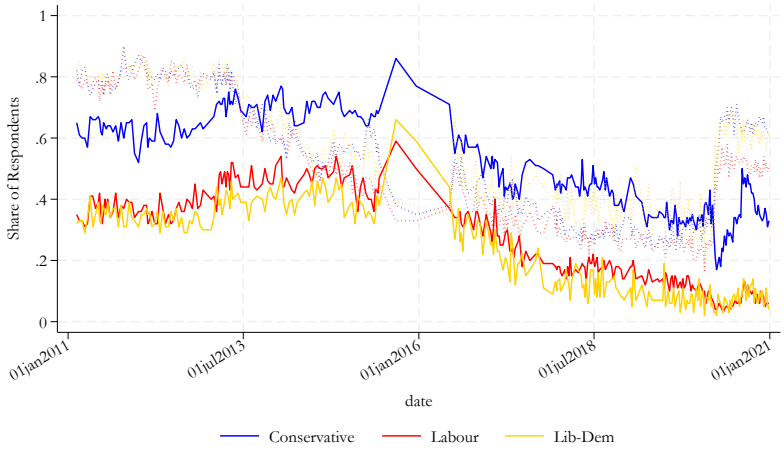
(a) Multiculturalism

(b) Common EU Asylum Policy



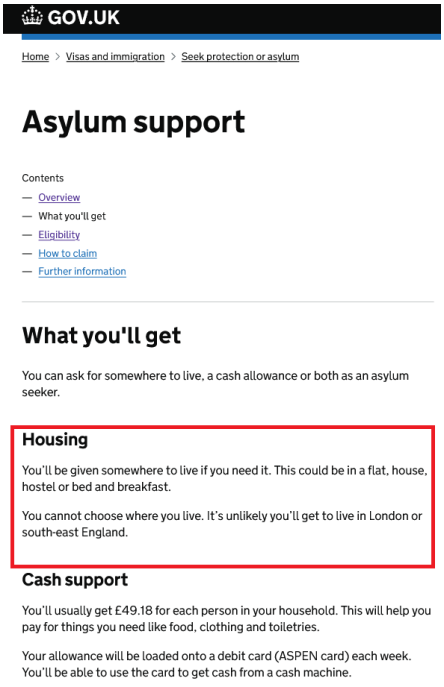
Notes: The graphs report scatter plots of data from the 1999, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 and 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). In both panels, the vertical axis reports the overall ideological stance of each party on a ten point scale (0 = Extreme left; 5 = Center; 10 = Extreme right). The horizontal axis reports parties' positions on multiculturalism (0 = strongly favours multiculturalism - 10 = strongly favours assimilation) in Panel OA.1a and support for a common EU asylum policy (0 = strongly opposes; 10 = strongly favours) in Panel OA.1b. The question on multiculturalism was asked in waves 2006 to 2019, while the question on the EU asylum policy was only asked in 1999 and 2002. Source: our elaboration on CHES data (variables: *LRGEN*, *MULTICULTURALISM*, *EU_ASYLUM*).

Figure OA.2: **Most Important Issues Facing the Country? Immigration and Asylum (continuous line) Vs the Economy (dotted line); by Party Affiliation (2011-2020)**



Notes: The graphs report the share of respondents who answered "Immigration and Asylum" (continuous lines) and "the Economy" (dotted lines) to the question: "*Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please tick up to three.*" The graph distinguish respondents according to the self-reported affiliation to the three major British parties: Conservative (blue), Labour (red) and Liberal-Democrat (yellow). The data are collected weekly/fortnightly from a sample of approximately 1 to 5 thousand individuals by YouGov (https://yougov.co.uk/). Data are available at this link.

Figure OA.3: **UK Government: Instructions for Asylum Applicants**



GOV.UK

Home > Visas and immigration > Seek protection or asylum

Asylum support

Contents

- Overview
- What you'll get
- Eligibility
- How to claim
- Further information

What you'll get

You can ask for somewhere to live, a cash allowance or both as an asylum seeker.

Housing

You'll be given somewhere to live if you need it. This could be in a flat, house, hostel or bed and breakfast.

You cannot choose where you live. It's unlikely you'll get to live in London or south-east England.

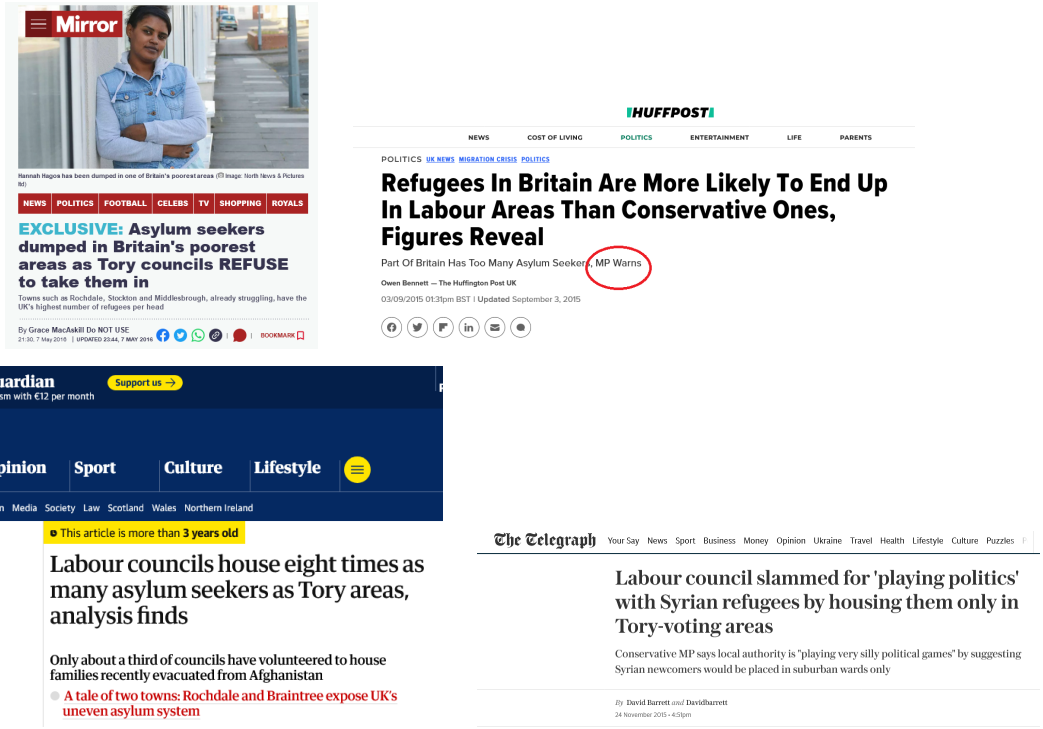
Cash support

You'll usually get £49.18 for each person in your household. This will help you pay for things you need like food, clothing and toiletries.

Your allowance will be loaded onto a debit card (ASPEN card) each week. You'll be able to use the card to get cash from a cash machine.

Notes: https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/overview

Figure OA.4: **Politics in the Allocation? Evidence from Media Outlets**



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EXCLUSIVE: Asylum seekers dumped in Britain's poorest areas as Tory councils REFUSE to take them in

Towns such as Rochdale, Stockton and Middlesbrough, already struggling, have the UK's highest number of refugees per head

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Part Of Britain Has Too Many Asylum Seekers, MP Warns

Owen Bennett — The Huffington Post UK

03/09/2015 01:31pm BST | Updated September 3, 2015

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Labour council slammed for 'playing politics' with Syrian refugees by housing them only in Tory-voting areas

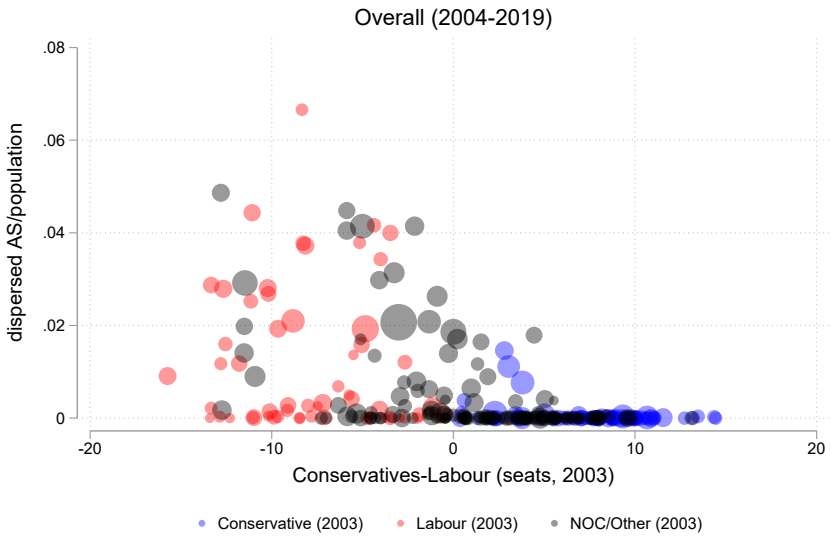
Conservative MP says local authority is "playing very silly political games" by suggesting Syrian newcomers would be placed in suburban wards only

By David Barrett and Davidbarrett

24 November 2015 • 4:51pm

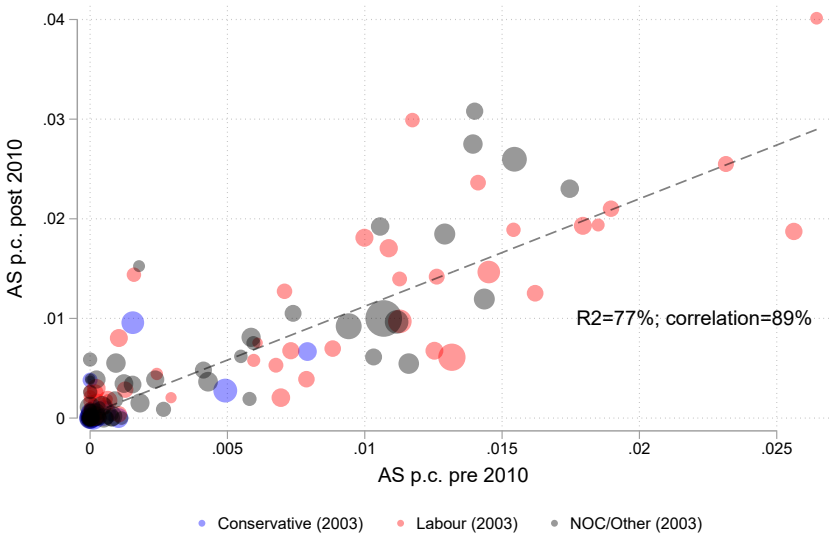
Notes: Article titles are taken from the Mirror (7 May 2016), the Huffington Post (3 September 2015), The Guardian (3 September 2021) and The Telegraph (24 November 2015).

Figure OA.5: ***Dispersed*** **Asylum Seekers by Local Council Composition in 2003**



Notes: Each marker corresponds to a LA. The vertical axis reports the cumulative number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (AS) per capita during 2004–2019. The horizontal axis shows the difference in council seats between the Conservative and Labour parties in the 2003 local elections, defined as Conservative minus Labour (values > 0 indicate a Conservative seat advantage, values < 0 a Labour seat advantage). Marker colours denote which party controlled the local council in 2003: blue = Conservative, red = Labour, black = no overall control (NOC) or other. Marker size is proportional to the LA population in 2003.

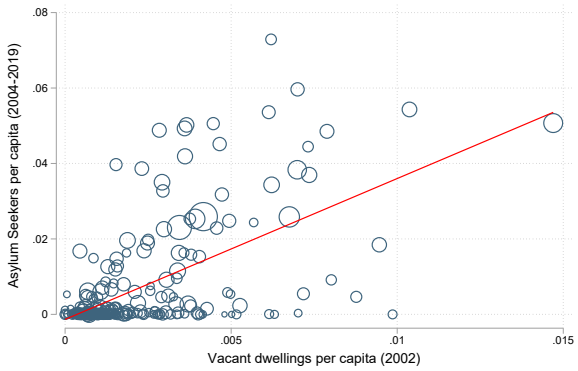
Figure OA.6: **Persistence in the Allocation of** ***Dispersed*** **Asylum Seekers**



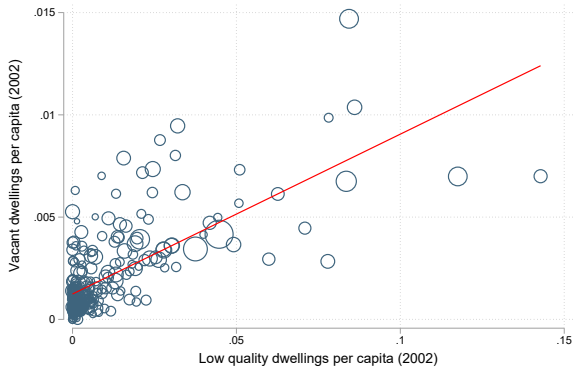
Notes: Each marker corresponds to a LA. The horizontal axis reports the cumulative number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (AS) per capita during 2004–2010, when the UK central government was led by the Labour Party. The vertical axis reports the cumulative number of *dispersed* AS per capita during 2011–2019, when the UK central government was led by the Conservative Party. Marker colours denote which party controlled the local council in 2003: blue = Conservative, red = Labour, black = no overall control (NOC) or other. Marker size is proportional to the LA population in 2003. The dashed line represents the fitted linear regression line. Reported statistics are the Pearson correlation coefficient (89%) and the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 77\%$).

Figure OA.7: ***Dispersed* Asylum Seekers, Vacant Public Dwellings, and Low-Quality Public Dwellings**

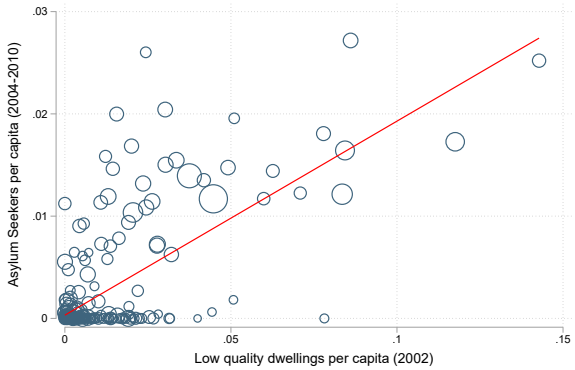
(a) *Dispersed* Asylum Seekers (2004–2019) vs. Vacant Public Dwellings (2002)



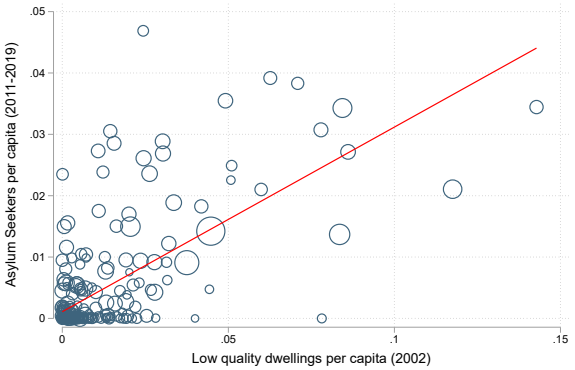
(b) Vacant (2002) vs. Low-Quality Public Dwellings (2002)



(c) *Dispersed* Asylum Seekers (2004-2010) vs. Low-Quality Public Dwellings (2002)

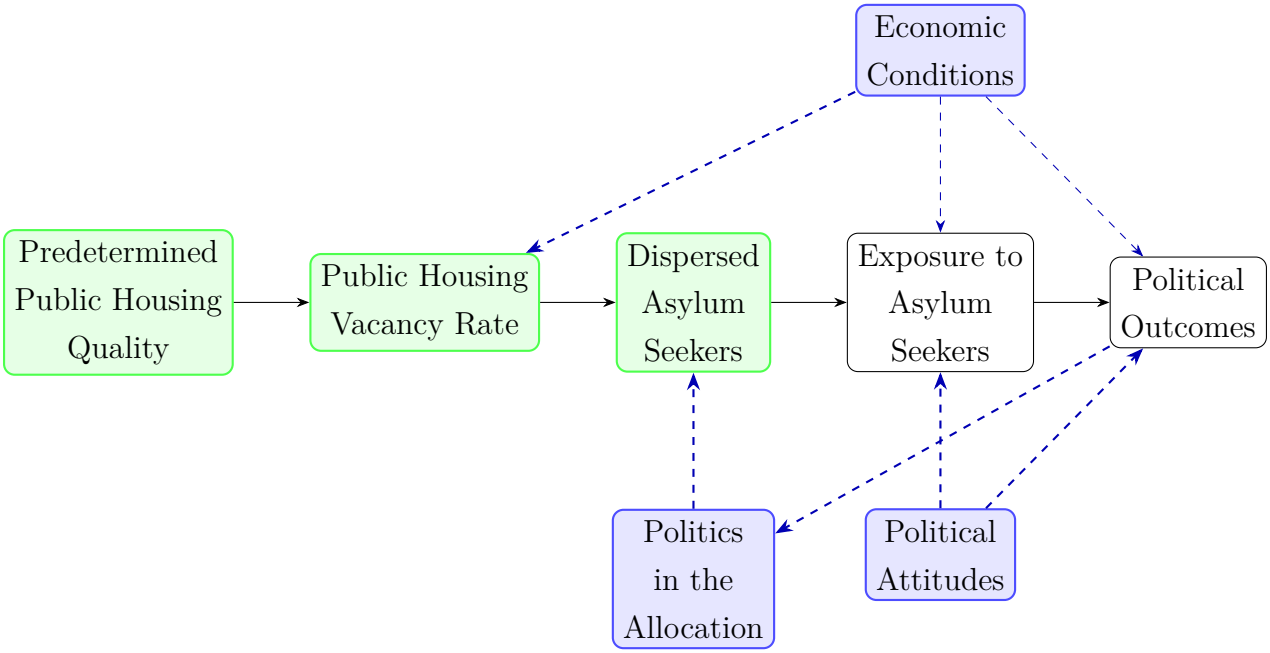


(d) *Dispersed* Asylum Seekers (2011-2019) vs. Low-Quality Public Dwellings (2002)



Notes: The figure reports cross-sectional correlations between *dispersed* asylum seekers, vacancy rates and shares of low-quality public housing. Panel (a) plots the correlation between *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita received by each LA (cumulative over the entire 2004-2019 period; vertical axis) and the number of vacant public dwellings per capita in 2002 (horizontal axis). Panel (b) plots the correlation between the number of vacant public dwellings per capita in 2002 (vertical axis) and the number of low-quality public dwellings per capita in 2002 (horizontal axis). Panels (c)-(d) show the correlation between *dispersed* asylum seekers per capita received by each LA (cumulative over the 2004-2010 period in panel (c) and the 2011-2019 period in panel (d); vertical axis) and the number of low-quality public dwellings per capita in 2002 (horizontal axis). Marker size is proportional to LA population in 2001.

Figure OA.8: **Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG): Empirical Question, Potential Confounders and Identification Strategy**



Notes: The figure reports a DAG representation of our empirical question (in white), the main potential unobservable confounders (in blue) and potential instrumental variables (in green). Arrows indicate causal relationship: solid lines denote relationships between observable variables, while dashed lines represent relationships between observable and unobservable variables. The main causal relationship of interest – namely, the impact of local exposure to asylum seekers on political outcomes – is confounded by unobservable local trends in economic conditions and political attitudes, which may jointly affect both the location decisions of asylum seekers and local electoral outcomes. *Dispersed* asylum seekers could provide an exogenous measure of local exposure – since the allocation is orthogonal to asylum seekers' preferences and choices – if the dispersal policy were not subject to *politics in the allocation*, which makes it endogenous to political outcomes. Vacancy rates of public housing would constitute a valid instrument for *dispersed* asylum seekers – and therefore for local exposure – if they were not also driven by unobservable local economic trends affecting housing demand. Predetermined characteristics of public housing (in particular, poor quality) thus provide an instrument for vacancy rate – and, in turn, for the other variables – which is arguably exogenous to any of the unobservable confounders in our setting.

O.A.4 Online Appendix Tables

Table OA.1: **Local Elections: Cons.-Lab. Vote Share Gap (OLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Cons-Lab Vote Share Gap		
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.003*	0.002	0.002
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	-	Y	Y
LA Linear Trend	-	-	Y
Mean DV	.115	.115	.115

Notes: Panel A reports OLS estimates from regressing the vote-share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in local elections on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"). This variable is measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table OA.2: **Local Elections: Vote Shares and Turnout – Pre- and Post-2010 (OLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
				Vote Shares:				**Turnout**
	Cons.-Lab. Gap	**Labour**	**Conserv.**	**Lib-Dem**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Other**	
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.002	-0.002*	-0.000	0.001	-0.000	-0.001	0.003	0.003***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD) × Post 2010	-0.001	0.003*	0.002*	-0.007***	0.001	0.004***	-0.003*	-0.002**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,541
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.115	.265	.38	.179	.041	.058	.078	.425

Notes: **The table reports OLS estimates from regressing various local election outcomes – the Conservative-Labour vote share gap (Col. 1), individual party shares (Cols. 2-7) and voter turnout (Col. 8) – on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"), both alone and interacted with a post-2010 dummy variable. This variable is measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019 (2004-2018 for turnout; see footnote 8). The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.**

Table OA.3: **Local Elections: Share of Elected Councillors, by Party – Pre- and Post-2010 (OLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Share of Elected Councillors:					
	Labour	**Conserv.**	**Lib-Dem**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Other**
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	-0.006**	0.003	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD) × Post 2010	0.009**	0.003	-0.010***	-0.000	0.001	-0.002
	(0.004)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.291	.475	.154	.01	.012	.059

Notes: **The table reports OLS estimates from regressing party shares of elected councillors in local elections on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"), both alone and interacted with a post-2010 dummy variable. This variable is measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.**

Table OA.4: **Local Elections: Vote Shares Conditional on Running, and Small Parties' Participation Decisions (2SLS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	Vote Shares (conditional on running):					**Participation:**	
	Labour	**Conserv.**	**Lib-Dem**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Green**	**UKIP**
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	-0.026***	0.006**	0.001	0.007*	0.009	-0.001	0.018
	(0.008)	(0.003)	(0.007)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.024)	(0.031)
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD) × Post 2010	0.004	0.004**	-0.012***	0.003	0.005	0.009	0.027
	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.013)	(0.016)
Observations	2,755	2,774	2,666	2,144	2,035	2,775	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.267	.38	.187	.053	.078	.773	.734
FS F-stat	8.86	8.93	8.86	5.3	8.88	8.93	8.93
FS F-stat inter.	24.19	24.19	22.64	19.45	21.28	24.2	24.2

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing alternative local election outcomes – individual party shares conditional on running (Cols. 1-5) and a dummy equal to one if the Green party and the UKIP stand for election (Cols. 6-7) – on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"), both alone and interacted with a post-2010 dummy variable. The variable "*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)" – measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV", constructed as in equation (2). An interaction of the instrumental variable with the post-2010 dummy is also included in the first stage. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table OA.5: **Local Elections: Cons.-Lab. Vote Share Gap – Instrumenting with IV Sub-Components (2SLS and FS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Panel A - 2SLS Estimates			
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.031***	0.036*	0.028***	0.029***
	(0.011)	(0.019)	(0.010)	(0.010)
	Panel B - First-Stage Estimates			
Low Quality IV	12.179***			
	(3.599)			
Difficult to Let IV		20.091**		2.402
		(7.796)		(10.519)
Undesirable IV			18.731***	17.771**
			(5.511)	(7.521)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.115	.115	.115	.115
FS F-stat	11.45	6.64	11.55	6.15
Overidentification pval	-	-	-	.527

Notes: The table reports 2SLS (Panel A) and FS estimates (Panel B) from regressing the vote-share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in local elections on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"). This variable is measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. Column (1) reports estimates using our main instrument (*Low-Quality* IV, constructed as in equation (2)). Columns (2) and (3) use alternative instruments based solely on the number of difficult-to-let and undesirable dwellings, respectively (each divided by the total number of public dwellings) and Column (4) includes both components as separate instruments. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table OA.6: **Local Elections: Cons.-Lab. Vote Share Gap – Alternative IVs and Measures of Local Exposure (2SLS and FS)**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Panel A - 2SLS Estimates							
Dispersed AS (1'000)	0.206***	0.092**	0.090*	0.233***				
	(0.078)	(0.040)	(0.049)	(0.062)				
Dispersed AS p.c.					0.100***	0.084***	0.070*	0.110***
					(0.037)	(0.024)	(0.038)	(0.026)
	Panel B - First-Stage Estimates							
Low-Quality IV	1.813***				3.717***			
	(0.579)				(1.098)			
Predicted AS		0.561***				0.614***		
		(0.159)				(0.181)		
Alt. IV (vacant '98)			0.499**				0.639**	
			(0.194)				(0.261)	
Alt. IV (dispersed only)				2.803***				5.934***
				(0.729)				(1.389)
Observations	2,775	2,775	2,699	2,775	2,775	2,775	2,699	2,775
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.115	.115	.115	.115	.115	.115	.115	.115
FS F-stat	9.79	12.4	6.61	14.79	11.45	11.54	6.01	18.24

Notes: The table reports 2SLS (Panel A) and FS estimates (Panel B) from regressing the vote-share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in local elections on two alternative measures of local exposure: (i) "*Dispersed* AS (1'000)": the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers in the second quarter of each year (in thousands) in Columns (1)–(4); (ii) "*Dispersed* AS p.c.": the non-standardised per capita measure in Columns (5)–(8). These variables are instrumented with: (i) "*Low-Quality* IV" is our main instrument, constructed as in equation (2) (Cols. 1 and 5); (ii) "Predicted AS" is the total number of *dispersed* AS in all the LAs included in the sample at the end of the second quarter of the year, multiplied by the number of low-quality public dwellings in the LA divided by the total number of public dwellings in all the LAs included in the sample (Cols. 2 and 6); (iii) "Alt. IV (vacant '98)" is the total number of *dispersed* AS in the UK at the end of the second quarter of the year, multiplied by the share of vacant public dwellings in the LA in 1998 (Cols. 3 and 7); (iv) "Alt. IV (dispersed only)" is constructed as our main IV but the *shift-component* is the national number of *dispersed* asylum seekers, rather than the total number of *dispersed* and *non-dispersed* (Cols. 4 and 8). All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is election year-LA. Observations are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table OA.7: **Local Elections: Cons.-Lab. Vote Share Gap - Before and After the Introduction of the Dispersal Policy (Reduced Form)**

	Pre Dispersal	Post Dispersal
Main IV	-0.021	0.712***
	(0.080)	(0.162)
Observations	2,149	2,775
Period	1990-2001	2004-2019

Notes: This table presents reduced form estimates of the effect of the main instrument "*Low-Quality* IV" (constructed as in equation (2)) on the vote share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in local elections, before (1990-2001) and after (2004-2019) the introduction of the asylum dispersal policy. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table OA.8: **Local Elections: Cons.-Lab. Vote Share Gap – Sensitivity to Sample Restrictions (2SLS)**

	(1) **Excluding London/South East**	(2) **Excluding Post-2015 Period**	(3) **Excluding Never-Takers LAs**
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.026**	0.028**	0.039**
	(0.012)	(0.014)	(0.020)
Observations	1,993	1,859	1,478
LA and Year FE	Y	Y	Y
LA Controls	Y	Y	Y
Mean DV	.073	.123	.009

Notes: The table reports 2SLS estimates from regressing the vote-share difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in local elections on the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)"). This latter variable – measured in the second quarter of each year and standardized by the within-LA standard deviation – is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as in equation (2). Column 1 excludes London and the South East. Column 2 excludes data from 2015 onwards. Column 3 excludes LAs that did not host any asylum seekers during the sample period. All regressions include LA and year fixed effects. LA controls are: population size, the share of residents aged over 65, the unemployment rate, and real GDP per capita. Years: 2004-2019. The unit of observation is the LA-election year. Estimates are weighted by the resident population in each LA. Standard errors clustered at the LA level in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table OA.9: **Impact of Asylum Seekers on MPs' Speeches: Other Measures**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Sentiment Score			**Pro-migrants Score**			**Universalist Values Score**		
	All MPs	Labour	Cons.	All MPs	Labour	Cons.	All MPs	Labour	Cons.
Dispersed AS p.c. (SD)	0.004	-0.011	0.061	0.081	0.108	0.122	3.692	3.372	3.528
	(0.038)	(0.086)	(0.115)	(0.057)	(0.082)	(0.239)	(2.270)	(4.030)	(3.977)
Observations	1,732	552	1,067	1,727	549	1,066	4,293	1,811	3,096
Mean dep.	.138	.076	.171	.092	.078	.09	1.254	2.048	-.123
First stage F	9.51	2.85	6.92	9.5	2.85	6.93	15.94	7.46	15.33

Notes: 2SLS Estimates. All dependent variables are computed analysing MP speeches in the period 2004-2019 in the second and third quarters of the year (source: Hansard). Speeches with less than 10 non-stop words are excluded from the computation. Sentiment score (Cols. 1-3) is computed with Vader Sentiment Analyzer and measures the compound polarity of MP speeches when migration keywords are mentioned (it ranges between -1 for most negative to +1 for most positive speeches). Pro-migration score (Cols. 4-6) is computed with chatGPT 3.5-turbo and measures the average stance towards immigration in MP speeches when migration keywords are mentioned (more pro-immigrant speeches are assigned positive values). Universalist value score (Cols. 7-9) is an index of the relative frequency of universalist vs. communal moral terminology in all MPs' speeches (regardless of whether migration keywords are mentioned) and is computed following the methodology in Enke (2020). The main explanatory variable is the number of *dispersed* asylum seekers (per 1,000 population) residing in the LA ("*Dispersed* AS p.c. (SD)") standardized by the within-LA standard deviation. This variable is instrumented with the "*Low Quality* IV," constructed as described in equation (2). All regressions include LA and year fixed effects, and control for resident population, share of residents over 65 years old, real GDP per capita, and unemployment rate. Observations are weighted by the total number of speeches in the LA-year (considering all MPs, Labour MPs, or Conservative MPs, depending on the outcome variable). Significance levels: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.