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# Migration mood and policy responsiveness: a structural analysis of public opinion, policy, and migration flows in Italy (1990–2020)

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## ABSTRACT


This study analyses the structural relationships between immigration flows, public opinion, and migration policy in Italy over three decades (1990–2020), with particular attention to the 2015–2018 migration crisis. We theorise a system of interconnected responsiveness and feedback among migration levels, public mood, salience, and policy, and test it using structural equation modelling and a unique longitudinal dataset combining official indicators of flows, survey-based mood indices, and a composite measure of policy openness. Over the long term, the system reveals patterns of public and policy responsiveness consistent with a thermostatic dynamic. During the crisis, however, this equilibrium breaks down: policy becomes unresponsive to public mood and instead reacts sharply to concerns and, partly, to migration pressures. At the same time, mood moves in the same direction as policy, indicating reinforcement rather than counterbalance. These results suggest that under crisis conditions, migration policy may become directly exposed to politicisation, and the public thermostat ceases to operate.

**KEYWORDS** Public attitudes; migration policy; migration; responsiveness; public thermostat

## Introduction

Over the last decades, immigration became increasingly central to the political agendas of many Western countries (Green-Pedersen & Otjes, 2019; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019, 2022). Although contexts were different, the dynamics were largely similar. In most countries, the issue was initially politicised by far-right parties advocating ‘zero-immigration’ policies (Grande *et al.*, 2019; Mudde, 2013; Norris, 2005), which helped them expand electorally as

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public concern about immigration grew (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Hatton, 2021). Mainstream right-wing parties adopted more restrictionist positions as well, while left-wing parties generally remained relatively more liberal (Grande *et al.*, 2019) – but in general, entire party systems moved towards more restrictionist positions over time (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Migration policy followed a similar course, albeit amid institutional constraints and persistent misperceptions (Czaika *et al.*, 2024; de Haas *et al.*, 2019; Geddes & Scholten, 2016).

Or at least, this is the dominant narrative in both scholarly and media accounts of migration politics – a narrative that often equates politicisation with an inexorable public turn against immigration. But did mass public opinion towards immigration really become more negative over time? Was there a persistent trend downward, or did opinion rather cycle around certain levels of tolerance? What caused such movements in public attitudes? Were they related to real changes in levels of immigration, or rather to perceptions and the politicisation of the issue? Did migration policy really follow a shift towards generalised restrictionism? And how do all these processes evolve under conditions of political crisis?

These questions have to do with the relationship between real-world events (immigration flows), political processes (public opinion), and policy outputs (migration policy) – and the underlying mechanisms of *dynamic representation* (Stimson *et al.*, 1995). Our understanding of these processes has increased markedly as research on the politics of migration has expanded in recent years. Yet immigration, public opinion and public policy have largely been studied separately, which means that our understanding of how these factors interact and influence each other is still partial. Systematic analyses were largely constrained by the limited availability of reliable longitudinal measures of the variables central to these processes. Whereas we are able to measure levels of immigration over time with good approximation, developing systematic, long-term indicators of mass public attitudes towards immigration, and of migration policies, has proved more challenging.

This article contributes to both the assessment and the accurate measurement of the relationship between immigration, mass attitudes, and policy. We present a theory of the interaction between real-world events, public opinion, and policy responses, and of the feedbacks between political and real-world processes. Our work builds on migration scholarship on the opinion/policy link. Early studies of migration policy responsiveness claimed the existence of a gap between opinions and migration policies (Freeman, 1995), which was also highlighted in more recent research (Morales *et al.*, 2015), attributing it to client politics (Freeman, 1995), insulation via supranational or intergovernmental venues (Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000; Scipioni, 2018), or liberal constraints (Hollifield, 1992; Joppke, 1998).

Subsequent research, however, finds evidence of opinion–policy responsiveness (Butz & Kehrberg, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2015; Jennings, 2009; Levy *et al.*, 2016) – especially as immigration becomes more salient (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Givens & Luedtke, 2005), which can activate latent opposition under intense political and media attention (Carvalho *et al.*, 2025; Hatton, 2021). At the same time, research questions whether policy can effectively regulate flows, especially in asylum and irregular domains heavily constrained by external drivers and implementation limits (Czaika & De Haas, 2013; de Haas *et al.*, 2019).

We connect these insights by modelling mood, salience, policy, and flows within a dynamic system regulated by mechanisms of representation and responsiveness. We hypothesise that migration mood reacts to immigration levels, becoming more negative when immigration increases, and more positive when migration decreases. We posit that such *opinion responsiveness* is mediated by the salience of migration. According to what we call *policy responsiveness*, we hypothesise that migration policy responds to migration mood, becoming more restrictionist when mood turns negative, and more open when attitudes are more positive. Moreover, *migration responsiveness* means that migration levels respond to migration policy – decreasing when policy becomes more restrictive, increasing when it is more liberal.

We also posit that the operation of a *public thermostat* (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Wlezien, 1995) generates some feedbacks within the system. A thermostatic logic connecting mass public attitudes to flows or policy has been brought directly to immigration by Jennings (2009), and more recently by Van Hauwaert and English (2019), Claassen and McLaren (2022), Van Hauwaert (2023), and Hartzell (2025). Similarly, we hypothesise that migration attitudes balance migration policy by moving in the opposite direction: demanding more policy restrictions when policy becomes more liberal, and more liberalism when policy is more restrictive. We then test if migration policy seeks to balance immigration levels following the operation of a *policy thermostat* – shifting towards restrictionism when immigration increases, and becoming more liberal when it decreases.

Our framework generalises the thermostatic model to migration politics by linking public and policy thermostats within a single dynamic system that also includes salience and migration flows. To test this theory, we assembled a unique longitudinal dataset combining official migration statistics with original data on public opinion and policy. Using algorithms developed to estimate measures of mass public attitudes from incomplete data (Stimson, 1999), we generated systematic, long-term indicators of attitudes towards immigration (*migration mood*), as well as of the openness of migration policy between 1990–2020. We focus on the case of Italy, an ideal case study considering its large variation along the key variables of interest over time. Italy was also central to the period commonly referred to as the

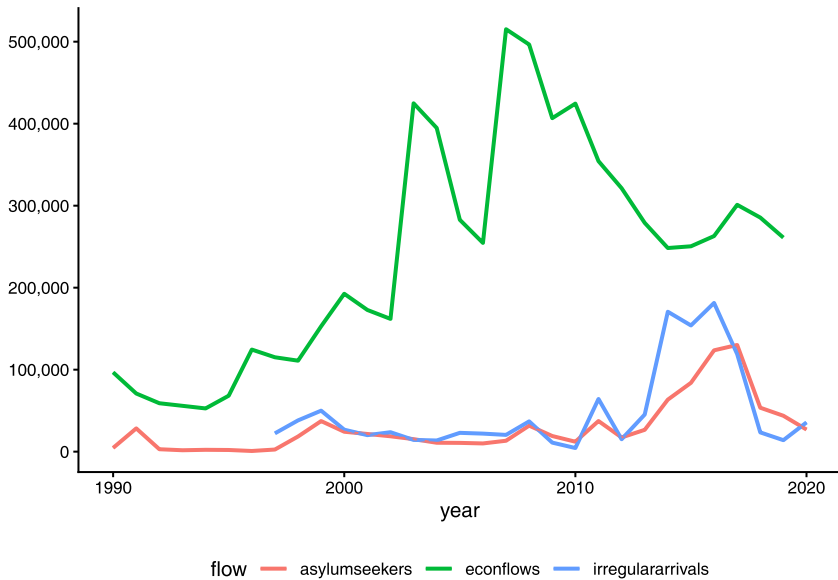
*migration crisis* that peaked between 2015–2018, providing an opportunity to examine whether and how the relationship between immigration, public opinion, and public policy shifted under conditions widely perceived as critical.

Our empirical analysis, which consists of a set of Structural Equation Models, finds significant mechanisms of public and policy responsiveness under normal conditions, with public opinion reacting to migration levels and moderating policy in a thermostatic manner. However, the analysis also shows that this equilibrium was disrupted during the migration crisis. Policy became unresponsive to public mood and instead reacted sharply to public salience and, partly, to migration pressures. At the same time, mood moved in the same direction of policy rather than counterbalancing it, signalling a reinforcement dynamic. Overall, these findings contribute to a better understanding of the conditions under which responsiveness in migration politics operates – and how, under crisis and politicisation, the public thermostat can cease to function.

### **Background. Immigration, public opinion, and migration policy in Italy**

Italy was predominantly a country of emigration from the end of the Second World War until the mid-1970s, with negative net migration flows. Migration turned moderately positive in the late 1970s and 1980s, fluctuated around zero in the 1990s, and has remained positive since 2000. Until 2010, most of the increase in immigration was driven by economic motives, such as employment or study (Figure 1). Annual inflows of regular migrants rose sharply, and as a result, the stock of foreign residents grew from under 500,000 in 1990 to 1.35 million in 2000, 3.65 million in 2010, and over five million by 2020. While most immigration occurred through regular channels, successive waves of regularisation (*sanatorie*) in 1995, 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2009 also contributed significantly.

Regular and forced migration are distinct but interrelated forms of mobility (de Haas *et al.*, 2019; Talleraas, 2022). Compared to labour migration, inflows of refugees and irregular arrivals – mostly arriving by sea, in the Italian case – have consistently been smaller. Asylum applications accounted for 10% of labour migration flows in the 1990s, 6% in the 2000s, and 20% in the 2010s. Data on irregular sea arrivals, available from 1997, show an average of 23,000 per year until 2010 – approximately 12% of regular migration. While there were episodic surges, such as during the Kosovo crisis, a major shift occurred in the following decade, when irregular arrivals rose sharply to about one-third the level of regular inflows. Despite their lower numbers, forced migration – not labour migration – became the focus of what was widely labelled a *migration crisis* (Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020). As migration



**Figure 1.** Economic, irregular, and asylum-related immigration flow in Italy, 2000–2019.

scholars argue, however, this crisis was rather a matter of intensified political focus than of migration levels: ‘the migration crisis was actually a crisis of politics, of trust and confidence in political institutions and in political leaders’ (Geddes *et al.*, 2020: 2).

As in other European countries, the changing migration landscape in Italy was increasingly politicised by far-right parties (Geddes & Scholten, 2016; Norris, 2005). Migration soon became an issue owned by these parties (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022), helping them to consolidate support – most notably the Northern League, which experienced a spectacular rise in the years surrounding the so-called migration crisis (Dennison & Geddes, 2022), subsequently followed by Brothers of Italy. While centre-right parties often adopted restrictionist positions (Hadj Abdou *et al.*, 2022), and the left generally leaned toward more liberal views, most parties have shifted in a more restrictive direction over the past decades – signalling a broader realignment in the party system.

Italy’s evolving immigration profile mirrors broader European trends of growth, diversification, and politicisation. These patterns suggest some degree of transmission from external conditions (migration flows) to political responses (public opinion and party competition) and ultimately to policy. While research on the politics of migration has expanded rapidly in recent years, flows, attitudes, and policy have often been examined in isolation. This fragmentation has hindered a systematic understanding of how these elements interact over time.

Two major theoretical perspectives dominate research on how immigration affects public opinion in receiving countries (for a review, Meer & Tolsma, 2014). Group threat theory (Blalock, 1957) posits that higher immigration levels provoke a backlash among host populations, leading to more negative attitudes (e.g. Kaufmann, 2014; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Quillian, 1995) and greater support for anti-immigrant parties (Norris, 2005). Contact theory, by contrast, suggests that greater exposure to immigrants can reduce prejudice and foster more positive attitudes, particularly when conditions favour meaningful interaction (e.g. Maxwell, 2019; McLaren, 2003).

While both theories are supported by empirical evidence, recent studies based on long-term, cross-national data paint a more complex picture. Research by Claassen and McLaren (2022) and Van Hauwaert and English (2019) shows that in the long term, greater immigration exposure tends to lead to increased acceptance – suggesting a habituation effect consistent with contact theory. However, this does not preclude short-term backlash effects, especially when immigration is sudden or perceived as disorderly (Hangartner et al., 2019). Experimental studies (e.g. Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2010) also find that the nature of immigration – such as skill level or perceived cultural distance – strongly conditions public reactions. Moreover, recent work underscores that contact can have positive effects at the micro level, but these can be overwhelmed by threat perceptions and perceived competition at higher levels of aggregation (Toshkov, 2024).

Taken together, these findings highlight the conditional nature of both contact and threat effects, which depend on the scale, timing, and perceived nature of immigration. Moreover, most studies tend to focus on regular or economically motivated migration. In contrast, the public salience and emotional intensity surrounding irregular migration and asylum-seeking may activate different perceptions and political mechanisms (e.g. Hangartner et al., 2019).

Research on the alignment between public opinion and migration policy has long centred on the so-called gap hypothesis. Early studies sought to explain why liberal immigration policies persisted despite widespread public preference for restriction. A leading explanation pointed to the distribution of immigration's costs and benefits: dispersed costs and concentrated benefits created a clientelist mode of politics, where policy was shaped by organised interests while insulated from public opinion (Freeman, 1995).

More recent work, however, finds that migration policy has become more responsive than the clientelist model suggests (Levy *et al.*, 2016). A key reason is the rising salience of migration in the public sphere, which constrains policymakers' ability to ignore popular demands for restriction (Givens & Luedtke, 2005). Across different contexts, salience has been shown to drive the politicisation of migration (Morales *et al.*, 2015), fuel the success of

anti-immigration parties (Dennison & Geddes, 2019), and increase the responsiveness of policy to public attitudes (Butz & Kehrberg, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2015).

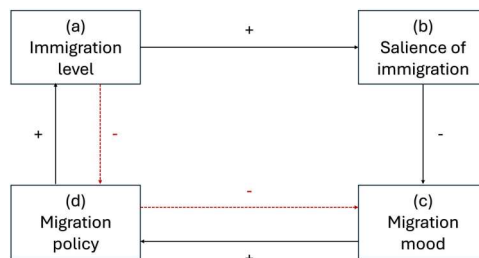
A more nuanced account of policy responsiveness – focussed specifically on asylum migration – was offered by Jennings (2009), who showed that the administration of asylum applications responds to the public salience of immigration. Jennings found that asylum applications and immigration salience are co-integrated in an error-correction relationship, operating as a kind of thermostat: when the salience of migration rises above a long-term equilibrium, policy adjusts over time to restore balance, and vice versa.

Another key question concerns whether the political processes linking immigration, public opinion, and policy also shape subsequent immigration levels. A growing literature suggests that migration policy does influence migration flows – particularly in the case of forced migration – highlighting a positive relationship between restrictive policies and lower inflows (Brekke *et al.*, 2017; Czaika & Hobolth, 2016; de Haas *et al.*, 2019; Toshkov, 2014).

Despite important advances, research on the migration–opinion–policy nexus remains fragmented. Different strands of scholarship have focussed separately on flows, attitudes, or policy, limiting our understanding of how these elements interact over time. One major constraint has been the lack of systematic, long-term indicators of both public opinion and migration policy. This paper addresses that gap by generating and analysing new time series on migration attitudes and policy outputs. Before presenting these data, the next section outlines our theoretical model.

### A theoretical model of the relation between immigration, opinion, and policy

We propose a theory that integrates previously disconnected evidence on the relationships between immigration, mass opinion, policy responses, and policy feedback. We conceptualise these relationships as components of a dynamic system, illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** A conceptual scheme for the relationship between immigration, migration mood, and migration policy.



### **Opinion responsiveness hypotheses**

We begin by examining the responsiveness of mass public opinions on immigration, which we call *migration mood*. Note that our expectations concern relative adjustments in the public's desired direction of immigration (higher or lower levels) and of policy (more or less restrictive), not the stability of absolute ideal points over decades. In thermostatic terms (Jennings & Wlezien, 2015; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010), the public updates its relative demand when policy or outcomes are perceived to move outside an acceptable range; we do not assume fixed absolute preferences. This is crucial in migration, where salience and crisis events may shift attention without implying long-run drift in absolute preferences (cf. Van Hauwaert, 2023).

How does mood relate to immigration? Existing research consistently points to a relationship between immigration levels and migration mood (Claassen & McLaren, 2022; Jennings, 2009; Van Hauwaert, 2023); some disagreement exists on the shape of this relation. We follow recent studies in arguing that the effect of immigration on mood depends on the degree of *concern* about the topic (Claassen & McLaren, 2022). The degree of concern, in turn, can be approximated by the salience of the topic among the public (Dennison & Vranceanu, 2022). Therefore, we distinguish between migration mood (evaluative orientations about migration) and salience (how much the issue engages attention) (Hatton, 2021).

Salience is analytically part of public opinion, but needs to be theorised (and modelled) separately because it mediates the relationship between flows and mood, and it can also condition policy responsiveness to mood. A growing body of research shows that the salience of immigration tends to rise with increases in immigration levels, particularly when flows are sudden, visible, or framed as exceptional events. Periods of heightened immigration typically attract greater media coverage and political attention, which in turn amplify public concern (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Carvalho *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, immigration salience can be interpreted as a function of both objective migration pressures and their political amplification – explaining why spikes in arrivals, especially of forced migrants, are often followed by peaks in perceived importance of immigration as a political issue (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Hatton, 2021). Therefore,

H1a. Migration levels are positively related to the public salience of migration.

Higher levels of immigration, coupled with increased salience, can also be associated with more negative public sentiment, at least in the short term (Claassen & McLaren, 2022). Larger or more visible inflows heighten perceptions of competition and cultural threat (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2010; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Quillian, 1995). Rapid increases in migration can also activate pre-existing anxieties and stereotypes rather than fostering contact-based

tolerance (Toshkov, 2024; Van Hauwaert & English, 2019). These mechanisms suggest that as immigration rises – particularly when inflows are irregular or politicised – the aggregate mood towards immigration is likely to deteriorate. Accordingly,

H1b. Migration salience is negatively related to migration mood.

The relationship between immigration and mood could also be contingent on the type of migration. As recent trends of politicisation show, ‘forced’ forms of migration – such as irregular arrivals or asylum migration – tend to raise higher concern than ‘regular’, labour immigration. The costs of forced migration are more visible than the benefits, media coverage takes a more negative tone, and it is more easily politicised by anti-immigration parties (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). Regular immigration in turn has clearer benefits, and in the long term it may even be associated with positive migration mood (Claassen & McLaren, 2022; Van Hauwaert & English, 2019). Hence,

H1c. Levels of ‘forced migration’ lead to reductions in migration mood. ‘Regular migration’ has no or positive effect on migration mood.

In sum, migration mood responds to levels of immigration, but the direction and strength of this response depend on public awareness and concern, which are captured by the salience of the issue and may vary by type of migration.

### ***Policy responsiveness hypotheses***

Theories of democratic representation posit that public policy tends to adjust to shifts in collective preferences. Classical models of policy responsiveness conceive government as updating policy outputs to reflect movements in public opinion (Erikson *et al.*, 2002; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Stimson *et al.*, 1995). When citizens become more supportive of a policy goal, elected officials anticipate or respond to electoral incentives by adapting policy in the same direction.

Even in highly politicised or institutionally constrained domains such as immigration, scholars have found evidence of responsiveness. Comparative analyses suggest that governments tend to enact more restrictive policies when public attitudes towards immigration become more negative, and more liberal policies when attitudes soften (Ford *et al.*, 2015; Levy *et al.*, 2016; Van Hauwaert, 2023). Such responsiveness, however, is partial and conditional: it may be stronger for salient and electorally visible dimensions (e.g. asylum or border control) than for more technical ones (e.g. integration policy) (Hatton, 2021; Morales *et al.*, 2015). In sum, we can hypothesise that policy makers respond to public preferences. In particular:

H2a. There is a positive relationship between opinion and policy in relative terms: when mood becomes more favourable towards immigration, policy becomes more open; when mood deteriorates, policy becomes more restrictive.

At the same time, responsiveness is unlikely to be uniform. A large body of work suggests that the degree of issue salience conditions the link between opinion and policy. When immigration is salient, politicians perceive electoral and reputational incentives to align with public preferences, and insulation through client politics or bureaucratic discretion weakens (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Freeman, 1995; Givens & Luedtke, 2005). Under low salience, by contrast, migration policy may reflect the influence of organised interests, international obligations, or administrative inertia rather than shifts in public mood. As such, salience acts both as a mobilising force and as an information signal, amplifying policy responsiveness when public attention is high and dampening it when attention wanes (Carvalho *et al.*, 2025; Hatton, 2021).

H2b. Higher migration salience should increase responsiveness, whereas low migration salience may decouple policy and mood through client politics or elite insulation.

### ***Immigration responsiveness hypothesis***

Most research in comparative migration politics focuses on how immigration shapes attitudes and policies. Fewer studies examine whether migration policy, in turn, affects actual inflows. Existing evidence suggests that policy can influence migration levels, though its effects are typically partial and domain-specific. Comparative studies of policy effectiveness show that more open regulatory regimes are generally associated with higher inflows, while restrictive policies can curb them – particularly for labour migration, where entry is more directly regulated (Czaika & De Haas, 2013; Czaika & Hobolth, 2016; de Haas *et al.*, 2019). Similar dynamics are observed for asylum and forced migration, although the magnitude of policy effects is often modest relative to conflict intensity, geography, and international burden-sharing arrangements (Brekke *et al.*, 2017; Toshkov, 2014).

The capacity of policy to shape immigration thus depends on policy scope and implementation. Destination-country policies can constrain entry and residence but have limited leverage over global drivers of migration such as wars, economic crises, or demographic pressures (Carammia *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, migration control is mediated by policy effectiveness – the extent to which governments translate formal restrictiveness into outcomes – shaped by administrative capacity, EU-level coordination, and cooperation with origin and transit states (Czaika *et al.*, 2024; de Haas *et al.*, 2019). In short, while migration policy is not the sole determinant of inflows, it remains a key part of the causal chain linking political decisions to population movements.

H3. There is a positive relationship between migration policy and levels of immigration. As the tone of migration policy becomes more liberal, immigration will increase; conversely, as policy becomes more restrictive, immigration will decrease – although the magnitude of this effect is expected to vary across migration domains.

### ***Feedbacks. Public and migration policy thermostat***

The relationship between public opinion and migration policy is not one-way. Just as policymakers respond to shifts in public mood, citizens also adjust their preferences in reaction to policy outputs. In thermostatic terms, public opinion reacts to policy change in a relative manner: when policy moves in one direction, the aggregate mood tends to move in the opposite direction, re-balancing its demand for ‘more’ or ‘less’ restrictive regulation (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010; Stimson *et al.*, 1995; Wlezien, 1995). Empirical applications confirm such negative feedbacks in diverse policy areas and, more recently, in immigration. For instance, Jennings (2009) documents a long-run equilibrium between asylum administration and public concern in the United Kingdom, while cross-national analyses show that opinion reacts thermostatically to policy change in migration domains (Hartzell, 2025; Van Hauwaert, 2023). Building on these findings, we expect migration mood to move counter-cyclically with migration policy.

H4a. Because of the operation of the public thermostat, migration policy will have a negative effect on migration mood: as policy becomes more restrictive, the public mood will request more liberalism; as policy becomes more liberal, migration mood will turn more negative.

A second feedback mechanism links policy to migration levels. Just as citizens adjust their preferences to policy, policymakers adjust policy to changing migration pressures. Rising immigration – particularly when visible or politically salient – creates incentives for governments to tighten admission and control policies; declining inflows permit liberalisation. This policy thermostat mirrors the logic of thermostatic representation, with policy acting to re-establish equilibrium between immigration outcomes and political acceptability. Prior studies find evidence of such compensatory adjustments: asylum inflows may trigger more restrictive legislation or administrative measures (Brekke *et al.*, 2017; Hatton, 2021), whereas periods of stability or declining arrivals are associated with policy relaxation (de Haas *et al.*, 2019). We therefore expect a negative relationship between immigration levels and subsequent policy openness:

H4b. Due to the *policy thermostat*, migration policy will move opposite to immigration: as immigration increases, policy will become more restrictive; as immigration decreases, policy becomes more liberal.

Together, these feedbacks close the dynamic system linking immigration, public opinion, and policy: opinion responds thermostatically to policy, and policy responds thermostatically to migration flows. Their strength and stability determine the overall responsiveness and equilibrium of migration politics.

Figure 2 provides a stylised representation of the theory, with signs indicating the expected direction of the relationship. The *public* and *policy* thermostats are shown as feedback dotted lines. For example, when immigration levels rise, immigration tends to become more salient among the public, the general mood towards immigration deteriorates, and policymakers respond by adopting more restrictive policies seeking to curb inflows:

- (a) [higher] immigration level → (b) [higher] salience of immigration → (c) [lower] migration mood → (d) [lower] immigration policy → (a) [lower] immigration level.

Change, however, can originate anywhere in the system.

This figure summarises a simplified theoretical model. In reality, migration politics is not a closed system: additional unobserved variables likely affect the dynamics, and individual links may vary in strength or direction across time and context. For instance, the transmission belt connecting public preferences and government policy may be weak or unstable (Carammia *et al.*, 2018), and migration policy may differ in its capacity to influence immigration flows. The actual functioning of the system will depend on institutional, political, and external factors. Nevertheless, we expect the dynamics to broadly follow the structure depicted above. We examine these expectations empirically in the next section using Structural Equation Models that jointly estimate the directional relationships among immigration, mood, salience, and policy.

## Research design

### Concepts

Our model rests on three main concepts – immigration, public opinion on immigration, and immigration policy – and one derived variable, salience, which we treat as a distinct component within the broader domain of public opinion. While salience is not a separate concept, we model it independently because it plays a dual role: it mediates the impact of immigration flows on public mood, and it conditions how strongly policymakers respond to public attitudes. This design choice explains why salience appears as a separate element in Figure 2.

**Immigration.** Migration is a broad concept encompassing different forms of population movements (Talleraas, 2022). A key distinction in migration studies separates economic (or ‘regular’) migration, such as labour or student mobility, from forced migration, including refugees and irregular arrivals. Public opinion and political actors tend to be more reactive to forced migration (Geddes & Pettrachin, 2020; Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). Within the European Union, most economic migration, particularly intra-EU mobility, is managed as ‘internal’ and is regulated by a relatively liberal regime (Czaika *et al.*, 2024; Geddes *et al.*, 2020). Forced migration, in contrast, is the object of intense politicisation, with opinion often more negative and policy more restrictive.

**Opinion towards immigration: migration mood and salience of migration.** Public opinion on immigration encompasses several attitudinal dimensions (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). As summarised by Dennison and Vranceanu (2022), attitudes can target immigrants themselves, immigration policy, the perceived effects of immigration, or its perceived importance as an issue. We distinguish between two broad components: migration mood, the evaluative orientation towards immigration, and salience, the degree of public attention to immigration as a political problem.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas most studies focus on individual attitudes, we analyse aggregate public mood – that is, the prevailing direction of mass attitudes over time. This approach follows the ‘policy mood’ tradition (Stimson, 1999, 2004), which conceptualises mood as the net balance of restrictive versus liberal sentiment in the population. Migration mood captures short- and long-term fluctuations in collective tolerance toward immigration, shaping the boundaries of politically acceptable responses.

Although closely related, salience is analytically distinct. It refers not to whether citizens favour or oppose immigration, but to how much they care about the issue (Dennison & Vranceanu, 2022; Hatton, 2021). Salience measures concern (Claassen & McLaren, 2022) or cognitive engagement, not policy preference. For this reason, we treat salience separately in the empirical model: it may increase when immigration rises, amplify negative sentiment (via attention and framing), and heighten political responsiveness.

### **Migration policy.**

Migration policies cover a wide range of instruments and domains – regulating entry, residence, integration, and return (Czaika *et al.*, 2024; Helbling *et al.*, 2017). They can also be classified according to their target populations, distinguishing, for instance, between economic and political migrants, or between regular and irregular forms of mobility (Czaika *et al.*, 2024; Helbling *et al.*, 2017).

Here we conceptualise immigration policy in broad terms, as the overall tone or temperature of national migration regulation, spanning laws,

administrative decisions, and international commitments. Analogous to migration mood, policy can vary along a continuum from liberal to restrictive, oscillating over time in response to political, social, and external pressures. Our focus is therefore not on individual legislative acts, but on the general direction of policy change – the net movement of the policy environment toward openness or closure over time.

## Data

**Table 1** summarises the variables and indicators used in this study and their relationship to the main concepts. The analysis integrates multiple data sources.

### Data on immigration:

- Data on economic migration from [UN DESA](#)<sup>2</sup> and the [OECD](#).<sup>3</sup>
- Data on asylum applications from [Eurostat](#)<sup>4</sup> and the [Unhcr](#).<sup>5</sup>
- Data on irregular arrivals by sea from [Frontex](#),<sup>6</sup> the European Union border agency.

### Public opinion:

- Data on the salience of immigration as a ‘Most Important Issue’ from [Eurobarometer](#) surveys.<sup>7</sup>
- Migration mood series estimated with the dyad ratios algorithm (Stimson, 2018) combining survey data from Eurobarometer, Eurofound, European Social Survey, European Values Study, Italian National Elections Studies (Itanes); Pew Global Attitudes and Trends; World Values Study.<sup>8</sup> Tables A1–A4 in the Appendix detail the estimation procedure at yearly and quarterly levels.

### Policy:

- We used the dyad ratios algorithm also to generate longitudinal measures of policy, assembling a set of composite indices from scholarly and institutional datasets: DEMIG (Czaika *et al.*, 2024; de Haas *et al.*, 2019), IMPIC (Helbling *et al.*, 2017), (UN DESA<sup>9</sup>), and (Mipex<sup>10</sup>) (for a review, Scipioni & Urso, 2017). Tables A5–A8 in the Appendix detail the estimation procedure at yearly and quarterly levels.

We leverage the variable data availability over time to carry out two complementary analyses. We first perform a general-level test of our theoretical model using yearly data covering the period 1990–2019. Most indicators are available at an annual frequency, including economic and asylum

**Table 1.** Concepts, variables, indicators.

General concept	Specific concept	Indicator	Variable name	Source	1990–2020 yearly data	2009–2020 quarterly data
Immigration	Forced migration – asylum migration	Number of asylum applications	asylumseekers	Eurostat; Unhcr	x	x
	Forced migration – irregular arrivals by sea	Number of irregular arrivals by sea	arrivalsbysea	Frontex		x
	Economic migration – stock	Stocks of foreign residents	econstocks	Eurostat; Undesa	x	x
Opinions on immigration	Economic migration – flow	New residence permits	econflows	Eurostat; Undesa	x	x
	Sallience of immigration	Sallience of immigration among public opinion	sallience	Eurobarometer		x
Immigration policy	Opinions about immigration	Immigration mood	migmood	Various surveys	x	x
	Overall immigration policy openness	Immigration policy openness	policy	Demig, Impic, Mipex, Undesa	x	x

<sup>1</sup> Variable econstocks, quarterly. Yearly data are linearly interpolated to estimate quarterly figures;<sup>2</sup> Variable econflows, quarterly. Yearly data are distributed among quarters to estimate quarterly figures;<sup>3</sup> Variable sallience, quarterly. Missing quarters estimated with linear interpolation;<sup>4</sup> Variable migmood, quarterly. Although quarterly data for most variables are available from 2008, the quarterly immigration mood series was created using data starting from 2003, which was one of the data-richest years. Correlation between 'long mood' and 2003–2019 mood series is .98.



migration, as well as our yearly measures of migration mood and migration policy.

We then take advantage of the richer and more finer-grained data that are available from 2009 to conduct a more intensive analysis on the decade surrounding the 2015 migration crisis (2009–2020). For this period we complement data on economic and asylum migration with indicators of irregular arrivals and of the salience of migration among the public. Some variables are available at the monthly level for this period, but not all. Moreover, although data sources for our measures of policy mood and migration policy also became more frequent in recent years, we do consider them sufficiently consistent to construct reliable monthly indicators. Therefore, we adopt a quarterly frequency for the 2009–2019 analysis. In sum, for the intensive analysis, we (a) use quarterly data when available, aggregating them to quarterly frequency; (b) generate quarterly series of migration mood and migration policy.

In the analysis that follows, we first describe the construction of our original series of migration mood and migration policy. We then plot all time series to provide a graphical illustration of the shape of each, at the yearly and quarterly levels before testing the theoretical model through a set of Structural Equations Models.

### ***Developing time series of migration mood and policy openness***

Tracing immigration attitudes over time is a complex task. The main sources of opinion data – public opinion surveys – rarely provide consistent time series. Questions on immigration attitudes were asked only intermittently, especially before the 2000s when migration was less salient and thus less frequently included in survey instruments. Although more survey programmes have recently added migration questions, they remain heterogeneous in wording and framing, even within the same survey house. As a result, there is considerable instability in how attitudes toward immigration are measured across time and sources.

The absence of reliable longitudinal indicators long prevented systematic analyses of the determinants and consequences of migration attitudes. Early studies therefore relied on the salience of immigration as a proxy for opinion (Jennings, 2009). The assumption that issue salience correlates with underlying preferences is plausible, but until recently it could not be tested empirically.

To address this limitation, we use the dyad ratios algorithm developed by James Stimson to estimate latent opinion series from sparse data, following the approach used to construct the well-known indicator of policy mood (Stimson, 2018). We apply this method to a large set of migration-related questions drawn from multiple sources of opinion data. Tables A1–A8 in

the Appendix provide details on the generation of the migration mood series at yearly and quarterly levels. Similar approaches have recently been employed by Claassen and McLaren (2022), Van Hauwaert and English (2019), Van Hauwaert (2023), and Ford *et al.* (2015).

A key innovation of this study lies in the development of a longitudinal indicator of migration policy using the same dyad ratios approach. Constructing consistent policy time series poses challenges similar to those for public opinion: data sources differ in scope, period coverage, frequency, and conceptualisation (Scipioni & Urso, 2017). Existing efforts to measure migration policy (e.g., DEMIG, IMPIC, MIPEX, UN DESA) are invaluable but fragmented, with different temporal coverage and scales. Moreover, prior thermostatic research has relied on bills (Hartzell, 2025) or flows (e.g. Jennings, 2009; Van Hauwaert, 2023) as proxies for policy restrictiveness, thus conflating policy with input and with output, respectively.

Our approach resolves these issues by integrating multiple independent sources and estimating a latent migration policy temperature indicator that captures the overall degree of policy openness at each point in time. This produces a unified and continuous measure – yearly for 1990–2020 and quarterly for 2009–2020 – that reflects the general orientation of migration policy rather than isolated events or outputs. This represents a notable advance in the measurement of migration policy, enabling the joint modelling of flows, opinion, salience, and policy.

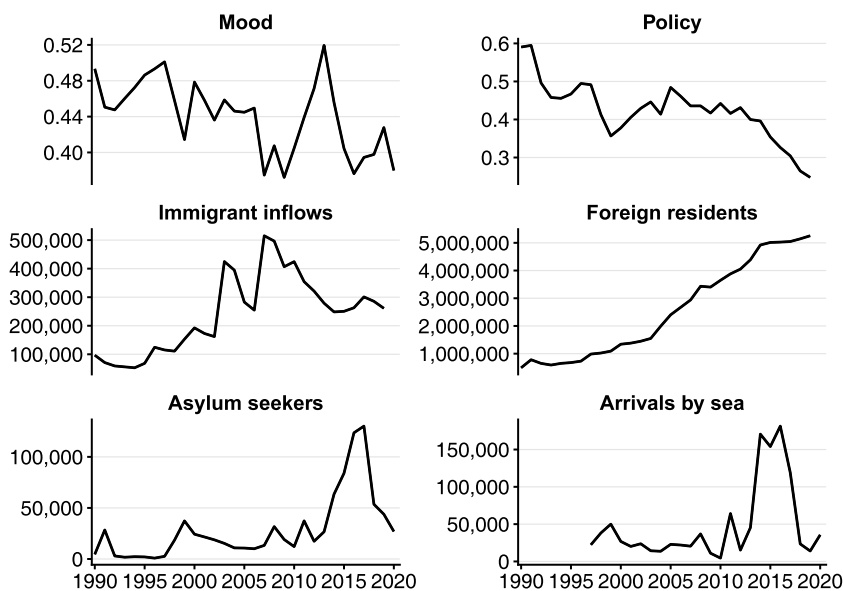
## Results

### *Migration, mood, and policy in Italy between 1990-2020*

Figure 3 presents yearly series for migration mood and migration policy, alongside economic and asylum migration flows from 1990 to 2020.

Over these three decades, the stock of foreign residents in Italy increased more than tenfold, from under 500,000 to over five million. Behind this steady growth, however, migration and political dynamics evolved significantly. The period can be roughly divided into two phases. From 1990 to the mid-2000s, immigrant inflows rose sharply, with peaks linked to *sanatorie* (regularisations) of irregular migrants. Meanwhile, forced migration remained limited but started to shift. Until 1997, annual asylum applications averaged around 6,000, with a temporary peak of 28,000 in 1991. Between 1998 and 2007, the average tripled, with elevated numbers from 1999 to 2001 due to the conflict in former Yugoslavia – which also triggered the first highly visible, though still episodic, arrivals by sea.

The late 1990s saw both a rise in forced migration and the first substantial drop in public mood on migration, reaching a low in 1999. However, sentiment rebounded shortly after and fluctuated around relatively moderate levels for the rest of the first half of the period.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 3.** Yearly series of migration mood, migration policy, foreign residents (stocks), immigrant inflows (residence permits), asylum seekers (asylum applications).

At the start of the series, the migration policy indicator stood at its highest point (0.59). It then declined steadily until 2000 (0.36), before becoming more expansive again, peaking in 2004 at the second-highest level recorded. Overall, the first half of the period was characterised by relatively liberal migration policies (average: 0.46), with fluctuations around a slightly downward trend, except for a sharp dip in 1993 from the exceptionally open levels at the outset.

In sum, the first half of the period marked a radical transformation in Italy's migration landscape. The migrant population grew sharply, driven primarily by regular inflows of labour migrants and successive rounds of regularisation. Forced migration remained limited initially, but began to rise following visible sea arrivals linked to the Yugoslav wars. During this time, migration mood and policy openness tended to move in tandem, cycling closely together.

### ***The migration crisis***

After the mid-2000s, Italy's migration regime changed significantly. Inflows of migrants registering in the country remained high, although their growth rate slowed. Still, the average number of new residence permits issued annually nearly doubled compared to the previous period (320,000 vs. 180,000). As a result, the stock of foreign residents increased from just under three million in 2008 to over five million by 2020.

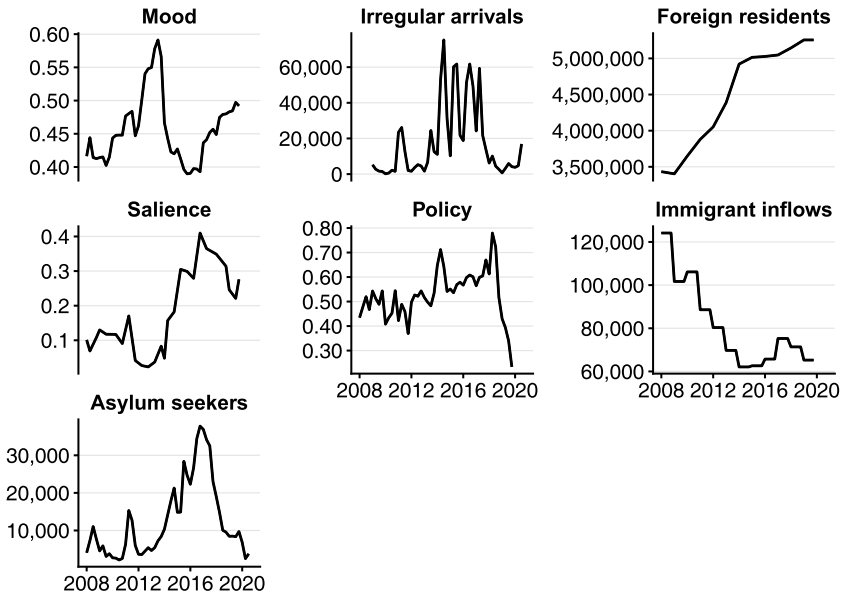
More politically salient, however, was the sharp rise in forced migration – especially irregular arrivals by sea. Until 2012, sea arrivals remained relatively stable at around 25,000 per year. From 2013 onwards, however, they surged massively, averaging over 90,000 annually and peaking at 180,000 in 2016. Asylum applications followed a similar trajectory, with some lag due to administrative procedures.

This second period also marked a decoupling between public attitudes and policy openness, which had previously tended to move together. After 2007, migration mood declined to unprecedented lows and remained depressed until 2010. Then, in a sharp reversal, it climbed rapidly to a high point in 2013 – just as forced migration began to rise substantially, though public discourse had not yet labelled it a ‘crisis’. From that peak, mood plummeted again, reaching a new low in 2016 before oscillating at low levels for the remainder of the decade. These swings largely mirrored the rise in arrivals and the intense politicisation of migration during the crisis years.

The most notable change during the years surrounding the migration crisis is the sharp divergence between migration flows and public mood. During this period, however, migration policy also began to decouple – not only from migration levels, but also from public attitudes. Starting around 2010, migration policy took a clear turn toward restriction, initiating a sustained downward trend. By 2020, policy openness had reached its lowest point, with the index reduced to half the level recorded in 2006.

From 2009 onward, we can observe our indicators at a more granular, quarterly frequency – and, crucially, begin to track the salience of migration in public opinion. [Figure 4](#) reveals a strong and persistent negative correlation between salience and mood. The two indicators almost mirror each other: when migration salience is low, public mood is relatively positive; as salience increases, mood declines. Salience also closely tracks asylum applications, with the exception of the final years of the series, when salience remains high even as asylum inflows drop.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, policy openness – while somewhat cyclical in earlier years – follows a distinct pattern, trending sharply downward in the final part of the series.

As forced migration inflows surged during the so-called migration crisis, the salience of immigration rose sharply, and public mood turned increasingly negative. In the latter half of the decade, as the number of arrivals and asylum applications declined, salience also fell – though less steeply – and migration mood became more favourable. These developments broadly align with theoretical expectations about the political dynamics of migration. Yet not entirely. While reduced flows and salience coincide with a more liberal public mood, migration policy does not follow suit. Contrary to expectations, policy openness continues to decline, reaching its most restrictive levels by the end of the period.



**Figure 4.** Quarterly series of migration mood, salience of migration, migration policy, foreign residents (stocks), immigrant inflows (residence permits), irregular arrivals, asylum seekers (asylum applications).

To better understand these patterns, the next section turns to a more systematic statistical analysis of the relationships among migration flows, public concern and attitudes, and policy responses.

### **Structural equation models**

To test the system of relationships hypothesised above, we estimate a series of Structural Equation Models (SEMs).<sup>13</sup> SEM allows us to assess multiple interdependent associations simultaneously (Kline, 2015), combining regression and path analysis to examine whether the observed data are consistent with our theoretical expectations. We do not estimate latent variables here; instead, our models capture the network of relationships among observed indicators. Given the observational and aggregate nature of the data, these paths should be interpreted as associations consistent with the theoretical directionality rather than as causal effects. In other words, we use SEM as a confirmatory technique to test the consistency of our theory with empirical data.

We estimate the models separately for (a) the entire 30-year period (1990–2019, yearly data) and (b) the decade surrounding the migration crisis (2009–2020, quarterly data). This strategy distinguishes long-term equilibrium patterns from shorter-term disruptions.

### Long-term dynamics (1990–2019)

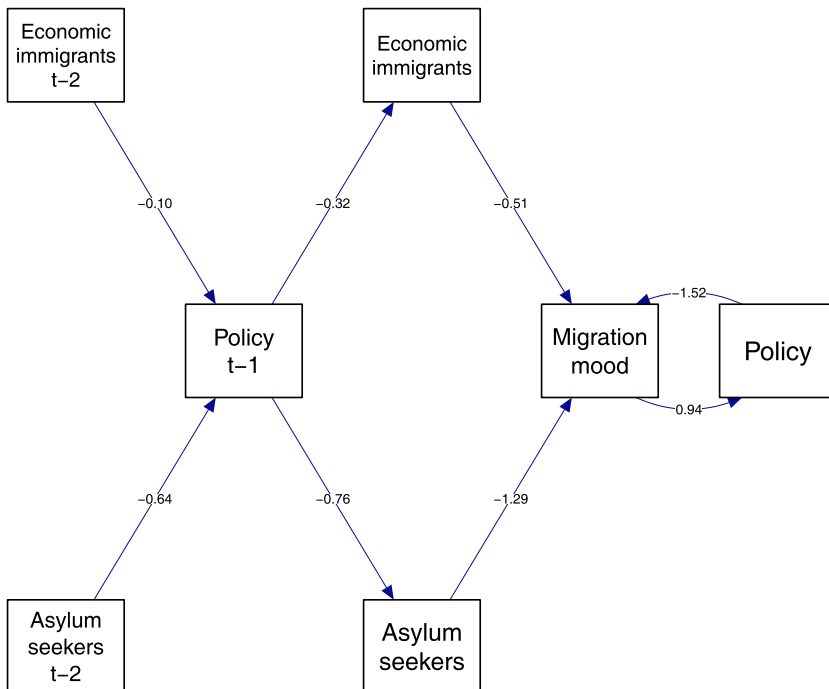
Table 2 and Figure 5 summarise the yearly SEM. Figure 5 shows the path diagram describing the structural relations among variables. Rectangles denote variables, arrows the estimated relationships, and coefficients the strength and sign (positive or negative) of the relations. Overall, the structure of relationships accords closely with our hypotheses.

Consistent with H1b, higher immigration is associated with a more negative migration mood: as immigration increases, public attitudes become more

**Table 2.** Structural equations model of the relations among migration flows, migration mood, and migration policy.

Path	Estimate	SE	z	p
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Asylum seekers	−1.290	.439	−2.941	.003
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Policy	−1.515	.762	−1.988	.047
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Economic immigrants	−.512	.276	−1.853	.064
Policy $\leftarrow$ Migration mood	.936	.273	3.435	.001
Policy t-1 $\leftarrow$ Asylum seekers t-2	−.644	.097	−6.614	0
Policy t-1 $\leftarrow$ Economic immigrants t-2	−.096	.097	−1.000	.317
Asylum seekers $\leftarrow$ Policy t-1	−.761	.184	−4.146	.00003
Economic immigrants $\leftarrow$ Policy t-1	−.323	.211	−1.528	.127

Notes: Yearly data for 1990–2019.



**Figure 5.** Causal path of the relations among migration flows, migration mood, and migration policy. Yearly data for 1990–2019.

negative, and the other way round. This relationship holds for both economic and forced migration, although the effect is stronger for asylum inflows (H1c). Moreover, in line with the policy responsiveness hypothesis (H2a), migration mood is positively related to migration policy openness. Migration policy is more liberal when migration mood is more positive, and more restrictive when attitudes toward migration are more negative.

We can also observe the hypothesised feedback relationships. Consistent with the public thermostat (H4a), migration policy is negatively associated with mood, meaning that public attitudes tend to balance the direction of policy. When policy becomes more liberal, the public mood shifts toward greater restriction; when policy turns more restrictive, attitudes become more accepting. This pattern suggests that the public reacts relatively to policy change rather than reverting to fixed preferences, and that these counter-movements help stabilise the system over time. The thermostatic mechanism is thus an essential component of dynamic representation. Opinion and policy continually adjust to one another within a feedback loop, and the resulting equilibrium reflects an effective mechanism of mutual adjustment.

A further feedback concerns what we term the migration policy thermostat (H4b). Here, migration policy moves opposite to flows: higher immigration levels are followed by more restrictive policy orientations, whereas lower inflows are associated with greater openness. This relationship appears for both economic and asylum migration, although the association is weaker and statistically less robust for economic inflows. Together, these findings point to a bidirectional, self-correcting structure linking public attitudes, policy choices, and migration levels over the long term.

The one notable deviation from expectations concerns policy's relation to migration flows. If policy effectively regulated immigration, more restrictive stances should be followed by reduced inflows; instead, we find weak or negative associations, suggesting limited policy capacity to influence migration levels directly. This finding aligns with recent comparative work questioning policy effectiveness under external and structural constraints (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016; de Haas *et al.*, 2019).

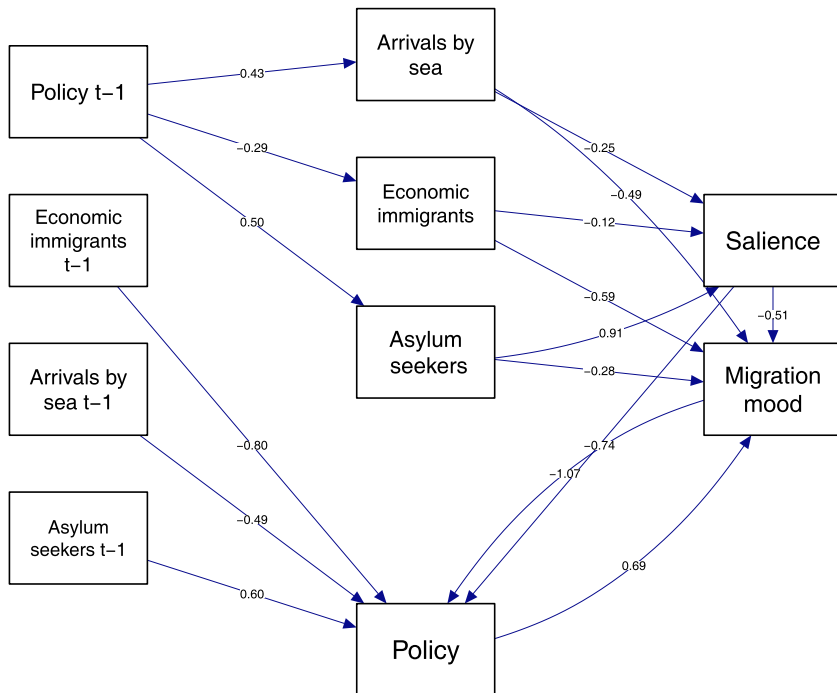
These results reflect associations rather than causal effects, and unobserved factors – such as macroeconomic cycles, EU-level developments, or patterns of party competition – may influence several of the relationships. Still, the overall configuration of interdependence among immigration, public opinion, and policy aligns with a thermostatic logic – at least when considering the system's long-term dynamics.

### **Intensive analysis (2009–2020)**

We next turn to the more detailed analysis of the 2009–2020 period, which includes the years surrounding the migration crisis. For this analysis, we

use higher-frequency (quarterly) data that include irregular arrivals by sea, and the salience of immigration as an additional indicator. This allows us to test the mediating pathway hypothesised in H1a–H1b, whereby rising immigration increases salience, which in turn depresses public mood. The descriptive analysis of the time series in Figure 4 in the previous section provided initial evidence in favour of that hypothesis. However, it also pointed to a potential distortion in policy responsiveness to both migration levels and migration attitudes – with migration policy trending towards increasing restrictiveness, despite decreasing levels of immigration and improving migration mood.

Figure 6 and Table 3 report the SEM results. The estimated relationships between immigration and public attitudes remain consistent with the long-term pattern: higher immigration levels are associated with a more negative mood, both directly and indirectly through higher salience. This is so for economic and forced types of migration, although the effect of asylum migration is not statistically significant to conventional levels. The mediation through salience is clear, meaning that public concerns tend to amplify the negative relationship between immigration and the public mood. Salience,



**Figure 6.** Causal path of the relations among migration flows, migration mood, and migration policy. Quarterly data for the period 2009–2020.



**Table 3.** Structural equations model of the relations among migration flows, migration mood, and migration policy.

Path	Estimate	SE	z	p
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Asylum seekers	-.282	.281	-1.002	.316
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Arrivals by sea	-.489	.185	-2.647	.008
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Economic immigrants	-.585	.219	-2.674	.007
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Salience	-.507	.256	-1.981	.048
Migration mood $\leftarrow$ Policy	.687	.253	2.720	.007
Salience $\leftarrow$ Asylum seekers	.911	.089	10.260	0
Salience $\leftarrow$ Arrivals by sea	-.250	.089	-2.801	.005
Salience $\leftarrow$ Economic immigrants	-.119	.122	-.969	.333
Policy $\leftarrow$ Migration mood	-1.067	.343	-3.116	.002
Policy $\leftarrow$ Asylum seekers t-1	.598	.254	2.354	.019
Policy $\leftarrow$ Arrivals by sea t-1	-.495	.252	-1.959	.050
Policy $\leftarrow$ Economic immigrants t-1	-.798	.292	-2.737	.006
Policy $\leftarrow$ Salience	-.744	.271	-2.745	.006
Asylum seekers $\leftarrow$ Policy t-1	.501	.153	3.274	.001
Economic immigrants $\leftarrow$ Policy t-1	-.294	.115	-2.556	.011
Arrivals by sea $\leftarrow$ Policy t-1	.426	.156	2.725	.006

Notes: Quarterly data for 2009–2020

in turn, seems to relate to forced migration, while regular immigration does not appear associated to increased concerns.

While the relations between immigration and public attitudes are consistent with the long-term pattern (and with H1a-H1b), the configuration of relationships involving migration policy differs sharply from the earlier period. In the years surrounding the crisis, the link between mood and policy – central to H1 and H2 – breaks down: policy no longer adjusts to shifts in public sentiment, nor does public opinion respond thermostatically to policy changes. Salience, in turn, stands out for the strong and significant negative relation with policy openness: when immigration becomes highly salient, governments tend to adopt more restrictive positions. This confirms H2b and highlights the central role of politicisation in shaping short-term policy responsiveness.

Policy openness, in turn, has a positive and significant effect on migration mood, whereas mood relates negatively to policy. This represents a full reversal of the thermostatic dynamic (H4a) and a partial disruption of the pattern of policy responsiveness observed in the long-term analysis. Instead of mood balancing policy (H4a), policy seems to reinforce mood; rather than responding to mood (H2a), policy responds to salience only (H2b). It seems that around the years of the crisis, migration policy decouples from the public mood and instead becomes tightly linked to salience, indicating that governments reacted to politicisation rather than to attitudes.

The policy thermostat (H4b), in turn, seems in full operation, with policy relating negatively to irregular arrivals and even economic flows (but not to asylum). This pattern reinforces the idea of the policy being sensitive to migration and public concerns.

By contrast, during the crisis years the direction of the association between migration policy and subsequent migration flows is reversed, compared to the long-term pattern. More restrictive policy orientations are followed by lower levels of forced migration – both asylum applications and sea arrivals – whereas more liberal policy stances tend to precede higher inflows. In other words, the data suggest that, amid intense politicisation, Italian migration policy operates as a regulatory constraint (consistent with H3), but only on forced migration.

Taken together, the crisis-period results reveal a partial breakdown of the self-correcting dynamics that characterise migration politics under ordinary conditions. The feedback loop between public opinion and policy – central to thermostatic representation – disappears when migration becomes both highly salient and externally driven. In this context, government action shifts from balancing public sentiment to managing perceived emergencies in a more politicised mode of governance. Policy becomes exposed to public concerns, and reinforced rather than balanced by the public mood. At the same time, restrictive measures seem more directly connected to subsequent reductions in inflows, suggesting a temporary reorientation toward short-term control rather than long-term equilibrium.

## Conclusions

This study has examined the dynamic interplay between immigration flows, public opinion, and migration policy in Italy over three decades, including the years surrounding the 2015–18 migration crisis. By modelling flows, salience, attitudes, and policy within a single framework, it contributes to the growing literature that links migration politics to theories of dynamic representation and thermostatic responsiveness. The approach captures migration politics as a feedback system rather than a one-way sequence of reactions, allowing us to observe how equilibrium mechanisms operate – and when they fail.

Observed in the long term, both public and policy thermostats functioned as expected. Migration mood became more restrictive when immigration increased and more positive when inflows slowed; while policy responded to these shifts by alternating between liberal and restrictive phases. Yet feedbacks were asymmetric: policy followed public mood more than it effectively shaped subsequent migration flows. These patterns illustrate how opinion and policy can co-evolve within a self-correcting system of democratic responsiveness.

During the migration crisis, this equilibrium weakened. Public mood remained sensitive to immigration pressures and heightened salience; policy drifted toward restrictionism, largely independent of public preferences and driven by public concerns. Policy remained linked to public dynamics, yet the key driver shifted from mood to salience. The strong

negative effect of salience on policy openness indicates that political pressure arising from media visibility and public concern can override the corrective mechanisms of the thermostat, pushing governments toward restriction even as public mood becomes more liberal.

The long-term analysis revealed a balanced system in which opinion and policy adjust to one another over time. In the short term, however, the substitution of salience for mood transforms the feedback structure of the system. Instead of stabilising public attitudes, policy moves in tandem with them, producing a reinforcing loop of concern and restriction beyond what the underlying attitudes alone would justify. The pattern observed in the short term therefore represents not a breakdown but a distortion of thermostatic responsiveness – one in which politicisation short-circuits the equilibrium between opinion and policy. What emerges is a bounded form of thermostatic representation, a system that functions under routine conditions but weakens when migration is politicised as an emergency.

Taken together, these findings underscore that responsiveness in migration governance is conditional – shaped by the interaction of public preferences, external shocks, and institutional constraints. They highlight both the potential and the limits of democratic feedback in a highly politicised policy field. Future comparative research could extend this framework across countries to examine when and why migration policy aligns with, or drifts away from, public attitudes under different political and crisis contexts.

## Data availability statement

All the data and replication code are openly available via the Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EFSVON>.

## Notes

1. As Dennison and Vranceanu (2022) put it, 'We can break the concept of public opinion towards immigration into a salience component and a proper mood component'.
2. [www.un.org/development/desa/en/about/desa-divisions/statistics.html](http://www.un.org/development/desa/en/about/desa-divisions/statistics.html)
3. <https://www.oecd.org/>
4. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/asylum-and-managed-migration/data/data-base>
5. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>
6. <https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-map/>
7. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/browse/theme>
8. Our dataset includes a subset of questions from a broader dataset assembled to create an indicator of policy mood in Italy (Bellucci & Pellegata, 2017), which we then updated to 2020.
9. [www.un.org/development/desa/pd/data/world-population-policies](http://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/data/world-population-policies)
10. [www.mipex.eu](http://www.mipex.eu)

11. The migration mood and migration policy indices range from 0 (fully negative mood/restrictionist policy) to 1 (fully positive mood/expansionist policy). Between 1990 and 2020, migration mood ranged between 0.37 and 0.52, while the policy index varied between 0.25 and 0.59.
12. Salience appears less closely aligned with sea arrivals when observed at quarterly intervals, likely due to the strong seasonality of irregular migration. At yearly frequencies, sea arrivals and asylum applications match more closely, with the former slightly preceding the latter (see [Figure 4](#)).
13. We fitted the models using R package `lavaan` (Gana & Broc, 2019) and we generated plots with R package `semPlot` (Epskamp, 2019).

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## Disclosure statement

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