

Militants in Exile: Spanish Republicans and Political Mobilization in France

Elias Dinas
EUI
elias.dinas@eui.eu

Pau Grau-Vilalta
EUI
pau.grau@eui.eu

Alejandro López Peceño
EUI
alejandro.lopezpeceno@eui.eu

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While a large literature studies how migrants' mere presence affects natives attitudes, less is known about how migrants can actively reshape the politics of destination societies. We argue that politically experienced migrants can transplant organizational capacity into host communities, strengthening the local mobilization capacity of aligned host-country parties. We examine this argument by studying the exile of half a million Spanish Republicans to France: left-wing exiles with substantial experience in party and union organizing. We leverage newly digitized individual-level refugee records to show that communes hosting Spanish refugees shifted toward communist candidates in the postwar period. These results cannot be driven by compositional effects because most refugees did not get voting rights. We show that the increase in communist support reflects vote switching rather than mobilization, suggesting that Spanish refugees helped reorient left-wing voters toward the PCF.¹

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1 INTRODUCTION

How does political ideology spread across space? A large literature shows that political traits persist vertically, transmitted across multiple generations (Cantoni et al., 2019; Voigtländer and Voth, 2015; Fouka and Voth, 2023). Research on partisanship and political ideology confirms this intergenerational link from parents to offspring (Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Jennings et al., 2009). By contrast, we know much less about horizontal transmission – how social interaction leads to the spatial diffusion of political ideas. The reason for this lacuna is straightforward: individuals tend to sort into social environments that reflect their pre-existing beliefs, and such sorting confounds the effects of exposure and interaction (Maxwell, 2019).

One natural setting in which to study such diffusion is migration. Immigrants carry with them what has been described as a cultural suitcase – norms, values, and beliefs that survive displacement and shape long-run outcomes in their descendants. Because these traits move with people, researchers have been able to identify vertical transmission using epidemiological and intergenerational designs (Guiso et al., 2006; Giuliano, 2007; Fernández and Fogli, 2009; Dohmen et al., 2012). Yet migrants are far less useful for studying horizontal transmission: they typically sort into destinations that match their preferences or economic prospects (Ferwerda et al., 2024), making it difficult to disentangle social influence from selection. Only in rare cases of forced displacement – where exposure is plausibly exogenous – can we credibly examine whether newcomers reshape the cultural or political landscape of host societies. Recent work exploits such contexts to show that forcibly relocated populations can alter local gender norms in receiving regions (Miho et al., 2024).

We contribute to this literature by extending it to the diffusion of political ideology. We study one of the most prominent episodes of forced displacement in twentieth-century Europe: the exile of up to half a million Spaniards to France following the Spanish Civil

War. These refugees were not typical economic migrants. They were disproportionately drawn from politically mobilized segments of Spanish society – socialists, communists, and anarchists fleeing Francoist repression (Soo, 2016). We ask how such an ideologically skewed influx of displaced individuals affected the ideological outlook of the local populations to which they were exposed.

Our case presents a particularly demanding test of horizontal transmission. Unlike prior work examining gender norms – where the transmitted trait was largely orthogonal to the reason for displacement – here the trait of interest was the very basis of exile. Spanish refugees fled because they were politically active and associated with the left. They did not merely transport a neutral cultural attribute; they carried a politically stigmatized identity associated with defeat and repression. Although France differed from Francoist Spain, interwar and wartime Europe was hardly a hospitable environment for communism. Concerns about communist mobilization were widespread under both the Vichy regime and in the postwar period, reflecting broader European anxieties about left-wing radicalism (Acemoglu et al., 2023). If anything, this context should have inhibited ideological diffusion. In this respect, our case constitutes a harder test for horizontal transmission than existing work.

Yet the very historical context that made ideological diffusion unlikely also created conditions under which it could occur. Horizontal transmission does not operate through exposure alone; it depends on the social valuation of those transmitting the trait. Individuals are more likely to emulate actors perceived as competent, morally legitimate, or worthy of deference – a process known as prestige-biased transmission (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001). Crucially, prestige can be constructed through costly action. During World War II and the Nazi occupation, Spanish Republicans played a visible and active role in the French Resistance, supporting underground networks and joining guerrilla units (Soo, 2016; Català, 2015). Participation in clandestine operations constituted costly and publicly observable signals of commitment and courage. Through such actions, ide-

ological commitment became legible and credible to local populations. What had been a stigmatized political identity could be reinterpreted as evidence of moral resolve and organizational competence. In the logic of prestige-biased transmission, such reevaluation increases the likelihood that natives emulate rather than reject the beliefs carried by newcomers.

We investigate the electoral consequences of Spanish refugee settlement in postwar France. Using a difference-in-differences design and instrumenting postwar refugee presence with prewar Spanish-born settlement patterns, we estimate the causal effect of refugee exposure on local voting behavior. We find suggestive evidence that refugee settlement increased electoral support for the French Communist Party (PCF). A doubling of Spanish refugees per capita is associated with roughly a two-percentage-point increase in communist vote share. Event-study specifications indicate that this effect emerges immediately after the war and remains statistically significant for at least two decades. The shift reflects vote switching rather than mobilization: turnout is unaffected, while support for the socialist SFIO declines.

Our findings contribute to three strands of literature. First, we extend research on the political effects of migration by conceptualizing refugees not merely as triggers of backlash, as emphasized in prior work (Dinas et al., 2019; Hangartner et al., 2019; Steinmayr, 2021), but as agents capable of reshaping host-country ideological equilibria. A small but growing literature points in this direction. For example, the so-called Forty-Eighters – German political exiles following the failed revolutions of 1848 – played a decisive role in mobilizing support for the Union during the American Civil War, leveraging their organizational experience and ideological commitments to shape political alignments in their host society (Dippel and Heblich, 2021). Our study complements and extends this insight by showing that such influence need not occur only through elite leadership or wartime mobilization, but can translate into durable shifts in mass electoral behavior.

Second, we contribute to work on collective action entrepreneurship and the long-run

political consequences of wartime organization. While previous research highlights how participation in resistance movements generates dense networks of support among locals (Costalli and Ruggeri, 2019), this literature has focused primarily on networks formed internally within native populations. We shift attention to networks forged by newcomers in exile. Our results show that politically experienced migrants can reconstruct organizational structures abroad and embed themselves within host communities in ways that reshape political competition.

Third – and most centrally – we provide causal evidence that horizontal ideological transmission can occur even when the transmitted trait was politically stigmatized and constituted the very basis of displacement. Unlike cases in which migrants carry culturally salient but politically neutral traits, Spanish exiles bore an identity that was contested and feared. Our findings suggest that costly political action can transform a marginalized identity into a source of moral authority (Egozi and Ram, 2024), enabling newcomers to reshape the beliefs of the societies that receive them.

2 THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

How can politically experienced migrants alter the ideological orientation of the societies that receive them? Building on Bazzi’s (2025) conceptual framework about the conditions under which immigrants can influence locals, we argue that ideological diffusion depends on three elements: the intensity of migrants political commitments; the openness of the host society to ideological change; and the credibility of migrants as carriers of political meaning.

The first element concerns the migrants themselves. Political exile often selects individuals whose commitments are unusually strong. Economic migrants leave to find work; political exiles leave because staying would cost them their freedom or their lives. When displacement is tied to repression or defeat, its shared experience forms the building block upon which collective memory is built, further strengthening group identity (Zolberg and

Benda, 1983; Shain, 2002). This process increases the salience of ideology as the common bond of the group, thereby enabling its intergenerational persistence (Hadzic et al., 2020; Bauer et al., 2016; Fouka and Voth, 2023). This pattern appears in many cases of political exile, from Chileans after 1973 (Wright and Oñate Zúñiga, 2007) to South Africans during apartheid (Geisler, 2004) to Iranian dissidents after 1979 (Elmore, 2024).² Those who crossed the Pyrenees during the *Retirada* were no exception to this rule. Members of the CNT, UGT, PSOE, and PCE, many of them had spent years organizing, fighting, and in many cases surviving repression in defense of the Republic ().

The second element concerns the receiving environment. Again, applying Bazzi and Fiszbein (2025)'s framework to the case of ideology, there is more space for refugee influence when political alignments in the host community are unsettled. Periods of institutional disruption—war, occupation, regime change, or post-conflict reconstruction—can weaken established hierarchies and open space for new actors. Liberation created such a moment of political flux that made France unusually open to outside influence. The Vichy regime had discredited the traditional right, and the postwar settlement was still being negotiated. Moreover, openness to outside influence is expected to increase with cultural proximity (Bazzi and Fiszbein, 2025). If, indeed, cultural distance is one of the main barriers to migrant influence, then this barrier must have been relatively low for the Spanish Republicans. They shared a Latin Catholic background, overlapping traditions of labor organizing, and enough linguistic proximity for everyday contact to be feasible. Together, the refugees seem to have arrived *at the right time and with the right profile to be heard*.

When the conditions above hold, Bazzi and Fiszbein (2025) identify three channels through which migrants can shape the views of locals: spillovers between individuals, mobilization through organizations, and leverage over political institutions. While all

²Chilean exiles in Sweden, for example, founded Chilekommittén, a network that organized housing and transport for fellow refugees, ran advocacy campaigns, and helped refugees participate in local civic life (Olsson, 2009). Similar patterns appear among Kurdish and Palestinian exiles in Europe (Koinova, 2021).

three are a priori plausible, we discuss in more detail the first two of them, since we think they are more likely to apply in our case.

Spillovers are the product of horizontal transmission—between-group influence. Its success, however, hinges on how migrants are evaluated by locals. Civilian refugees were dispersed across hundreds of communes and entered local labor markets—in agriculture, domestic service, and industry—creating the kind of sustained everyday contact that Allport et al. (1954)'s contact theory identifies as the setting where attitude change is most likely. Whether this contact shifted opinions in a left-wing direction is, however, ambiguous a priori: the refugees' unambiguous identification with the left could attract French citizens who were already sympathetic while deepening suspicion among those who were not (Acemoglu et al., 2023). The net effect is ultimately an empirical question, which our difference-in-differences design addresses. Individual-level OFPRA records, which document marriages between refugees and French partners, will allow us to test more directly whether mixing through the marriage market was a channel through which political beliefs spread.

What seems to matter in the favor of refugees is a particular type of transmission that produces social learning, known as prestige-biased horizontal transmission (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001). A strand of literature in evolutionary anthropology and cultural economics seeks to understand how individuals decide which traits to adopt from others (Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, 1981). One answer that has been proposed is success bias (Richerson and Boyd, 2005): people prefer to copy from role-models that demonstrate success in some activity—e.g. hunting or sailing. However, observing direct success is often costly or simply too noisy (Jiménez and Mesoudi, 2019). Therefore learners may replace these direct cues with indirect ones, as adaptive shortcuts to choose from whom to learn (Egozi and Ram, 2024). Henrich and Gil-White (2001) called this process prestige-biased transmission and distinguished it from dominance-biased transmission in that in the former case deference is freely conferred, unlike the latter where it is “coerced” (Ellis,

1995).

Despite their displacement and initial marginalization, Spanish Civil War refugees brought with them characteristics that could position them as role models within French communities. In environments characterized by uncertainty or distrust, successful signaling requires costly behavior (Gambetta, 2011). For politically marginalized groups, this dynamic is particularly consequential. When the ideology of a group is viewed with suspicion, observers may initially assign low credibility to its members. High-cost actions—especially those aligned with widely valued collective goals—can update these beliefs. By incurring visible risk, actors signal commitment not only to their ideology but also to broader principles that resonate locally. The result is a shift in perceived type: from radical outsider to principled and capable political actor.

The refugees' own role in the resistance further raised their standing. Participating in clandestine networks, sabotage, and armed struggle under Nazi occupation was not only dangerous but visible. In the logic of prestige-biased transmission (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001), costly and observable signals raise the status of those who send them (Gambetta, 2011). By risking their lives alongside French resisters, Spanish Republicans earned a moral authority that made local populations more receptive to their views.³

This reputational updating matters for diffusion. Once a group is perceived as possessing desirable traits—courage, organizational competence, steadfastness—its broader belief system may become more attractive, or at least less suspect. In this sense, prestige operates not by eliminating disagreement, but by lowering the threshold for imitation. Political ideas attached to credible carriers face fewer barriers to adoption than the same ideas voiced by actors perceived as unreliable or extreme.

³This argument has scope conditions. Communist resistance under Axis occupation did not always produce pro-left sentiment: in some settings, competition over territory escalated into civil conflict that left lasting resentment against the left (Kalyvas, 2006; Dinas et al., 2024). Historiographic evidence suggests, however, that such dynamics were limited in occupied France, where resistance groups were more often integrated into broader coalitions and fratricidal violence was rare (Nalewajko, 2024; Jackson, 2003). French public memory consequently settled on a relatively consensual view of resistance as morally legitimate (Judt, 2006).

Organizational experience, which the exiles carried with them, may well have scaled up the diffusion of their' ideas. The Spanish left—especially during the Second Republic and the Civil War—had built a dense tradition of collective action through unions and parties, above all the CNT and UGT (Fraser, 1979; Cazorla-Sánchez, 2009). This practical knowledge of how to recruit, organize, and mobilize transferred across borders (Jha and Wilkinson, 2012). Crucially, the Spanish refugees did not build new organizations from scratch, as the Forty-Eighters did when they founded German-language newspapers (Dippel and Heblich, 2021), or as Confederate migrants did when they established white supremacist associations (Bazzi et al., 2023). Instead, they embedded in structures that already existed: the PCF and its affiliated associations. Embedding in an existing network amplified their reach far beyond what their numbers alone could explain. The historical record is consistent with this picture: across many départements, exile committees shared halls with local PCF sections, co-organized events and fundraisers, and fed members into PCF recruitment circuits (Lillo, 2011; Guixé i Coromines, 2002).

Beyond strengthening our overarching expectation, namely that presence of Spanish exiles boosted support for the left after WWII, the organizational channel helps to develop a set of two more fine-grained expectations. First, refugees should have increased support for the PCF in particular, not for the left as a whole—the organizational channel runs through the party they joined, not through left-wing sentiment in general. Second, the increase should reflect voters switching from other parties rather than previously disengaged citizens turning out for the first time, because organizing through an existing party primarily realigns people who are already politically active rather than activating those who are not. Because embedding works primarily by persuading or realigning politically engaged citizens, such shifts should reflect vote switching rather than increased turnout.

Finally, the channel through which we expect such effects to materialize even after the conditions that generated them is vertical transmission—parents passing on political

commitments to their children (Bisin and Verdier, 2001). Norms and attitudes persist even when the conditions associated with those experiences have ceased to operate (Guiso et al., 2006) or the regime that produced them has changed (Luttmer and Singhal, 2011; Balcells, 2012), especially when formal institutions are either weak or non-existent (Grosjean, 2014). Children who grew up in households where exile was a formative experience and party affiliation a family norm would be expected to carry these commitments into their own political lives, especially so in periods of political malleability and fluctuation, two of the key characteristics of the Fourth Republic (Rioux and Rogers, 1987).

3 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

3.1 From exile to Resistance

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was a humanitarian catastrophe. Recent estimates suggest that 540,000 Spaniards lost their lives during the conflict, and about 440,000 civilians and combatants crossed the Pyrenees into France. Most of them did so during the “Retirada” (retreat) in January 1939, after Francoist troops seized the city of Barcelona, making the war all but lost for the Spanish Republic. This exodus became “the largest in European history up until that point, and in the shortest period of time” (Rodrigo and Alegre Lorenz, 2022, p. 207). The sheer scale and speed of this influx set the stage for an improvised—and heavy-handed—French response.

Most of the refugees were considered combatants (all men above 16 and under 55), and were interned in large, improvised, concentration camps near the border (the largest of them, in Argèles, received more than 100,000 refugees). French authorities wanted to keep them on a short leash, as they were concerned that these committed left-wing and militarily experienced men could represent a threat to national security. As a result of their confinement in the camps, these refugees had very little interaction with the local population. The remaining refugees—women, children, and the elderly—were dispersed

across 71 of France's 90 mainland départements to distribute the fiscal burden and reduce potential security risks (Rubio, 1977, p. 73). Prefects compiled lists of disused schools, prisons, and monasteries; the Ministry of the Interior made final assignments. This state-imposed geography, set within weeks of the "Retirada", would shape local encounters and long-term settlement patterns (Dreyfus-Armand, 2000, p. 192).

In a context of stark political and social polarization, as well as growing geopolitical tensions, reactions inside host communities quickly polarised. Unions, Popular Front militants, and sympathetic mayors organised food drives and language classes. Conservative newspapers, instead, warned that France was being "invaded by the Marxist army in retreat", turning combatant refugees into symbols of Bolshevik contagion (Soo, 2016, p. 40), and asking for repatriation. This narrative was so pervasive that even some CGT trade-unionists echoed the call for expulsion (Parello, 2012, p. 929). At the same time, civilians, predominantly women with children, initially elicited more compassion, yet prefects soon received petitions describing them as purveyors of "radical propaganda" who unsettled local youth (Maugendre, 2015, p. 588). In short, the same security logic that divided camps from communes shaped popular perceptions: combatants were feared enemies, civilians pitied victims, and those frames conditioned the trajectories available to each group.

On 3 September 1939, two days after Germany invaded Poland, France and Britain declared war on the Reich. Combatant refugees were then offered four exit routes: (i) repatriation to Spain (about 40 percent chose this), (ii) emigration to third countries chiefly Mexico, (iii) enlistment in the Foreign Legion, or (iv) assignment to special foreign-labor battalions that filled wartime manpower gaps. Civilian refugees faced a parallel triage—return, onward migration, or local work permit—but as the war economy tightened many women were funneled into agriculture or domestic service (Maugendre, 2015, pp. 488-91). Spanish exiles soon became an asset to the Resistance. Thousands of men slipped out of camps or labor units to form guerrilla columns hoping the conflict would extend

to the liberation of Spain; after the 1944 Liberation these units were folded into the *Forces françaises de l'intérieur* and fought until the end of the war (Dreyfus-Armand, 2000, p. 169). Women refugees performed critical clandestine tasks: courier work, sheltering fugitives, handling documents and weapons. As Neus Català (2000, p. 10) recalled, exiled Spanish women, like shadows, helped sew the webs in which Nazism became trapped. Such activity came at a price: hundreds of Spanish women were deported to Nazi camps during the occupation (Dreyfus-Armand, 2000, p. 123).

3.2 *Political militancy in postwar France*

By 1945 the exile population had fallen to roughly 140,000 people. Confronted with acute labour shortages, the Provisional Government extended to them the protection of the 1933 Refugee Convention later administered by OFPRA under the 1951 Geneva framework (Angoustures, 1997, p. 91). Legal security encouraged labour-market insertion and gradual south-ward re-concentration toward the Pyrenees and the Rhône valley, where earlier Spanish communities already existed (Rubio, 1974, pp. 239-245). Integration followed classic paths: by the 1960s one-third of refugee files involved naturalization requests, and more than half of Spaniards born between 1925 and 1940 had married French partners (Angoustures, 1997, pp. 105-32).

Not only did Spanish refugees become progressively embedded in their municipalities, but they also remained politically active – collecting funds for prisoners in Spain, organizing cultural events, and founding or revitalizing organizations that tied the diaspora to the French left, particularly the French Communist Party (PCF). In numerous départements, exile committees collaborated with the PCF by sharing party-owned halls for meetings and film screenings, co-hosting festivals and fund-raisers, and even steering federations such as the *Federación Española de Emigrantes Residentes en Francia* (FEERF) into semi-clandestine recruitment circuits for the PCF (Lillo, 2011). By contrast, the CNT maintained a stronghold in Toulouse holding public rallies and cultural festivals

therebut never approached the PCFs geographic reach. Visibility peaked in September 1950 when, during *Opération Boléro-Paprika*, police arrested 176 militants of the Spanish Communist Party on charges of “intelligence with a foreign power” (Denoyer, 2011). Sectoral groups such as the *Unión de Mujeres Españolas* (UME) likewise forged a collective antifascist identity: with up to 4,000 members, the UME organised anti-Franco demonstrations and circulated the monthly *Mujeres Antifascistas Españolas*, a magazine that reportedly reached 10,000 copies (Yusta Rodrigo, 2012; Martínez Rus, 2014). Through these shared spaces, joint events, and the transfer of experienced organizers, Spanish exiles supplied cadres, resources, and voters to local PCF sections—quietly but durably reshaping political attitudes and party strength in the communes where they settled.

The remainder of the paper empirically investigates whether the presence of Spanish Republicans translated into measurable electoral gains for the French left in the postwar period.

4 DATA AND METHODS

4.1 Data

Treatment: Refugee presence after WWII Because many refugees relocated during and after World War II, the distribution of refugees in 1939 is not an appropriate measure for studying their role in the postwar period. Fortunately, however, the *Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides* (OFPRA) systematically recorded the post-war locations of Spanish refugees.

These numbers come from the refugees’ expedients at OFPRA, which include the “Refugee Cards” issued to refugees every five years by this organization to verify their refugee status within the French state (see an example in Figure A2). Over 184,000 of these cards are available in the OFPRA archives and contain—among other relevant demographic information—the commune of residence for each refugee and the year the

card was issued. As late as 1963, there were still 70,588 refugees in France (see Figure A1 in the Appendix). We then aggregate this data at the municipal level to identify refugee presence, 1 shows their distribution across the territory.

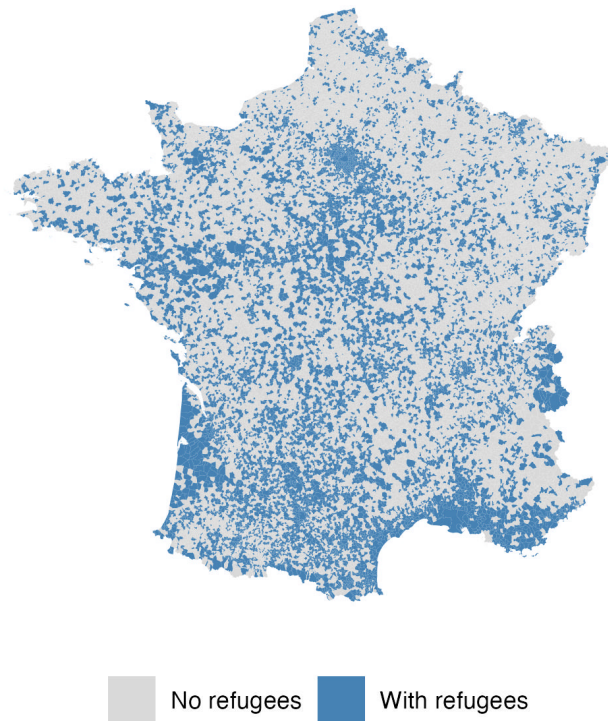


Figure 1: Communes with refugee presence, based on data from the *Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides* (OFPRA).

Instrument: Spanish presence in 1931 One concern with using the post-WWII presence of refugees is the potential for selection bias, as refugees were able to move to locations of their choosing. For example, they may have been more likely to settle in areas where the political left was stronger and local populations were more sympathetic to their presence. To mitigate this issue, we will instrument the presence of the refugees by using the “past settlement” of Spanish economic migrants, following a vast literature in economics and political science (Jaeger et al., 2018). While in 1939 refugees were assigned to communes based on hosting capacity, many later relocated to preferred locations –often where they already had a network of friends or acquaintances– as greater freedom of movement be-

came possible during the later stages of the war and the postwar period. Therefore, we can use the presence of Spanish-born residents in the prewar period to predict the final destination of the Spanish refugees. The key exclusion restriction is that the presence of Spaniards in 1931 influenced postwar support for the left only through its effect on attracting Spanish Republican exiles.⁴

To measure the presence of Spanish migrants prior to the Spanish Civil War, we use data from the 1931 census. At the department level, we rely on official census data, which report the number of Spanish-born residents per hundred inhabitants. For the commune-level analyses, we draw on individual-level records from the 1931 census that we obtained from Filae (2025).⁵ To construct our sample, we conduct a thorough search using a list of the most common Spanish surnames (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2025). To ensure that individuals identified through this method are migrants rather than descendants of earlier settlers, we restrict the sample to those whose place of birth is listed as Spain and aggregate this restricted sample by counting the number of Spanish-born individuals in each commune. We then validate our data against the official department-level data.⁶ As expected, our data shows that the presence of Spanish-born residents in 1931 is a strong predictor of the presence of Spanish refugees in 1963 (see Figure 2).

Outcome: Electoral Support for Communist Candidates To examine how refugees influenced local political preferences, we turn to electoral results. We obtain commune-level electoral data for legislative elections held between 1924 and 1968 from Cagé and Piketty (2023). Our main outcome of interest is the share of votes for left-wing parties, defined as the ratio of votes cast for these parties to the total number of votes cast in each commune. Following the authors classification, we define left-wing parties as those

⁴The validity of this restriction is supported by our event-study specification (Figure 3), which shows no differential prewar trends in communist support between communes with varying Spanish populations in 1931. Furthermore, [TODO] TABLE XYZ show that the presence of Spanish populations in 1931 is uncorrelated with political outcomes, which lends support to the exclusion restriction assumption.

⁵There was a census in 1936, but we have not been able to retrieve individual records for it.

⁶When aggregated at the department level, there is a correlation of 0.729 (p-value < 0.005) between our measure and the official data from the census (see Figure A4 in the Appendix).

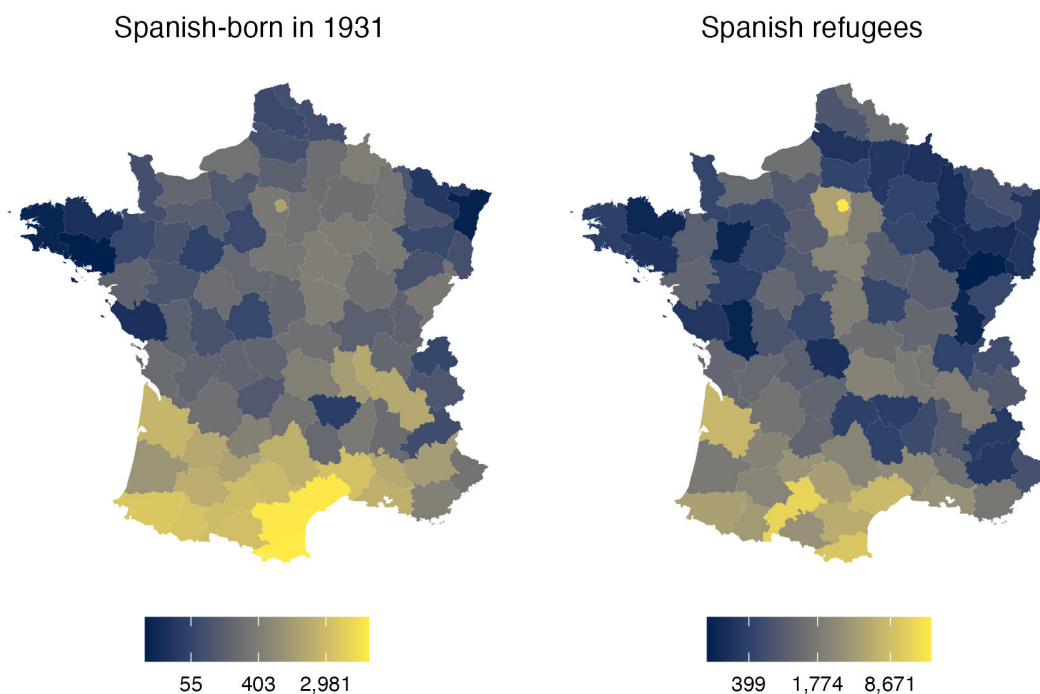


Figure 2: Department-level maps. The left-hand map shows the (logged) number of Spanish-born residents in each department according to the 1931 census. The right-hand map shows the (logged) number of Spanish refugees, based on data from the *Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides* (OFPRA).

coded as G, which includes the French Communist Party (PCF) and electorally allied or Communist-aligned lists (see Table A2).⁷

4.2 Estimation

We proceed in two steps. First, to estimate the average effect of the arrival of Spanish refugees, we implement a baseline difference-in-differences (DID) design comparing the four elections before and after World War II. Specifically, we estimate:

⁷In 1924, Communist candidates ran under the label *Bloc ouvrier et paysan* (BOP). In 1945, the *Parti communiste internationaliste* (PCI), a small Trotskyist organization that ran separate lists alongside the PCF. In 1962 and 1967, a subset of Communist candidacies appears under the label *Action pour l'unité de la gauche* (AUG), an electoral designation used to promote left unity under the two-round electoral system.

$$(1) \quad y_{it} = \beta \cdot r_i \cdot Post1945_t + \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where y_{it} denotes support for the communists in commune i and election t . Under standard DID assumptions, β captures the average effect of exposure to Spanish refugees in the postwar period. Refugee exposure r_i is measured as the logged number of refugees per one hundred inhabitants. Commune fixed effects α_i absorb time-invariant differences across communes, while election fixed effects α_t control for common shocks across elections. In some specifications, we replace election fixed effects with department-by-election fixed effects α_{dt} to absorb department-level shocks common to all communes within a department in a given election.

To assess the validity of the parallel trends assumption and to examine the evolution of the effect over time, we also estimate event-study specifications of the following form:

$$(2) \quad y_{it} = \sum_{k \neq -1} \beta_k (r_i \times \mathbb{1}\{K_t = k\}) + \alpha_i + \alpha_t + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where K_t indexes elections relative to 1945 (so that $K_t = 0$ in 1945) and the coefficients β_k capture the dynamic effects of refugee exposure in election k , measured relative to the 1936 election (omitted as the reference category $k = -1$). While the baseline DID focuses on elections close to 1945, the event-study specification exploits a wider post-treatment time window including elections from 1924 through 1968.

We conduct the analyses at the commune level. We estimate both OLS and 2SLS specifications, instrumenting refugee exposure with the prewar presence of Spaniards.⁸

⁸We use the logged number of Spaniards per 100 inhabitants in 1931.

5 RESULTS

We report the results of the baseline difference-in-differences analysis in Table 1. The first two columns present the estimates from the baseline OLS specification. The last two columns report the reduced-form results and the IV estimates. All models include election and commune fixed effects.

Across specifications, the interaction terms indicate a clear post-1945 shift in the outcome in areas more exposed to the arrival of refugees (or to predicted refugee inflows in the reduced-form specifications).

Specifically, a 100% increase in the number of refugees per capita is associated with a statistically significant increase of 0.9 percentage points in support for the communist vote share in the OLS specification and 1 percentage point in the 2SLS specification. Reduced-form specifications point to a similar pattern: a 100% increase in the number of Spaniards per capita in 1931 is associated with a statistically significant increase of between 0.8 and 1.3 percentage points. Importantly, the presence of Spanish people in 1931 is a strong predictor of the later presence of refugees, which supports our identification strategy.⁹

Next, Figure 3 reports event-study estimates assessing the dynamic effects of the refugee shock. Prior to World War II, refugee exposure does not predict differential trends in communist vote share, supporting the parallel trends assumption.

Across both approaches, the estimated coefficients present a similar pattern. However, immediately after the war there is a clear and statistically significant increase in support for the communists in communes that received more refugees. This effect remains positive and statistically significant throughout the postwar period and only begins to attenuate in the early 1960s.

Taken together, the event-study evidence reinforces the baseline results. Exposure to Spaniards does not predict prewar trends in communist support but is strongly associated

⁹See also Figure A7 in the appendix, which implements (Lal et al., 2024) IV diagnostics.

Table 1: Refugee presence and support for the PCF, DID results

	OLS		RF	IV
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Refugees \times Post1945	0.009** (0.004)	0.010** (0.004)		0.013** (0.006)
Spaniards \times Post1945			0.008** (0.003)	
Observations	293,829	293,829	293,829	293,829
Communes	34,392	34,392	34,392	34,392
Elections	9	9	9	9
Population control		✓		
F-test (1st stage)				137
Election FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Commune FE	✓	✓	✓	✓

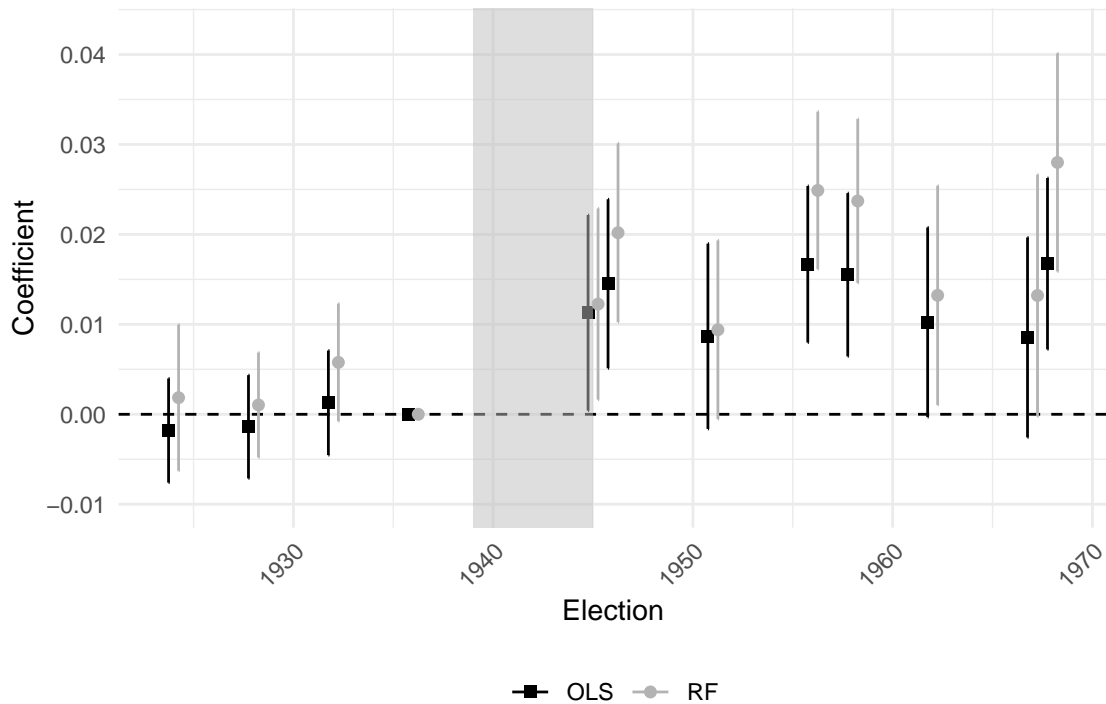
Commune-level regressions with two-way fixed effects. We report the partial F-statistic on the excluded instrument from the cross-sectional first-stage regression. Standard errors clustered at the department-level in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

with a discrete and persistent increase after 1945. We interpret this pattern as suggestive evidence that the arrival of highly politicized Spanish refugees contributed to postwar communist mobilization rather than reflecting pre-existing political dynamics.

5.1 Mobilization or Vote Switching?

The analyses presented so far suggest that the arrival of Spanish refugees increased electoral support for the PCF and other aligned parties, consistent with our hypothesis that refugees helped mobilize political support. An important remaining question, however, is whether this increase reflects mobilization (that is, the activation of previously disengaged voters) or electoral substitution (that is, voters shifting support from other parties to the communists). To assess the relative importance of these channels, we re-estimate the baseline specification for the five political families defined by Cagé and Piketty (2023),

Figure 3: Refugee arrival and support for the communists, event study

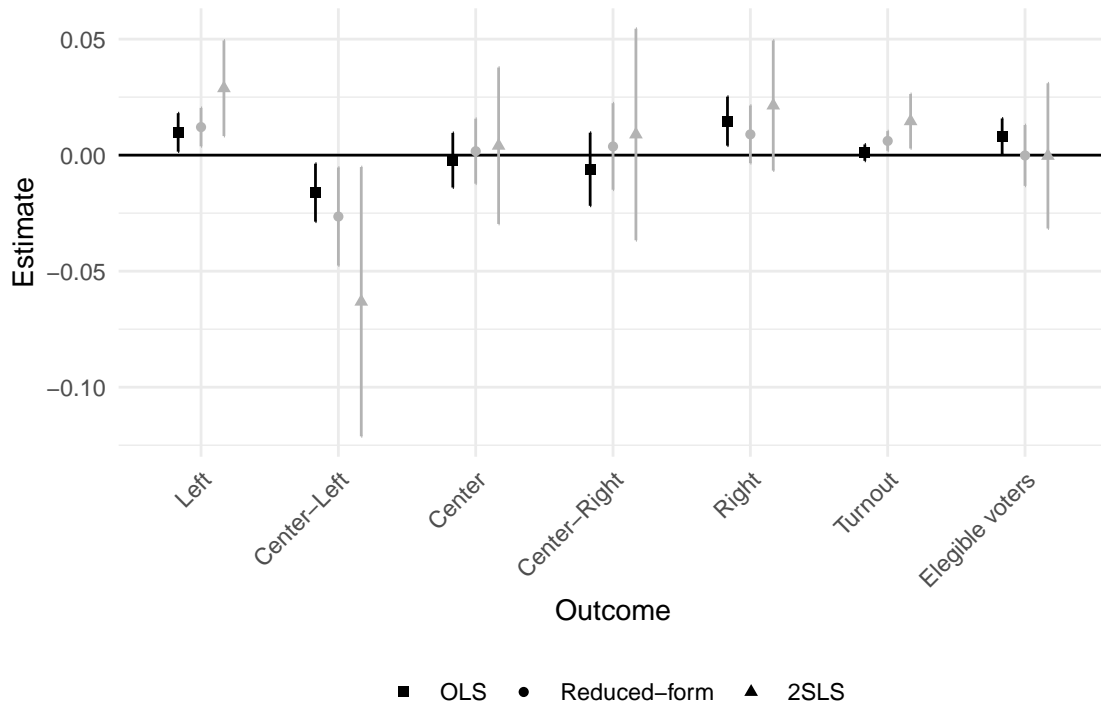


Event-study estimates. All specifications include commune and election fixed effects and control for log population at baseline (1936) interacted with election indicators (see Equation 2). Standard errors clustered at the department level.

as well as for turnout and eligible voters. As in Table 1, we estimate OLS, reduced-form, and 2SLS specifications at the commune level.

The results, presented in Figure 4, suggest that the postwar increase in left-wing support is driven primarily by vote switching rather than by mobilization. Across all three specifications, the increase in support for the Left is accompanied by a corresponding decline in support for the Center-Left, with little evidence of systematic changes for other ideological blocs. There seems to be an increase for support of the Right, which could be consistent with a backlash to the refugee presence or their Left-wing mobilization. However, this effect is only statistically significant in the baseline OLS. The final two columns address potential compositional changes in the electorate and among voters. First, the results make it unlikely that the effect is driven by refugees themselves entering the elec-

Figure 4: DID results on various electoral outcomes



This plot shows coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from the difference-in-differences analyses (see Equation 1), at the commune level. Confidence intervals are based on standard errors clustered at the department level.

torate, which is also consistent with the fact that access to French nationality came only later and only for a subset of refugees. Second, we find a small increase in turnout, which leaves open the possibility of some mobilization at the margin.

At the same time, these findings should be interpreted with caution because the analysis is conducted at the commune level. As a result, we cannot directly observe individual vote transitions and therefore cannot rule out an ecological inference problem: In particular, the combination of rising Communist vote share and declining Center-Left support does not by itself demonstrate that former SFIO voters switched to the PCF, nor does the modest increase in turnout allow us to identify which individuals were mobilized.

Taken together, these results are consistent with Spanish refugees contributing to a reorientation of support away from the SFIO, the dominant party of the Center-Left, and

toward the Communists. This interpretation aligns with historical accounts emphasizing the postwar consolidation of the PCFs identity as the party of the Resistance, alongside the SFIOs increasing association with the centrist coalitions of the Third Force during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

6 MECHANISMS: REVOLUTIONARY PRESTIGE?

Having established a consistent relationship between the presence of Spanish Republicans and increased support for the Left in France after the Second World War, we now examine mechanisms consistent with this pattern.

One of the key mechanisms proposed in the theory section is that Spanish refugees played a role similar to that of the German Forty-Eighters in the American North: they served as political role models (Dippel and Heblich, 2021). We argue that active participation in, and mobilization for, the French Resistance was one important vehicle through which they acquired local prestige. In this section, we evaluate that mechanism empirically.

We first show that the presence of Spanish refugees predicts whether a municipality later received formal recognition for participation in the Resistance. We then show that Resistance participation is itself associated with a postwar shift to the Left. At the same time, the effect of refugee presence remains positive even after accounting for Resistance recognition, indicating that revolutionary prestige was an important, but only partial, channel of political influence. Finally, we provide evidence against a key alternative explanation: that Spanish refugees merely settled in places that were already more prone to Resistance activity, without themselves contributing to it.

6.1 *Revolutionary prestige*

First, we examine the relationship between the presence of Spanish refugees and the intensity of Resistance participation. To measure refugee presence during World War II,

we use commune-level data on the presence of Spanish refugees from a dossier prepared for the *Conférence Internationale d'Aide aux Réfugiés Espagnols* (Paris, 15-16 July 1939) by the French *Bureau d'Information*, which recorded the presence of Spanish refugees between April and July 1939.¹⁰ The dossier includes a list of all refugee centers, specifying their commune, the number of refugees, and whether they were "combatants (males aged 15 to 55) or "civilians" (everyone else). According to this source, there were 167,932 combatants distributed over 12 concentration camps and 3 hospitals, and 63,535 civilians distributed over 903 lodging centers. In our analyses, we focus on civilian refugees, who were the ones actually in contact with the native population throughout the country. A map depicting the spatial distribution of the civilian refugees aggregated at the level of the *arrondissement* is provided in Figure A5. As the map illustrates, refugees were widely dispersed across the country, consistent with expectations drawn from the historical literature.

In turn, to measure participation in the Resistance, we rely on a list elaborated by the French Ministry of Armed Forces that records the names and commune of origin of individuals who were reported for "remarkable acts of faith and courage that contributed to the resistance of the French people against the enemy." The list is available as a dataset on the *Mémoire des Hommes* website (Mémoire des Hommes, nd). Using the birthplaces of the awardees, we are able to link 42,195 medals to individuals born in 11,454 different communes in our sample.

Because the distribution of refugees was centrally planned and mostly based on communes' hosting capacity (see Section 3), we posit that their presence at this stage is unlikely to be correlated with local political characteristics that might also influence participation in the Resistance. We assess the plausibility of this assumption in Figure A1, which presents the coefficients from OLS regressions of the number of refugees on our set of pretreatment covariates, including *arrondissement* (or department) fixed effects.¹¹

¹⁰The data has been made digitally available by the [Generalitat de Catalunya](#).

¹¹We apply a log+1 transformation to the number of refugees to reduce skewness.

The results support our assumption. Refugees were more likely to be placed in larger towns and in communes with less agricultural employment—that is, in more urban areas. However, their presence is uncorrelated with key political covariates such as left-wing vote share and turnout in 1936. Likewise, some economic factors like a commune's distance to railways or its revenue level do not meaningfully predict refugee placement. Importantly, we find only a weak correlation between where refugees were located in 1939 and the pre-existing Spanish-born population, implying that refugees had little scope to settle in areas where they already had a network. Taken together, the evidence supports historical accounts that refugee placement was driven chiefly by the communes' ability to host refugees, not by local political conditions.

Next, we examine the relationship between the presence of Spanish refugees and the intensity of Resistance participation. We estimate the following equation:

$$(3) \quad M_i = \beta \cdot r_i + \mathbf{X}_i' \delta + \lambda_a + \varepsilon_i$$

where M_i is the (logged) number of Resistance medals granted to residents of commune i , and r_i is the (logged) number of refugees. The vector \mathbf{X}_i' is our set of pre-treatment covariates, and λ_a is a set of arrondissement (or department) fixed-effects.

The results are shown in Table 2. The first two columns report the coefficients from the regressions with arrondissement fixed effects, with and without controls. In both cases, we see that the presence of refugees is strongly positively correlated with the number of Resistance medals. Specifically, the estimate in column (2) indicates that a 100% increase in the number of refugees is associated with around 7.5% more Resistance medals. In columns (3) and (4), we replicate this analysis using department fixed effects, finding nearly identical results.

Across all specifications, the presence of Spanish-born residents in 1931 is also strongly and positively associated with Resistance participation. A possible causal explanation is

Table 2: Spanish Refugees and Resistance medals

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Refugees (log)	0.077*** (0.005)	0.071*** (0.005)	0.078*** (0.005)	0.073*** (0.005)
Population 1936 (log)	0.404*** (0.003)	0.368*** (0.005)	0.400*** (0.003)	0.362*** (0.004)
Spaniards in 1931 (log)		0.082*** (0.005)		0.079*** (0.005)
Other foreigners (log)		0.027*** (0.002)		0.028*** (0.002)
Dependent variable mean	0.383	0.380	0.383	0.380
Observations	32,295	30,982	32,295	30,982
Within R ²	0.398	0.413	0.404	0.420
N Clusters	244	239	83	82
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Arrondissement FE	✓	✓		
Department FE			✓	✓

Commune-level regressions with (arrondissement or department) fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the level of fixed effects in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

that many male refugees who escaped the southern camps during the war relocated to towns with established Spanish communities, also contributing to local Resistance activity. Unfortunately, data on refugee locations in the later stages of the conflict are unavailable, so we cannot test this mechanism directly. It is nevertheless telling that the presence of other foreign-born populations, while also positively correlated with Resistance participation, returns smaller estimates: a 100% increase in Spaniards is linked to an 8 percentage-point rise in Resistance medals, whereas the same proportional increase in other foreign-born residents is associated with only about a 2 percentage-point rise.

Having established strong associations between the presence of refugees, now we ask: Was the refugees' influence in French society derived from their prestige earned during the Resistance? To test this hypothesis, we examine whether support for the Left rose more sharply after 1945 in communes with above-median Resistance intensity, while con-

Table 3: Is it a matter of prestige?

	(1)	(2)
Post1945 × Spanish-born 1931 (log)	0.012** (0.005)	0.008* (0.004)
Post1945 × Population 1936 (log)	0.005 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)
Post1945 × High-Resistance (medals)		0.124** (0.041)
Dependent variable mean	0.160	0.160
Observations	425,770	425,770
Within R ²	0.003	0.036
Commune FE	✓	✓
Election FE	✓	✓

Commune-level regressions with two-way fixed effects. Dependent variable is the share of votes received by the Left in legislative elections, 1919-1968. Standard errors clustered two-way by department and year in parentheses. Coefficients in percentage points. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

trolling for the postwar association between pre-existing Spanish presence and left vote.

Table 3 shows the results of this exercise. Column (2) indicates that high-resistance communes experienced a sizable additional shift toward the Left after 1945, consistent with the prestige hypothesis: Resistance credentials themselves appear to have mobilized left-wing voting. At the same time, the post-1945 association between pre-existing Spanish presence and left vote remains positive, suggesting that both channels point in the same political direction rather than that the prestige mechanism operates differently in more Spanish communes.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper shows that politically experienced migrants can reshape host-country politics. Studying Spanish Republicans exiled to France after the Spanish Civil War, we find that

communes hosting more refugees experienced a significant and sustained shift toward communist electoral support in the postwar period. The shift appears to be driven by vote switching from the Center-Left toward the French Communist Party, not by increased voter mobilization. These patterns align with historical evidence of refugee participation in French Communist Party networks and associational organizing, demonstrating that refugees successfully transmitted their political commitments through party structures and family socialization.

Our findings contribute to the literature on refugee political effects by centering migrant agency rather than treating refugees as passive demographic factors. Spanish Republicans possessed the organizational experience, ideological salience, and the moral credibility from Resistance participation that enabled them to function as political role models. These conditions may not be universal: future research should examine whether analogous mechanisms operate in other refugee contexts. Ultimately, this case shows that displaced populations can exercise consequential political agency, actively reshaping the electoral terrain of their host societies through organizational work and the diffusion of political commitments across generations.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

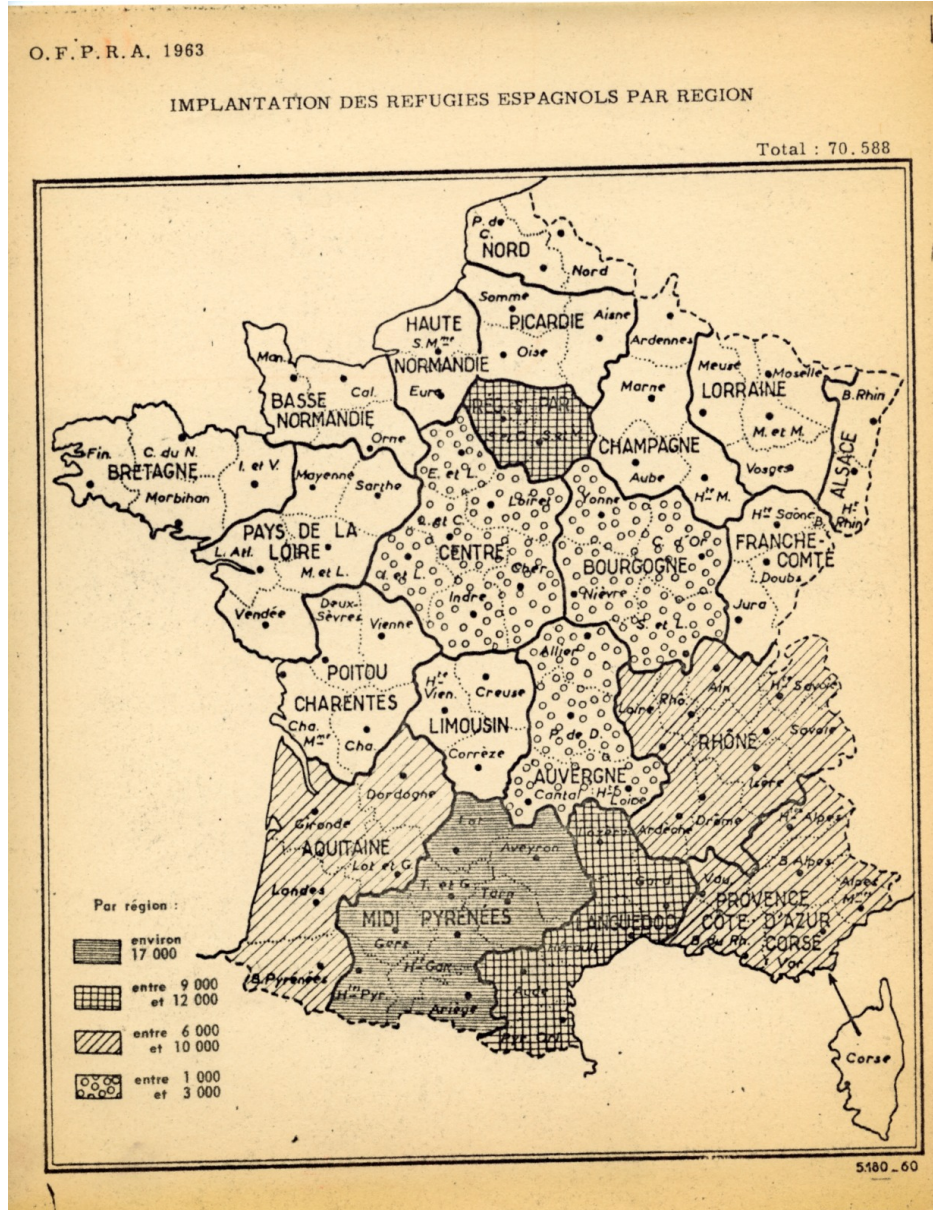


Figure A1: Presence of Spanish Refugees in 1963. Source: OFPRA. Rapport sur l'activité de l'OFPRA pour l'année 1963.



Figure A2: Example of a Refugee Card from the OFPRA archive

36.739

MINISTÈRE
DES AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES

**OFFICE FRANÇAIS
DE PROTECTION DES RÉFUGIÉS
ET APATRIDES**

7, Rue Copernic, PARIS (XVI^e)

- 7 MAI 1951
D. *Alonso 9/17/3*
CH. *le*
N. *29 299 120*
D. à r. *le*
CR n° *le*

DEMANDE DE PROTECTION

NOMS (los dos apellidos) : *CUNILLÉ PERELLÓ*

Prénom (nombre) : *Domingo*

Date de naissance : *30 Mai 1915*

Lieu de naissance : *Sabadell* Province : *Barcelona*

Profession : *Cordonnier* Nationalité : *Espagnole*

Adresse actuelle : *29 Bd de Gaulle Langogne (Lozère)*

Date et lieu d'entrée en France (avec passeport ou clandestinement) : *Fevrier 1939*

Etes-vous célibataire, marié, veuf (veuve), divorcé ? *marié ?*

Prénom et les deux noms du conjoint : *Carmen Hermann Bermejo*

Où se trouve votre conjoint ? *Langogne (Lozère) France*

Nationalité du conjoint : *Espagnole*

Date du mariage : *9 août 1938* Lieu du mariage : *Barcelona*

Prénom et les deux noms de votre père : *Juan Cunillo Rivera*

Prénom et les deux noms de jeune fille de votre mère : *Gertrudis Perello Gauset*

Nationalité du père et de la mère : *Espagnols*

Où se trouve votre père ? *Sabadell Espagne*

Où se trouve votre mère ? *Sabadell Espagne*

Avez-vous fait votre service militaire ? *voluntario* Dans quel pays ? *Espagne*

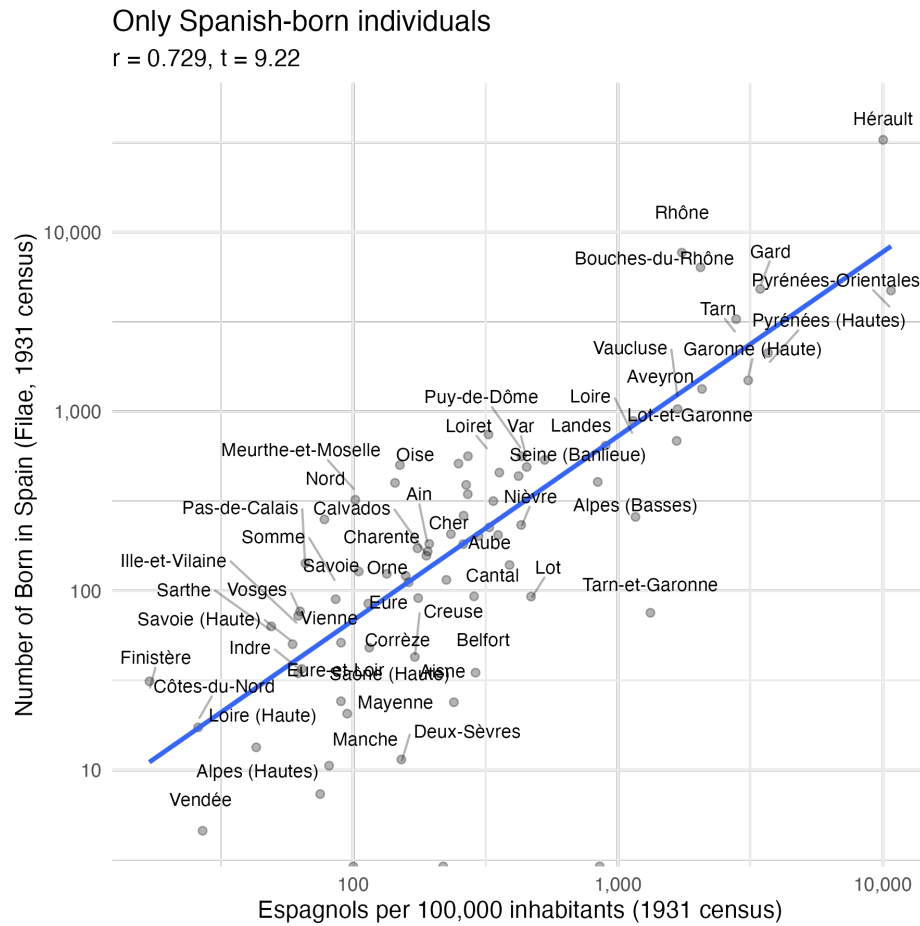
Dans quelle formation ? *Milicias* A quelle date ? *1936 - 1938*

Pour les mineurs : N° des certificats de réfugiés de vos parents :

Pour les femmes mariées : N° du certificat de réfugié de votre mari :

Voir au verso

Figure A3: Example of a Refugee Request from the OFPRA archive



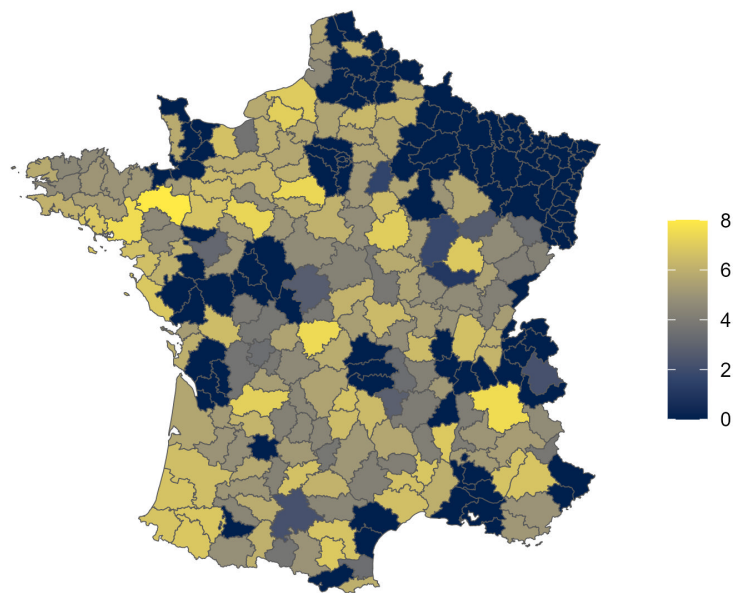


Figure A5: Logged number of civilian Spanish refugees in July 1939, aggregated at the arrondissement level for better visualization. Source: *Conférence Internationale d'Aide aux Réfugiés Espagnols*, see text.

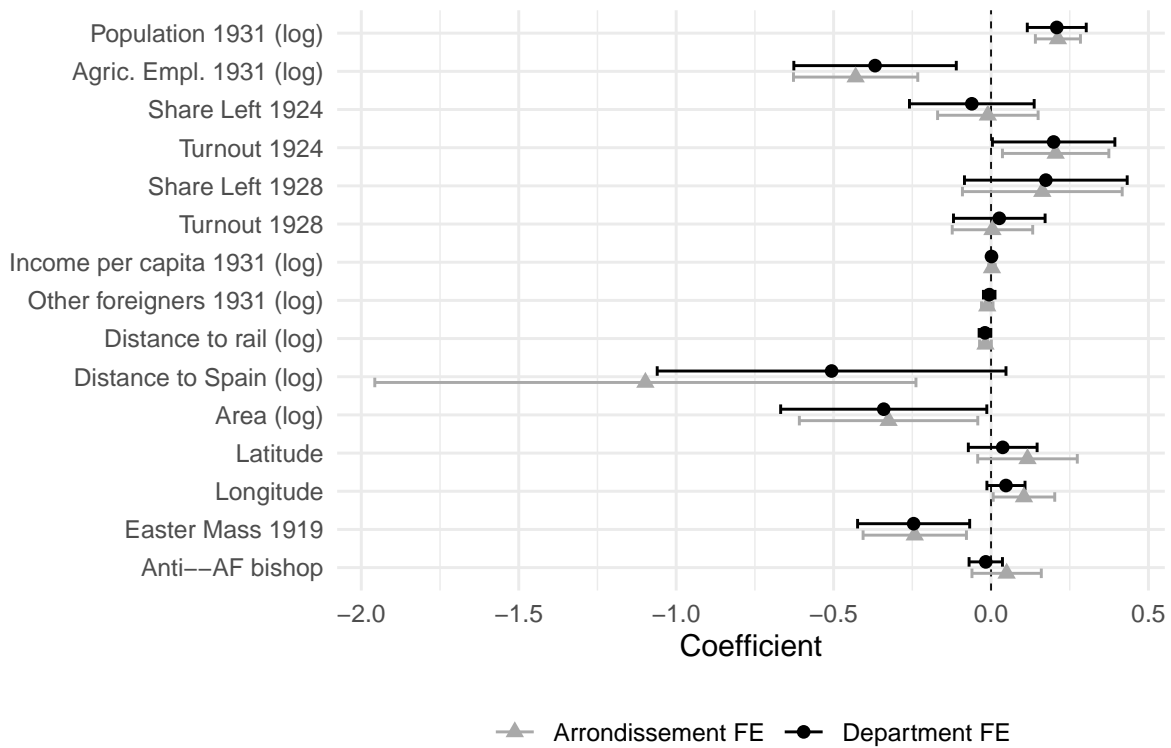


Figure A6: Determinants of presence of Spanish refugees in 1939.

Table A1: Determinants of refugee presence in 1939

	(1)	(2)
Population 1936 (log)	0.105*** (0.005)	0.098*** (0.005)
Agric. Empl. (log)	-0.025*** (0.006)	-0.025*** (0.006)
Spaniards in 1931 (log)	0.031*** (0.006)	0.028*** (0.006)
Share Left 1936	-0.028 (0.039)	0.014 (0.034)
Turnout 1936	0.021 (0.055)	-0.007 (0.053)
PIB per capita (log)	0.005 (0.003)	0.006* (0.003)
Other foreigners (log)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)
Distance to rail (log)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)
Distance to Spain (log)	-0.022 (0.121)	-0.006 (0.079)
Area (log)	-0.040 (0.032)	-0.014 (0.031)
Latitude	-0.002 (0.036)	-0.038* (0.022)
Longitude	-0.035** (0.016)	-0.028*** (0.010)
Observations	31,699	31,702
Within R ²	0.046	0.044
N Clusters	250	87
Arrondissement FE	✓	
Department FE		✓

Commune-level regressions with (arrondissement or department) fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the level of fixed effects in parentheses.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

Figure A7: Instrumental variable diagnostics (Lal et al., 2024).

Table A2: Parties included in the Gauche category by election year

Year	Parties
1924	Workers' and Peasants' Bloc (BOP)
1928	French Communist Party (PCF)
1932	French Communist Party (PCF)
1936	French Communist Party (PCF)
1945-1	French Communist Party (PCF)
1945-2	French Communist Party (PCF), Parti Communiste Internationaliste (PCI)
1951	French Communist Party (PCF)
1956	French Communist Party (PCF)
1958	French Communist Party (PCF)
1962	French Communist Party (PCF), Action pour l'Unité de la Gauche (AUG)
1967	French Communist Party (PCF), Action pour l'Unité de la Gauche (AUG)

Party abbreviations:

COM: Parti Communiste early label for the French Communist Party in 1919.

BOP: Bloc Ouvrier et Paysan workers' and peasants' bloc supported by the Communist Party in 1924.

PCF: Parti Communiste Français the French Communist Party.

PCI: Parti Communiste Internationaliste French Trotskyist party active in the 1940s; participated in the November 1945 election.

AUG: Action pour l'Unité de la Gauche electoral label denoting unified left-wing candidacies in the early Fifth Republic.