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Abstract

Through analysis of the dynamics of decision-making on migration in Sicily, this paper shows how party elites define strategies to politicise (or not) the migration issue. Conventional explanations of the politicization of immigration have largely neglected decision-making processes and explicitly ignored the reasoning of political actors, assuming that cognitive factors and strategic considerations are less relevant in the migration policy domain than in others. They conversely assume that party elites politicise migration in reaction to pressures caused by increasing flows or issue salience, anti-migrant public attitudes and/or far right propaganda. In contrast, this paper shows how actors' understandings of migration flows and of public reactions are formed, and how they shape or influence the dynamics of politicisation. By doing so, the paper develops three key arguments. First, it is not self-evident that increases in migration flows, issue salience and/or social mobilisations lead to political contestation of migration or initiate reactive responses by political elites. Second, party elites' decisions to politicise migration or not are shaped by their understandings of the effects of migration on underlying social systems rather than by objective evidence about public attitudes or social mobilisations. Third, these understandings are embedded in narratives, influenced by inherited traditions, and reinforced by the outputs of the very decision-making dynamics that they contribute to shape. To develop these arguments, the paper adopts an actor-centred constructivist approach and investigates decision-making dynamics by applying insights from framing theories and sensemaking approaches.

Keywords

Introduction[*]

This paper shows the unexpected dynamics of politicisation of migration in Sicily, a region of Europe which was centrally affected by the migration crisis but where migration is not the object of (negative) political contestation. By illustrating how in Sicily objective events and incidents such as high migration flows, high issue salience and anti migrant public attitudes do not lead to politicisation, the paper aims to contribute to the broader debate on the politicisation of migration, showing that cognitive frames and their influence on strategic decisions are a crucial but missing part of the puzzle.

Accounts of the politicization of migration, indeed, tend to see it as the result of objective and measurable factors: an increase in migration flows; the consequent increase in issue salience, anti-migrant attitudes and social mobilisations; or the issue entrepreneurship of right-wing parties (Grande et al., 2018; Zurn, 2012; Van der Brug et al. 2015, Castelli Gattinara, 2017). The undeniable observation that conflicts over immigration have become salient in national elections and evidently impacted on the political agendas of governments has, however, led most of the scholarship to largely neglect decision-making processes and actors' beliefs. Most of the literature neglects the reasoning of political actors, assuming that cognitive factors and strategic considerations are less relevant in the immigration policy domain and that party elites *necessarily* politicise migration under the pressure of increasing flows, issue salience and the propaganda of the far right (Abou-Chadi and Helbling, 2018: 700). Put differently, most of the existing literature on politicisation focuses on how ideas in the migration policy field are contested, but not on how understandings of flows and of public reactions are produced in the first place and acted upon. This holds true, despite eminent scholarly works (Cohen et al., 1972; Brunsson, 1985; Kingdon, 2014) having illustrated the potential decoupling of problems and choices during the decision-making process.

This paper shows, instead, how actors' subjective understandings of migration flows and of public reactions are formed, and how they shape or influence dynamics of political contestation of migration. By doing so, the paper challenges some of the assumptions of the existing literature to argue that: first, it is not self-evident that increases in migration flows, in the salience of migration, and in social mobilisations lead to political contestation of the issue or initiate reactive responses by party elites (potential decoupling of problems and solutions). Second, party elites' decisions to politicise migration (or not) are not shaped by objective evidence about public attitudes or social mobilisations. Rather, they are shaped by their understandings of the effects of migration on underlying social systems, formed through a process of sensemaking that is influenced by the events and cues that they pick up from the environment around them, past experiences, identity processes, social relations (potential decoupling of evidence and understandings). Third, these understandings are embedded in narratives, influenced by inherited traditions (Bevir and Rhodes, 2008: 171), and reinforced by the outputs of the very decision-making dynamics that they contribute to shape (sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments).

To develop these arguments, the paper adopts an actor-centred constructivist approach and investigates decision-making dynamics by applying insights from framing theories and sensemaking approaches. The paper applies the approach developed to the case of Sicily, a powerful and counter-intuitive case that demonstrates the value of the broader conceptual and methodological claim made. Sicily has been centrally and crucially affected by the refugee crisis: after 2015 it became the main European "gateway" for asylum-seeking migration, and its reception centres, at the peak of the crisis, hosted the highest number of asylum-seekers in Italy (Ministry of Interior, 2018). It has also experienced an increase in anti-migrant attitudes and in the salience of the migration issue. Despite that, as this paper will show, it experienced very low levels of political contestation of migration, and these distinctive dynamics of politicisation are largely based on actors' beliefs.

The paper begins by developing its theoretical approach and conceptual claims. It then justifies case selection and illustrates why Sicily is a puzzling and revealing case. This is then followed by a section that shows migration not to be the object of negative political contestation in Sicily, despite objective indicators suggesting that it should be. The subsequent section uses material from 41 semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2018 to unpick decision-making processes, to show how meanings are constitutive of the actions/inactions of political actors in Sicily, and thus to illustrate the drivers of these unexpected dynamics of politicisation in the region.

Opening the "black box" of the politicisation process

Politicization means "making collectively binding decisions an object of public discussion" (Zurn, 2012: 50). It is generally understood as a multi-dimensional concept (Grande et al., 2018: 2) which combines salience (the visibility of the issue) and polarization (the existence of conflicting views).

The existing literature on the politicisation of migration almost exclusively focuses on these visible and measurable "outputs", such as shifts in party positions on immigration and the political conflict during electoral campaigns. Taking these outputs as dependent variables, many scholars have examined causal relationships with the aim to identify their main "drivers" (Grande et al., 2018). The process of construction of immigration as a public issue is thus generally understood as the result of the interplay between multiple factors. At least three different strands can be identified in this scholarship, which focus, respectively, on: socio-economic variables such as migration patterns, models of integration and the unemployment rate (Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2017; Van der Brug et al. 2015); public attitudes on immigration and issue salience (Gilligan, 2015; Castelli Gattinara, 2017); and issue entrepreneurship by radical right parties or moderate centre-right parties (Van Spanje 2010; Hobolt and De Vries, 2015; Meyer and Rosenberger, 2015; Grande et al. 2018).

Decision-making processes, instead, are largely neglected by these scholarly works. Scholars from all these strands, in fact, tend to extrapolate back from these observed outputs of the politicisation process mere assumptions about the reasoning of political actors, under the conviction that "strategic considerations are less relevant in this domain than in others" (Abou-Chadi and Helbling, 2018: 700). Therefore, following an increase in migration flows and issue salience, radical right parties are assumed to adopt issue entrepreneurship strategies. Mainstream parties, on the other hand, are assumed to be prompted or to be forced to modify their positions on migration – "whether they like it or not" (ibid.) – in response to increasing migration flows, concerns expressed by the populations, and the pressure from the far-right (Gianfreda, 2017; Vranceanu, 2017).

While these considerations are evidently plausible, I argue that making assumptions about the nature of a process by extrapolating back from its outputs is problematic from an analytical and methodological point of view. Brunsson (1985) showed the scope for the presence of complex and often contradictory pressures to which parties must try to respond and that are not necessarily evident in the outcome of policy processes (Boswell and Geddes, 2011). These pressures might be due to both material and ideational factors. Particularly in situations of crisis, actors' interpretations of the effects of external environments powerfully drive decision-making preferences, often leading to the decoupling of problems and choices in the political process (Cohen et al., 1972).

This paper focuses on this "missing middle" to shed light on the question of how actors' understandings of the effects of migration flows and of public reactions to such flows are formed, and how they shape or influence dynamics of political contestation of migration. The paper thus reverses the traditional analytical focus of the existing literature and, rather than examining outputs, adopts a constructivist actor-centred perspective focused on decision-making processes, and, more specifically, on how actors frame problems, make sense of the situation around them and make decisions on how to act upon these understandings.

To do so, I will focus on both actors' understandings and the political context in which they operate (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 4). Actors' understandings of the consequences of migration flows and of public reactions to these flows necessarily drive actors' strategies (Pierre, 2000), forming the basis for an answer to the two key questions – "what is going on?" and "what should be done next?" – that actors face when they have to define their course of action in situations of crisis. The social and political context in which actors operate plays a key role in influencing how these understandings are developed and processed to shape actions. I assume, therefore, that actors are both "situated agents" (ibid.) – whose cognitive understandings and context for action are shaped by social, historical, political and organisational settings – and "strategic actors", who have a certain capacity to shape and influence the context in which they operate with their decisions (Hay, 2002: 128).

To investigate actors' individual purposive actions, their cognitive micro-foundations, and their impact on party elites' strategies, I draw concepts and ideas from the framing perspective and the sensemaking approach, two largely separate literatures, both of which have addressed the cognitive process by which the meaning of events is constructed, negotiated and translated into action.

While framing theories are often applied in political science, I specifically focus on cognitive frames rather than frames in communication (Scheufele, 1999: 106), in other words, I focus on the "micro" individual cognitive dimension of the framing process to extrapolate the set of dimensions that drive individuals' processing of information and understanding of events. The sensemaking approach, conversely, has been mostly developed in organizational studies (Weick, 1995; 2001) and emphasizes the social psychological and epistemological processes by which actors form an understanding of the situations they find themselves in and assign meaning to novel, unexpected or confusing events (Helms Mills et al., 2010: 183). Applying concepts and ideas from this second approach seems particularly relevant to investigate actors' strategies in the context of the refugee crisis: sensemaking, indeed, is specifically salient in situations of ambiguity or uncertainty, when a personal jolt, shock or break of routine, violating expectancies, requires individuals to develop some sort of sense regarding what they are up against, what their own position is relative to what they sense, and what they need to do (Weick, 1995).

According to Bird and Osland (2005: 125), framing and sensemaking are ontologically and methodologically compatible. Following their contributions to the literature on organizational studies, indeed, sensemaking can be conceptualised as an ongoing process involving an iterative cycle of sequential events: (1) framing the situation, (2) making attributions or assigning meaning to this situation, and (3) selecting a script that, based on the frames and attributions adopted, guides actions. Applying these two approaches together, I argue, allows to shed light on the question of how understandings about migration and public attitudes on migration are formed and acted upon, and of the impact of these processes on the politicisation of migration (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework (in green: the traditional politicisation argument; in red: the sensemaking process)
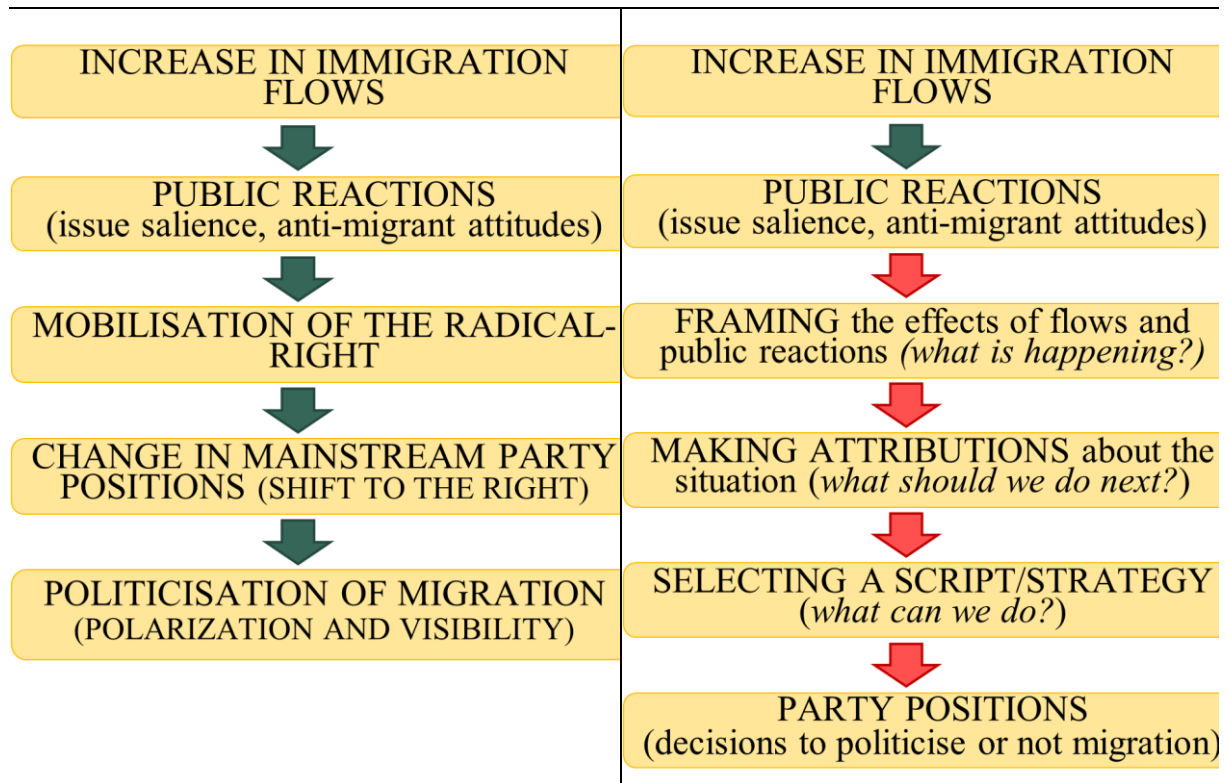
Case Selection

The approach developed is applied to the case of the Italian region of Sicily, a powerful heuristic case (Eckstein, 1973), selected for its high explanatory value, which allows to illustrate the value of the broader conceptual and methodological claim illustrated so far.

This region, I argue, represents a highly puzzling and revealing case. On the one hand, the existing literature suggests that, at least until 2014, migration in the region was not politicised, indeed. Traditionally, Sicilian politicians did not show any inclination to exploit anti-migrant fears for electoral gain (Cole, 1997: 124). Bassi (2014: 60) reports that, before the refugee crisis, immigration was not a prevailing concern on the Sicilian regional agenda, unlike in other regions.

On the other hand, at least four elements would suggest the emergence of dynamics there that, according to the assumptions of the existing literature, should lead to high levels of political contestation of migration.

First, the region's exposure to migration flows. Sicilian harbours became, since 2014, the main European "gateway" for asylum-seeking migration, and the region hosted the highest number of asylum-seekers in Italy, including half of the thousands of unaccompanied minors that landed in the country (Ministry of Interior, 2018). Asylum-seekers were dispersed throughout the region and reception centres were often created in rural areas, characterised by high unemployment and a stagnant economy harshly hit by the economic crisis. In 2017, more than 5,000 asylum-seekers were hosted in the "CARA di Mineo", a huge reception centre in a village in the province of Catania, with around 5,000 inhabitants.

Second, public reactions to these flows, a key factor leading to the politicisation of migration, according to the literature. Data from the last Eurobarometer, indeed, suggest that in 2018 the salience

of migration in Sicily was significantly high (23 per cent of respondents mentioned immigration as their first issue of concern, according to Il Sole 24 Ore[1]). Furthermore, other polls suggest that Sicilians express more negative sentiments towards migrants compared to people living in the Centre and North of Italy (Genovese et al., 2016: 9; Dennison, 2018), a trend that can be explained by both macro-economic factors (high unemployment and low income, leading to a higher labour market competition) and the presence of large Home Office centres such as the "CARA di Mineo" (Genovese et al., 2016). Ambrosini (2018: 119-121) and other sources[2] also suggest that migrants have been the target of a number of protests and xenophobic attacks.
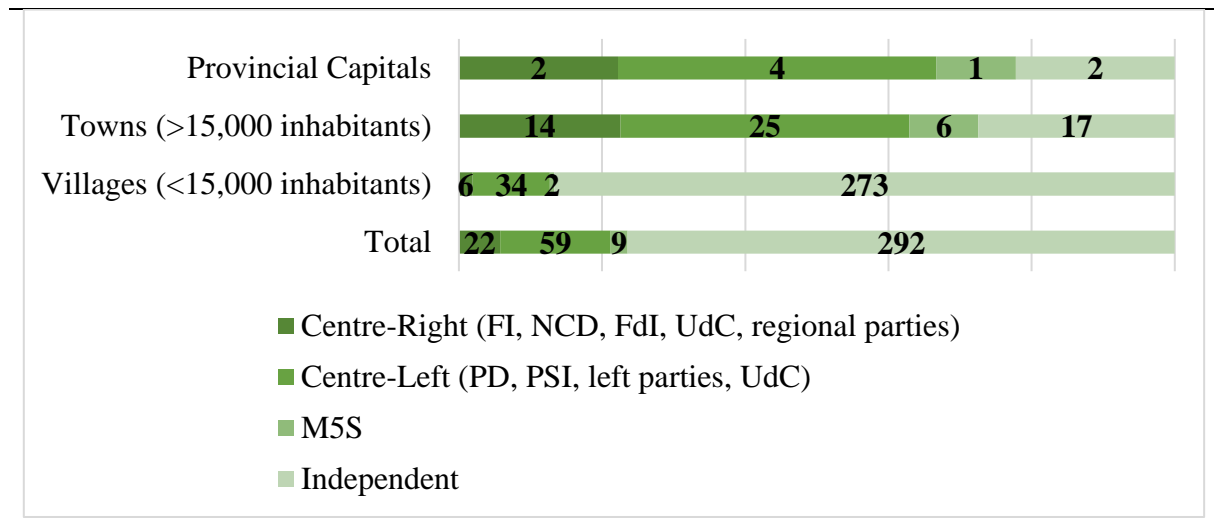
Third, the many scandals around asylum management in Sicily, which received wide coverage in both local and national media. The recent history of the region, in fact, has been marked by frequent scandals concerning the management of reception centres, often created as profit-driven businesses rather than providers of aid (Manzano et al., 2018: 83), the infiltration of the organized crime in the reception system (Massey, 2015: 24), and "media outrages on the living conditions of migrants" (D'Angelo, 2018: 2). Importantly, twenty interviews conducted, as part of a wider study (Pettrachin, *forthcoming*), with high level officials in the Ministry of Interior and national politicians in early 2018 revealed that these scandals powerfully influenced these actors' understandings of the refugee crisis and, ultimately, their strategies or policy choices.

Fourth, the very high political variation within Sicily – suggesting the potential for the adoption by parties of strategies of issue-differentiation – and the presence of strong and deeply rooted far right party, Fratelli d'Italia. After 2011, in fact, Sicily has been characterized by both extreme electoral volatility between one election and the other, and a significant instability of preferences in elections of different types (Cerruto and Raniolo, 2018: 419). Electors in the region for decades had massively supported moderate or conservative centre-right parties, but after 2011 their popularity started to decrease. The region became the main stronghold of the protest party Movimento Cinque Stelle, which after 2012 was the leading party at all regional and national elections but did not manage to win the governorship nor a significant number of municipalities (Figure 2). The regional government was controlled by the centre-left until 2017 and, then, by the centre-right coalition, with a strong far right component, mainly represented by the post-fascist Fratelli d'Italia. The far-right Lega was totally alien to the regional context but started to gain some consensus in the region after Salvini decided to get rid of its traditional anti-southernism and turned it into a nationalist far-right party. The very high number of mayors not affiliated to the main parties in Figure 2, finally, is a sign of the personalisation of local Sicilian politics. This is particularly evident in small municipalities, where mayors tend to turn into powerful gatekeepers that can provide political favours to citizens in exchange of votes (Parisi and Pasquino, 1977).

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[1] Source: https://www.infodata.ilsole24ore.com/2019/01/21/dimaiosalviniconsensopolitica/

[2] https://www.lasicilia.it/news/cronaca/188512/pestati-e-insultati-aggressioni-a-migranti-in-aumento-ma-la-sicilia-e-razzista.html.

Figure 2. Number of Sicilian municipalities led by different parties in late 2017 (source: www.comuniverso.it)

	Centre-Right (FI, NCD, FdI, UdC, regional parties)	Centre-Left (PD, PSI, left parties, UdC)	M5S	Independent
Provincial Capitals	2	4	1	2
Towns (>15,000 inhabitants)	14	25	6	17
Villages (<15,000 inhabitants)	6	34	2	273
Total	22	59	9	292

These four considerations suggest the potential for an increasing politicisation of migration in Sicily. The rest of this paper will therefore investigate, first, whether in fact the refugee crisis led to an increased political contestation of migration in Sicily and, secondly, how actors' understandings and decision-making processes influenced the politicisation process. The analysis draws on an extensive document analysis and on 41 semi-structured interviews conducted in May 2018 (see Tables A1 and A2 in the annex), across three geographical areas: North-Eastern Sicily (Messina, Catania), South-Eastern Sicily (Ragusa, Siracusa) and Western Sicily (Palermo, Trapani). As shown in Table A2, the sample includes party-actors from across the whole political spectrum.

The Diverse Politicisation of Migration in Sicily

This section shows that, despite the increase in flows, salience and public awareness, most party-actors in Sicily, until 2018, did not politicise migration. To reach this conclusion, I focus on the two elements that, following Zurn (2012: 51) and Grande et al. (2018: 7), define political contestation, namely issue salience, intended here as the visibility of immigration issue in relation to other issues in an election campaign, and polarization, i.e. the positional variance between parties on the immigration issue.

To assess issue salience, I develop a content analysis of manifestoes of mayoral candidates at the 2018 local elections in 14 Sicilian municipalities (Table 1), and of presidential candidates at the 2017 regional elections (Table 2). The use of party manifesto data to study the politicization of migration is common in the existing literature (Grande et al., 2018: 7) and it is assumed that they provide reliable insights on the strategic efforts of parties to emphasize immigration issues in an election.

Table 1. Number of electoral manifestoes that mention migration - Local Elections, 2018[3] (in bold: municipalities hosting reception centres; in Italics: municipalities hosting SPRAR centres)

		Number of Mayoral Candidates	Manifestoes that do not mention immigration	Manifestoes proposing pro-migrant policies (or framing the effects of migration positively)	Manifestoes proposing anti-migrant policies (or framing the effects of migration negatively)
Pr. Capitals	*Messina*	5	1	3	1
	Catania	5	4	1	0
	Siracusa	7	4	2	1
	Ragusa	7	5	1	1
	Trapani	5	4	0	1
Towns	*Modica (RG)*	4	1	2	1
	Mascalucia (CT)	4	3	1	0
	Carlentini (SR)	5	5	0	0
	Taormina (ME)	3	3	0	0
Villages	*Valderice (TP)*	3	3	0	0
	Santa Domenica (ME)	2	2	0	0
	Francofonte (SR)	4	3	0	1
	Acate (RG)	3	0	2	1
	Mineo (CT)	3	3	0	0
	TOTAL	60	41	12	7

Table 2. Electoral Manifestoes that Mention Migration - Regional Elections, November 2017

	Immigration or asylum not mentioned in the electoral manifesto	Manifesto frames the effects of migration in positive terms	Manifesto frames migration in neutral/ technical terms	Manifesto frames the effects of migration in negative terms
Presidential Candidates	**Musumeci** (centre-right)	**Micari** (centre-left) **Fava** (left)	**Cancelleri** (M5S)	

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[3] In 2018 local elections in Sicily were held in 137 municipalities. This selected sample includes all provincial capitals where elections were held and a representative number of towns and villages, randomly selected in order to keep a balance between geographical areas, number of inhabitants, number of asylum-seekers hosted and type of reception centres.

The analysis clearly suggests that most party-actors tend not to politicise migration. In the provincial capitals, 7 of the 27 manifestoes, mainly from left-wing or centre-left candidates, frame migration in positive terms, while only four frame its effects negatively: two candidates exclusively supported by the Lega (who both gained less than 2 percent of the votes), and two (non-elected) candidates of the centre-right coalition supported by the Lega. The inclusion of anti-migrant frames in these latter manifestoes, according to local media, was imposed by the Lega as a condition for the party's support to those candidates[4]. The Lega, therefore, emerges as the only party that attempts to inject anti-migrant frames into the local debate.

In towns and villages, only 8 manifestoes mention migration (3 of them frame its effects in negative terms) despite most of the selected municipalities hosting SPRAR reception centres directly managed by local governments. Even in Mineo, the village that hosted the biggest reception centre in Europe, none of the three manifestoes advocated closure or partial emptying of the centre.

The interview material confirms this finding. Most of the interviewees stated that they could not remember any debate or discussion on immigration during recent local or regional electoral campaigns. As an interviewee explains:

> If I think about local and regional electoral campaigns in the last two years, I have never heard any statement on immigration. I remember the last local electoral campaign in Pozzallo in 2017, where you would say immigration could have been a very salient issue, and rather it was a topic that was never mentioned, nobody spoke about it (Director of a local research centre).

The only candidates that are reported to speak about immigration during electoral campaigns are progressive candidates in the main cities, such as the Mayor of Palermo Orlando who, according to a centre-left MP, declared during the final rally of his campaign in 2017 that "whoever lives in Palermo is a Palermitan citizen, no matter where he comes from". Importantly, while the Lega's attempts to politicise immigration are perceived as a shock to the system by some interviewees, others play down their effects:

> The Lega gained some votes at the last national elections, but its members in Sicily are not conveyors of the typical ideas of the Lega on immigration, they are old politicians coming from other parties (…). If you speak with them or read what they say, you'll never find any public statement about migration (Deputy Prefect).

To assess polarization in the Sicilian political system, instead, I rely on the interview material and develop a manual frame analysis of actors' responses to questions investigating their perception of the effects of recent migration flows in their municipality and region. Findings are detailed in Table 3 below. The table suggests that at least three different perspectives on migration coexist in the Sicilian political system. A first restricted group of actors includes six mayors and deputy mayors of provincial capitals or port towns, who adopt multiculturalist frames and describe the effects of migration in very positive terms. The vast majority of actors, instead, refuse to frame the effects of migrant flows *per se* in negative or positive terms. Rather, they adopt "administrative frames" – putting a strong emphasis on the negative problems caused by the inefficient management of asylum – or circumscribe the effects of flows to the realm of people's perceptions or do not identify any relevant effect of immigration in their municipalities. Finally, a third group of actors – including two mayors of villages that hosted big reception centres, two MPs from centre-right parties with previous affiliations to the far right MSI/AN, and an independent mayor affiliated to the Lega – tend to adopt securitised or threat frames and describe the effects of migration in very negative terms (although none of them used identitarian or nativist frames, as might have been expected given the strong anti-migrant positions of these parties).

Despite the existence of divergent views, importantly, the table reveals that actors' political affiliation cannot predict the frames adopted. Table 3 indicates, indeed, that some of the interviewees

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[4]   https://www.ragusaoggi.it/la-lega-appoggera-la-candidatura-a-sindaco-di-maurizio-tumino-confronto-con-il-vertice-siciliano/

affiliated to centre-right or right-wing parties adopt administrative or even multiculturalist frames. This finding is confirmed by an analysis of media interviews released by the leaders of these parties in the island. The right-wing President of the Region Nello Musumeci, close to Fratelli d'Italia, and the President of the Regional Council and leader of Forza Italia Gianfranco Micciché, for instance, never adopted anti-migrant frames in public and even expressed pro-migrant positions[5]. Remarkably, the right-wing mayor of Mazara del Vallo (an important port town close to Trapani), member of Fratelli d'Italia, became known as one of the strongest advocates of multiculturalism and cross-Mediterranean connections in the region despite its right-wing party being known for xenophobic nationalism (Giglioli, 2017: 758). As the director of a local research centre interviewed puts it:

> The political debate on immigration in Sicily is messy and confused (…). I mean, it's not possible to identify clear differences in party approaches to immigration, they have very mixed positions. You can find a left-wing administration which is very hostile towards migrants and a very open-minded mayor from Fratelli d'Italia.

Importantly, when asked about the position they adopted in debates about immigration during recent electoral campaigns, the five interviewees that adopt securitised frames also replied that the issue was not at the core of the manifesto of their party. No reference to immigration, in fact, can be identified in their social media pages. As one of them states, "this matter cannot be a topic of discussion in electoral campaigns, because it is strictly under the competence of the national government, mayoral candidates must explain how they plan to solve the problems of their municipality" (centre-right MP).

To sum up, most party actors adopt ambiguous stances while describing the effects of migration in Sicily and do not politicise migration. A few centre-right actors do adopt securitised frames but do not act to politicise the issue. Finally, in contrast with a well-established finding in the politicisation literature (Green-Pedersen and Otjes, 2017; Grande et al., 2018 etc.), it is not right-wing actors but, rather, a number of mayors of the main provincial capitals and port towns that act as issue entrepreneurs, i.e. actors that "actively promote a previously ignored issue and adopt a position which is different from the mean position in the party system" (Hobolt and De Vries, 2015: 1161). These mayors adopt multiculturalist frames and thus promote an unusual type of "positive politicisation" of migration in the region.

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[5] http://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2018/08/24/news/si-sono-di-destra-ma-i-migranti-li-chiamo-fratelli-1.325912; https://palermo.repubblica.it/politica/2018/08/24/news/diciotti_micciche_contro_salvini_sei_uno_str_cancelleri_all_attac co_fi_supera_il_pd_a_sinistra_-204799662/

Table 3. Frame Analysis: How Interviewees Frame the Effects of Asylum-Seeking Migration in their City or Region (CR=centre-right politician; CL=centre-left politician; M5S=politician from the Movimento Cinque Stelle; IND=independent politician)

		CR7	M5S3	IND1	IND6	CL1	CL6	CR1	CR5	M5S6	IND3	IND4	IND5	CL2	CL4	CR4	M5S1	M5S2	M5S4	M5S5	CL3	CL5	LEGA	CR2	CR3	CR6	IND2
Securitised / threat frames	Law and order (security)																						■	■	■	■	
	Negative economic effects (labour and public finance)																						■		■	■	■
	Social or institutional tensions/protests																							■	■		■
Administrative frames	Burden for local authorities - management problems																■		■	■						■	■
	Asylum management became a profitable business												■	■			■	■	■	■						■	■
	New opportunities for criminal organizations to flourish		■														■	■	■		■					■	■
Public reaction frames	Raising intolerance by local population				■							■	■	■		■	■		■					■			
"No effect" frames	No significant effects							■	■	■																	
Multiculturalist frames	Positive socio-cultural effects	■	■	■	■	■	■							■							■						
	Positive economic effects					■					■					■				■							

Why is migration not the object of (negative) political contestation in Sicily?

How can we explain the distinctive dynamics of politicisation of migration in Sicily, which are contrary to the expectations derived from the three main strands of the politicisation literature? To address this question, I identify an overarching narrative that seems to influence most actors' understandings and then show how the three groups of party-actors identified above make sense of the situation around them and define their strategies and positions on migration.

The "Sicilian Theory"

The interview material crucially reveals that evidence about public attitudes on migration in Sicily is strongly embedded in a narrative story: most party-actors' understandings of public reactions to recent flows are powerfully influenced by inclusive identity-processes and what Jeffrey Cole in 1997 defined as "the prevalence of preconceptions about Sicilian tolerance among the local intelligentsia".

Many of the actors interviewed, indeed, referred to Sicily's multicultural past and its position at the crossroads of Mediterranean history as a key element that influenced their responses to the refugee crisis. The point is illustrated by the following quotes:

> We Sicilians are the product of migration flows, from and to this island, across all the dominations that we experienced in history. Therefore, we are ready for asylum-seekers' reception, we believe in this reception and in multiculturalism (Deputy Mayor, Independent).

> I think what determined Sicily's response [to the crisis] is its history and culture, which is built on the capacity to open itself up to the world outside. Sicily is at the centre of the Mediterranean, it couldn't have been different (Deputy Mayor, PD).

> I really couldn't have an instinct to shut myself away, because I really love the Sicilian culture and history. We melted with Arabs, Greeks, Romans, they all left us something, and they all taught us something (MP, centre-left, previously M5S).

> Our history and our culture help us making the right decisions (Mayor, centre-right).

Importantly, this narrative is proposed also by actors affiliated to centre-right or right-wing parties. The right-wing President of the Region, Nello Musumeci, declared in 2018, that "there is no racism in Sicily, a land which has been dominated by fifteen different foreign populations, and is used to coexist peacefully with people from other cultures"[6]. The right-wing mayor of Mazara del Vallo explained, during a media interview, that in his town "there are no tensions between different communities, since centuries Jews, Muslims and Christians live in the same territory and they respect each other, we did nothing more than going further along the same lines"[7].

The experience of nearly a century of emigration from the region also seems to powerfully influence actors' understandings. Nine interviewees referred to Sicilian emigration as an element that powerfully shaped their view of recent migration flows. As a PD Mayor puts it:

> I'm a politician since many years and I have a political view of the current migration flows. But I make no secret that I also have a personal view, influenced by the fact that I have relatives that have been migrants. They had harsh troubles at the beginning (…), I know what "reception" in a foreign country meant to them. Therefore, it's very easy for me to understand the reasons why these migrants come here…they are forced to. We have been a people of migration too (Mayor, PD).

Crucially, this prevailing narrative on Sicilian tolerance tends to be projected by most interviewees to the entire Sicilian population:

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[6] http://espresso.repubblica.it/palazzo/2018/08/24/news/si-sono-di-destra-ma-i-migranti-li-chiamo-fratelli-1.325912

[7] http://www.libertacivili.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Primo-Piano-Intervista-Cristaldi.pdf

> Sicilian citizens have always been super welcoming, because of their history and culture, they are used to share their land with other populations and they are open to different cultures (…) and this explains why recent migration flows have not been really suffered here (MP, M5S).

> We have a history of absorbing outsiders, having been dominated throughout the ages by Romans, Arabs, Byzantines and Normans, and the city is deeply catholic. The combination of these two elements make of Palermo a very welcoming city, a city that cannot be easily affected by racism (centre-left MP).

> "I was elected mayor with a victory of 74 percent. That means people think I'm right. There is no intolerance in the stomach of the people, it's only in politicians' minds" (Leoluca Orlando, Mayor of Palermo, interview released to The Guardian, 2018)

A deputy mayor from the M5S explains that "being welcoming towards newcomers is in Sicilians' DNA", while an independent deputy mayor explains that "our people accepted the idea that the future of this city is that of being a multicultural city".

Furthermore, this model tends to contrast the acceptance of Southern Italian with the intolerance of Northern Italians. At least four interviewees suggest that the experience of marginality and stigmatization endured by Southern Italians, particularly in the North of Italy, necessarily fosters a compassionate understanding for asylum-seekers. As a former MP puts it:

> Especially in Northern Italy, we Sicilians have suffered what asylum-seekers are suffering now. Until a few decades ago, in Bolzano, just to give you an example from a personal experience in my family, they didn't rent houses to Sicilians, even if they had an employment contract, even if they were very nice people, with children (centre-left MP, previously M5S).

A PD Deputy Mayor and a centre-right Mayor are even more explicit in pointing to the concentration of anti-immigrant politics and intolerance in the North by way of contrast to Sicilian tolerance:

> Once, in a meeting with other mayors I said that "talking about reception and solidarity is very nice but putting them into practice is different". They talked about solidarity but then 20 or 30 asylum-seekers were sent to a big city in the North and they raised hell. Here, we have put the principles of reception and solidarity into practice (PD Deputy Mayor).

This eagerness to compare oneself favourably with the North, to address and avenge unjust treatment and characterizations, seems to be an example of what Cole defines as the "ongoing Sicilian reaction to anti-southernism in Italian politics and culture" (1997: 101). It also shows how immigration discourses in Sicily develop "in relation to internal forms of 'othering' of southern Italians" (Giglioli, 2017: 749).

Importantly, all these accounts are at odds with existing data on public attitudes on migration, suggesting that most of the Sicilian population perceive migrants as a burden and that the issue is more salient than this narrative would suggest. This seems to support Cole's "Sicilian thesis" (1997: 101), according to which Sicily's history and culture, and the long experience of emigration, "would explain the acceptance of migrants there, or should justify such acceptance if it did not already exist". The Sicilian political elite, in other words, recalling the emigrant experience and the history of Arab and Norman civilization in Sicily, would ground the acceptance of migrants in historical precedent and "give local resonance to abstract formulations of anti-racism and diversity" (ibid.: 132). In Cole's words "a powerful and satisfying, if insinuating and destructive, 'commonsense' can and does emerge from a fusion of ideologies" (ibid.).

These dynamics seem consistent with well-established findings in the literature on sensemaking. According to Weick, sensemaking is grounded in identity construction (1995: 18) and identities are constructed through interactions with others: "what outsiders think we are and how they treat us stabilizes or destabilizes our identity" (Weick et al., 2005: 416). Also, they clearly indicate that the opportunity for sensemaking is provided by retrospection: individuals rely on familiar past experiences and the factors that have shaped their lives to make sense and interpret current events (Helms Mills et al., 2010: 184).

Pro-migrant narratives in the main Sicilian cities and port towns

Mayors of the main Sicilian cities and port towns that adopt multiculturalist frames and actively inject them into the public arena are particularly sensitive to the narrative on Sicilian tolerance. Their continuous invocation of Sicilian culture and history seems to seek making more evocative their general calls for tolerance, with the defining experience of past Sicilian emigration constituting the moral basis that they use for the enactment of this 'commonsense' in the present. The interview material reveals that this pre-existing perception is reinforced by several focusing events, indicators, personal experiences, and feedback, which, as suggested by the sensemaking literature, all play a key role in influencing how the interviewees assess the situation around them (Kingdon, 2014: 113).

One of these indicators seems to be the presence of a very active and strong civil society, particularly in big cities. In a context where most party-actors refrain from politicising migration, indeed, the politics of migration is mostly left to associations, NGOs and Christian churches, which ultimately play a crucial role in the local immigration policy-making (Bassi, 2014: 62). While most of the interviewees welcome the role played these NGOs, the four city deputy mayors interviewed admitted that these actors created significant (and, sometimes, uncomfortable) pressures to which they had to respond:

> As a Deputy Mayor responsible for immigration policies, I had of course to deal with the opposition of the Lega in the Council (…) but I mostly had to deal with pro-migrant activists, for whom the administration was not doing enough for the asylum-seekers. Sometimes they had very destructive attitudes, some of them tend to always perceive the institutions as something that must be contrasted, regardless of who is leading them and what they are doing (…). I could also perceive a strong competition between them, with the result that all of them tried to be in the limelight (…). And they consider you responsible of what the central government does, as if you were not doing enough to contrast them (Independent Deputy Mayor).

> We experienced some pressures, but they were coming from the civil society, from the NGOs, not from public opinion in general. Public opinion did not exert any significant pressure on this issue, while some of the NGOs did (PD Deputy Mayor).

Another element that seems to have influenced these actors' understandings is the direct experience of assisting migrants' landing process. This strong personal experience is mentioned by all mayors of provincial capitals and port towns as something that powerfully influenced their understandings. A Deputy Mayor from the M5S and the mayor of a port village referred both to their involvement in the process of distribution and to the burial of the bodies of migrants who died during the journey as a really shocking experience. The Deputy Mayor explains that "it was really heart-breaking, at the end I thought, none of us can choose the place where we were born, and therefore how can we not receive these people?". The mayor of the port village explains that what he saw reminded him of the pictures of the victims of Nazi concentration camps.

Finally, the wider European and Italian context also seems to contribute to activate these identity processes. The interview material reveals, indeed, that, without any constraint from public opinion, these mayors seem to think that the refugee crisis offers an opportunity to develop pro-migrant discourses that are also aimed, strategically, at "branding of difference" (Catungal and Leslie, 2009) and promoting a new image of their cities. Giglioli (2017: 758) explains that the Mayor of Mazara del Vallo started to formally celebrate the multicultural status of the town with the aim to rebrand it as a tourist destination and strategic location for cross-Mediterranean relations. The Mayor of Palermo, interviewed by CNBC[8], declared that "there is no city in the world that changed so deeply and widely like Palermo: in the last 40 years we went through a tremendous change, we started from being the capital of mafia to being the capital of human rights". A PD Deputy Mayor interviewed explained that he thinks "the refugee crisis is an opportunity for Sicily and its cities, to show their capacity to be open to the world, and to be an example for others". An independent deputy mayor adds:

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[8]   https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/28/italy-election-immigration-is-seen-as-a-key-issue-in-sicily.html

> We proposed a model that we want to offer to others (…) The vice-president of the German parliament went to Palermo to discuss the "Charter of Palermo" and understand what it means. Palermo won a Special Prize as "Smart City IBM" thanks to it. In New York they asked themselves, how is it possible that these Sicilian people, that everybody perceives as being invaded by migrants, rather than complaining because they are facing an invasion, tell migrants "come, and we will try to develop some reception programmes"? Therefore, they used their time to understand what we were doing, they came to Sicily, they spent one month in Palermo to understand how this model could be exported elsewhere (Independent Deputy Mayor).

A similar logic seems to apply to the main port villages and towns, although in this case the decision to adopt pro-migrant narratives seems to be, at least partly, a defensive strategy, to preserve the image of the municipalities as touristic destinations. As a Mayor explains:

> I really think that recent flows enriched the town from a cultural and social point of view. The only problem we have is that media tend to portray this town as invaded by migrants. It's not like this, local people don't even realise if some migrants are landed in the port, but these media campaigns harm us, because we live of tourism (Mayor of port village).

Therefore, ultimately, these attributions shape these actors' strategies and decisions. This explains the frequent use of pro-migrant frames in public speeches and rallies, and the launch of innovative human rights documents such as the Charter of Palermo, stating that "mobility must be recognized as an inalienable human right". Orlando even asked the competent national authorities to start using the port of Palermo to land rescued migrants and personally welcomed them in the port[9]. Coherent with this script is also the development of initiatives to export the "Sicilian model" abroad: the mayors of the main Sicilian cities and port towns were frequently invited to give speeches at foreign institutions and universities[10], to release interviews to international newspapers[11] and became popular abroad for their pro-migrant positions.

Outside the Main Cities: Asylum-Seekers' Reception as a Source of Job Opportunities?

As shown in Table 3, most of the party-actors interviewed – including MPs and mayors of small or medium-size municipalities – refuse to frame the effects of migration in Sicily either in positive or in negative terms. These actors' ambiguous stances, I argue, are revealing of Hall's concept of "deliberate malintegration" (1984). This concept suggests that actors involved in designing migration policies – which are often the object of a range of competing (mainly economic) interests – tend to develop strategies that are reflective "of an intentional jumble, or 'fudging', of different goals and priorities" (Geddes and Boswell, 2011), and that can therefore appear quite inconsistent or contradictory.

Differently from the mayors of the main cities, interviewees in rural Sicily, on the one hand, seem to perceive a stronger hostility from the local population towards migrants, due to the perceived competition in the bottom of the segmented labour market (especially in agriculture). Furthermore, many interviewees thus report that locals complain that immigrants receive the government attention they also deserve but cannot get. As two mayors put it:

> Part of the population does not understand the complexity of the phenomenon, and the responsibility is of politicians and of the national governments, because their hostility depends on the absence of welfare policies that could support families that are in need. What the underclass, in inverted commas, asks to the local administrations is the opportunity to be supported and granted a basic

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[9] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/apr/18/he-fought-the-mafia-and-won-now-this-mayor-is-taking-on-europe-over-migrants

[10] https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/leoluca-orlando---mayor-of-palermo/; http://www.nicolacristaldi.it/news/320/londra-17-giugno-2014-l-intervento-di-nicola-cristaldi-sindaco-di-mazara-del-vallo-nella-sede-del-parlamento-inglese; http://normanno.com/attualita/arrival-cities-accorinti-santisi-messina-modello-accoglienza/.

[11] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/apr/18/he-fought-the-mafia-and-won-now-this-mayor-is-taking-on-europe-over-migrants

income, and each time they make this request, they say, in Sicilian dialect, "to the blacks yes, to the whites no" (M5S Mayor)

Here, the locals don't say that they don't want asylum-seekers, they say that they must be integrated, that they should work and have a house. But they say they should also have all this. This is the key concept: why them and not me? Why the welfare system is so generous towards migrants but not towards locals? (PD Mayor)

On the other hand, interviewees in small economically struggling municipalities, seem to be much more aware of the economic benefits linked to asylum-seekers' reception (which in bigger and wealthier municipalities are less noticed and less needed). As a consequence of that, part of the population is perceived by most of these actors (including the mayor affiliated to the Lega) to be supportive or tolerant towards migrants' reception because of the opportunities of business or employment offered by asylum-seekers' reception. The mayor of a village that finally decided not to accept the Prefect's proposal to host some asylum-seekers explains that "part of the population, in fact a minority, sees the potential creation of a reception centre as an opportunity of local development for our municipality and to create jobs". As another right-wing mayor puts it:

Asylum-seekers reception became an opportunity for several service providers. Initially they were single centres, then the importance of asylum-seekers' reception grew up in the local economy. Of course, I don't think that this can or should represent a model of local development for this province, but actually it is a sector of the economy that can offer some responses to the very high unemployment that is a huge problem here (Mayor, right-wing).

Overall, local public opinion is thus perceived by most interviewees in Sicilian towns and villages as split between those that oppose immigration, for economic reasons rather than for identitarian or security reasons, and those that support asylum-seekers' reception for ideological reasons (a perception partly influenced by preconceptions on Sicilian tolerance) or because of the economic benefits associated to it. These elements seem to produce an enduring tension between the opportunity to offer employment to locals and, on the other hand, the fear of the negative reaction of the population. As a mayor explains:

The choice [to create or not a reception centre] is a difficult one. Clearly this sector is a source of job opportunities that we didn't have before (…). But overall, on the one hand we had an increase of high-skilled labour demand thanks to the SPRAR centres, on the other hand probably we had job losses in agriculture, since many asylum-seekers are now employed and exploited by local employers in the countryside (Mayor, M5S).

While these opposite pressures seem to emerge in the whole region, they seem to lead to different outcomes in different areas. In the little village of Mineo these pressures turned into harsh conflicts among locals. The village (with around 5,000 inhabitants), isolated in a mountainous area in the province of Catania, hosted the biggest reception centre of Europe (the so-called "CARA di Mineo"), with more than 5,000 asylum-seekers at the peak of the refugee crisis. On the one hand, the concentration of so many asylum-seekers in one single centre, according to several interviewees, created harsh problems of law and order. On the other hand, the centre offered jobs to hundreds of locals, in an area characterised by high unemployment and emigration rates. As two interviewees from the area explain, this situation led to harsh tensions among the "fortunate" and the "victims":

The presence of the CARA generated in Mineo a mechanism of self-destruction. Because here the emigration rate is high, many young people have to leave, and their parents were ready to do everything in order for this not to happen. Therefore, when they knew that their neighbours' son got a job in the CARA, they became extremely jealous and started fighting against each other, with lawsuits, denunciations and whatever. There has been a never-ending war, with citizens one against the other, which has powerfully destabilized the village (…). At some point all the town councillors from the opposition resigned, because the contrasts we experienced on this issue have been unbelievable (Mayor, centre-right).

Security is a relevant problem. The employment opportunities that asylum-seekers' reception offers can become a negative factor if they become speculative, sectarian or dominated by a patronage

system. What happened in Mineo is that we had a group of citizens that found a job and were fully realised, while others lived it as an additional injustice (Mayor, PD).

In such a situation – and despite forensic evidence that members of the Rome-based gang "Mafia Capitale" had bribed senior local authority and political officials in Rome to award maintenance contracts for the CARA to criminal associates and to divert migrants from other centres to Mineo – most party-actors decided not to take any position on the CARA in the wake of the local elections of 2018. Quite significantly, none of the three mayoral candidates included in the manifesto any significant statement on the CARA, motivating this decision by the fact that the local administration has no competences on the management of the centre.

In the rest of the region the underlying tension between the economic opportunities offered by migrants' reception and the perceived negative consequences on the local population remained more latent and forced mayors to make decisions on the creation of reception centres by balancing the different interests at stake. Sometimes, especially in little villages or when they perceived a strong opposition by locals, mayors decided not to support the creation of reception centres. In other cases, actors' perception that locals' hostility was unlikely to lead to anti-migrant protests led them to accept or even informally promote the creation of reception centres. When this happened, they seemed very careful not to make the decision appear to be open, a matter of choice, something that is decided upon and that therefore entails responsibility (Buzan et al., 1997: 29).

> Some interviewees, particularly from the civil society, suggest that these decisions are significantly influenced by the possibility that reception centres offer to develop new patronage relationships. As the head of a service provider puts it:

> Mayors are willing to create reception centres because, in a context of economic stagnation, these centres can offer jobs to several people. This is always a key element of their decisions. And I don't think this is scandalous per se, it is part of the effects of migration flows in broader terms, the fact that they have the potential to radically transform a socio-economic context (…). Some local administrations understood that, although, to be honest, for most of them the only element that matters is the opportunity to offer jobs to locals in a clientelist manner. This component is very strong. And very often it gets mixed with a genuine tendency to be welcoming with migrants. Everything is complex in Sicily, it is never black and white (Coordinator of a Service Provider).

To sum up, these actors' ambiguous stances and strategies of issue avoidance are linked to their perception of these competing interests. As a regional MP explains:

> Immigration is a very slippery slope, from a political point of view. When you openly speak about this topic, you know that by doing that you disappoint some and you please others. Therefore, typically, you tend not to take side, or to only refer to the national level, avoiding linking the issue to the regional level (…). Nobody speaks about that, and the reason is that everybody realises that this is a very slippery slope, where you can be perceived as a racist populist or as the one who takes care of migrants rather than poor Sicilians (Regional MP, M5S).

Potential anti-migrant political entrepreneurs

Finally, the case of those actors affiliated to centre-right parties that frame the effects of migration in securitarian terms but do not politicise migration, suggests that problem recognition is not sufficient by itself to place an item on the agenda. As Kingdon (2014: 114) explains, problems abound and decision-makers "pay serious attention to only a fraction of them", while several considerations independent of problem solving prompt politicians to act or not act, including attempts to "cast about ways to make their mark" or interest group pressure.

These actors, indeed, mostly perceive locals to be harshly hostile to migrants – as a centre-right MP explains "our traditional attitude to welcome those who are suffering has turned into widespread racist and xenophobic attitudes" – and tend to dismiss the importance of asylum-seekers' reception in the local economy. Three other elements explain their passive stances.

First, the way these actors assess the situation around them is mostly influenced by the lack of anti-migrant protests in the region, which seems to lead these actors to underestimate the salience of the issue in the region. These interviewees, indeed, do acknowledge that a part or most of the population is hostile to migrants (mainly for economic reasons) but seem to be convinced that such hostility is unlikely to generate protests or to gain political expression, influencing people's voting. Conversely, there seems to be a common perception in Sicily that electoral preferences are shaped by other more salient issues. As a centre-right MP puts it, "clearly, it is important to coordinate a strict opposition to potential future attempts to increase migration flows to our region, but we must avoid transforming local electoral campaigns into a struggle around an issue which is marginal" (centre-right MP). As a centre-left MP also explains:

> In a context where public transports are very inefficient or non-existent, waste management is a huge problem, having access to potable water is another big problem, people do not have a house or a job, well, in this context immigration is necessarily a marginal or less important issue (Centre-left MP).

Moreover, this idea is reinforced by the common perception that the impact of immigration in Sicily (and on Sicilians' perceptions) is limited because migrants do not aim to settle there:

> Since Sicily is affected by a diffused poverty, the impact of these flows is less strong (…). Some migrants who left the centres commit little crimes, or beg in the streets, but usually the situation is much worse in richer regions, where these people want to settle to develop their activities, sometimes legal, sometimes illegal. The only ones who settle here are those that don't want to work and keep doing nothing (…). And I tell you this, as somebody who is harshly against immigration (centre-right MP).

Second, these actors seem to think that politicising migration is not politically convenient. The catholic religion, in particular, is depicted by most of these actors as a foundational element of their identity and, as a centre-left MP explains, influences and constraints right-wing politicians. While possibly underestimating the salience of the issue, these actors, in fact, seem to be afraid of the negative political consequences that using anti-immigration frames publicly might have on the Sicilian electorate. A centre-right MP adopting securitarian frames admits, indeed, that "it is hard to say openly the things I tell you, because if you do so you are butchered in the media". This and other quotes suggest that actors' strategies are influenced by a strong "antipopulist norm" in Sicily dictating "that politicians should not seek to exploit racial, ethnic or immigration-related fears in order to win votes" (Freeman, 1995: 885).

Third, these actors seem to be influenced by some interest group pressure. Conservative parties in Sicily are traditionally close to the local economic elite and landowners, who often employ asylum-seekers and irregular migrants in low-skilled and low-paid jobs, mostly in agriculture (Corrado et al., 2018). As a centre-left MP puts it, "right-wing politicians in Sicily, with the exception of the Lega, have no incentives to frame migrants as a problem or an enemy and rather they tend to employ and exploit them in their business". As a right-wing mayor explains:

> It is common here to employ some of these non-EU migrants in houses and enterprises. Some of them work permanently, or quite permanently, or seasonally, and this has become normal. And they are employed not only to carry out tasks that locals don't want anymore, but also because they do it better, with higher dedication and greater punctuality, and certainly, on average, at a lower cost for employers (Right-wing mayor).

Other centre-right interviewees mentioned, during the interview, that they personally employed some foreigners or asylum-seekers in their farms or factories. As one of the MPs adopting securitarian frames admits:

> I'm the perfect example of a person who wants to promote migrants' integration. I have a personal experience in this sense, having employed in my farm some immigrants already ten years ago. I received them, I helped them with the family reunification, moved by humanitarian reasons and by the aim to integrate them in the labour market (centre-right MP).

In sum, the absence of anti-migrant protests – together with the strong Catholic identity and the close links between the conservative political elite and the local economic elite – prevents the emergence of anti-migrant political entrepreneurs and of a strong political contestation of migration in the Sicilian political debate.

Importantly, the opposite seems also true, as Figure 4 shows. Actors' strategies and their decision not to politicise migration, indeed, prevent the emergence of anti-migrant protests and the perceived absence of social mobilisations represents a powerful "feedback that gives information on current performance" (Kingdon, 2014: 113) which reinforces preconceptions of Sicilians' tolerance. Many interviewees, if explicitly asked so, reported that they actually remembered some spontaneous protests against the asylum-seekers by locals. These protests, however, received no support by the local political elites and did not gain significant media coverage, unlike those in other Italian regions (Pettrachin, 2019). In Kingdon's words (2014: 113) "focusing events, including disasters, crises, personal experience, and symbols, are important, but need accompaniment in the form of preexisting perceptions which they reinforce, firmer indicators, or combinations with other such events".

Figure 4. The non-politicisation of migration in rural Sicily
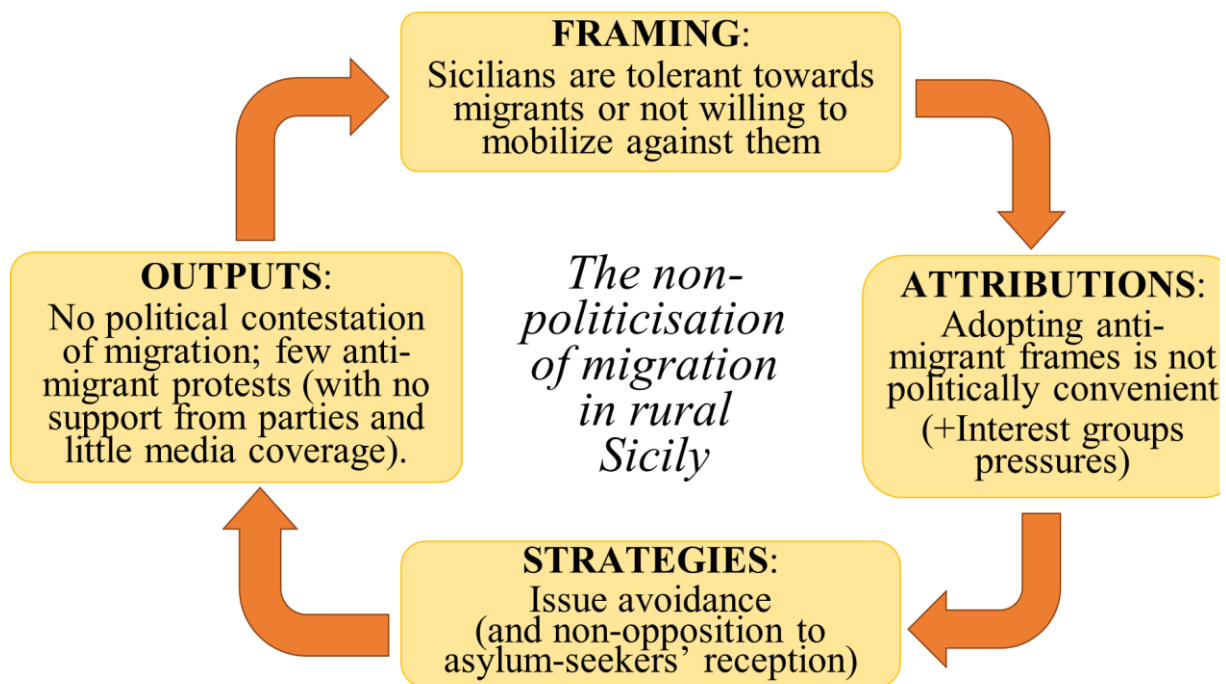
Conclusion

This paper has questioned some of the assumptions of the existing literature on the politicisation of migration, which tends to ignore the reasoning of political actors to conclude that political contestation is a (necessary) outcome of increasing migration flows and/or anti-migrant attitudes and/or pressures from the far-right. Rather than examining the objective and measurable inputs and outputs of the politicisation process, this paper has opened the "black box" of the politicisation process, looking specifically at party elites' understandings and decision-making processes.

The analysis has shown, first, that it is not self-evident that an increase in migration flows, in the salience of the migration issue and social mobilisations, lead to political contestation of migration or

initiate reactive policy responses. As explained by Cohen et al. (1972: 16), the relationship between problems and solutions is not necessarily smooth-flowing. This is not to say, clearly, that we should always expect a radical disconnect among public reactions and actors' politicization strategies but, rather, to make the point that a mere focus on objective and measurable outcomes is insufficient to catch the complexity of actors' decision-making and, ultimately, of the politicisation process itself. The Sicilian case is very revealing in this sense. Sicily has been centrally and crucially affected by the refugee crisis and experienced an increase in anti-migrant attitudes and in the salience of the migration issue, but, despite that, migration is not politicised. Most party-actors do not politicise migration. Migration is largely framed as an issue that is not a matter of choice, something that is decided upon and therefore entails responsibility at the regional and local levels. The only issue entrepreneurs (the mayors of the main cities) adopt multiculturalist frames and thus promote a very unusual type of "positive politicisation" of migration.

Secondly, the analysis has demonstrated that party elites' decisions not to politicise migration is driven by actors' understandings of the effects of migration on underlying social systems. Politicians, in other words, are not "passive recipients of information, but active choosers, interpreters and rationalizers" (Mutz, 2007: 91) and they form their understandings through a process of sensemaking that is influenced by the events and cues that they pick up from the environment around them, past experiences, identity processes, their social relations. The paper has crucially shown, for instance, that in the Sicilian case, evidence about public attitudes on migration is strongly embedded in a narrative story. Party-actors' understandings of public reactions to the migrant crisis are powerfully influenced by what Cole (1997) defined as the "prevalence of preconceptions about Sicilian tolerance" among the local intelligentsia, i.e. by the widespread idea that the Sicilian population is welcoming, or tolerant, or not willing to mobilise against asylum-seekers, and that this acceptance is justified by Sicily's history and culture. These understandings, disconnected from the reality suggested by available opinion polls, powerfully shape the way actors frame the situation around them, driving their decisions. Identity, in other words, seems to "turn out to be an issue of plausibility rather than accuracy, just as is the case for many issues that involve organizing and sensemaking" (Weick et al. 2005: 416).

The perceived absence of pressures from public opinion, then, leads party-actors to develop different courses of action based on the attributions that they make of the situation. In the main cities the attributions that mayors make are largely shaped by pressures coming from civil society actors such as the very active NGOs and Christian churches. In rural Sicily, instead, actors' strategies are largely shaped by the economic interests linked to the increasing importance of asylum-seekers' reception in the stagnant economy. These attributions lead mayors and other party-actors in the main cities to adopt radical pro-migrant narratives and preventing potential anti-migrant entrepreneurs, particularly in the countryside, from publicly using anti-migrant frames. The majority of actors outside the main cities adopt issue-avoidance strategies.

Finally, this paper has shown that sensemaking involves the active authoring of events and frameworks for understanding, as people play a role in constructing the very situations they attempt to comprehend (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014: 58). In other words, during the sensemaking process individuals, enacting the environments they face in dialogues and actions, generate a new reality, which can then influence or constrain the sensemaking process itself (Helms Mills et al., 2010: 185). In the Sicilian case, the absence of anti-migrant protests prevents the emergence of anti-migrant political entrepreneurs, but the absence of anti-migrant entrepreneurs in the region also prevents the emergence of anti-migrant campaigning, representing a powerful feedback that reinforces preconceptions of Sicilians' tolerance.

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Annex

Table A1. Sample of Interviewees

		N° of Semi-structured Interviews
Party Actors	Mayors/Deputy Mayors (Villages/Towns)	15
	Mayors/Deputy Mayors (Provincial Capitals)	4
	Regional MPs	2
	National MPs	6
Non-Party Actors	Deputy Prefects	2
	Trade unions	2
	Advocacy NGOs	3
	Service Providers	4
	Experts	2
	Civil Servants (Regional/Local authorities)	1
TOTAL		**41**

Table A2. Political Affiliation of Party-Actors Interviewed

Party Coalition	*Party*	N° of Semi-structured Interviews
Centre-Right	Fratelli d'Italia	1
	Lega (Noi con Salvini)	1
	Diventerà Bellissima	1
	Forza Italia	2
	Nuovo Centrodestra	3
Centre-Left	Partito Democratico	3
	Articolo 1-MDP	1
	I Verdi	1
None	Movimento Cinque Stelle	7
None	Independent	7
TOTAL		**27**