Assessing the Impact of Immigration on the Italian Labor Market Using Time Series Analysis

Evangeline Eastman

Barnard College, Columbia University

Faculty Advisor: Professor Randall Reback

Abstract

The present study uses time series analyses to investigate claims by right-wing Italian politicians that immigration worsens the unemployment rates of native Italians. The analyses look to assess the effects of immigration on the unemployment rates of Italians at different education levels and the employment of Italians within specific economic sectors. Trends in the immigration population did not appear to align with trends in the unemployment rate of Italians at any education level, and a large increase in the agricultural sector's share of immigrants did not accompany a sustained decrease of native employment. These results suggest that immigration was not a primary influence on Italian unemployment during the period 2006–2023, and that additions of immigrants to the labor market during the period 2013–2021 may have been absorbed by more intensive use of their labor in the agricultural sector.

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1 Introduction

Italy attracted national attention in 2024 over Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's plan to force refugees into Albanian detention centers while Italy processed their asylum claims, a move condemned by human rights groups and eventually rejected by the Italian judiciary (Bubola, 2024). This is the latest in a long series of conflicts between anti-immigrant Italian conservatives and the legal authorities that oppose them. Similar disputes occurred in 2019, when an Italian court ruled that then- interior minister Matteo Salvini could not continue to prevent an NGO-operated rescue boat from bringing stranded asylum seekers to Italy, and in 2009, when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Italy's forcible return of migrants to Libya under PM Silvio Berlusconi had violated the European Convention on Human Rights (Nadeau, 2024; Povoledo, 2012).

Italy's current era of anti-immigrant politics began with the 2015 European migrant crisis, during which over 900 thousand refugees arrived in Europe, primarily fleeing conflict and persecution in the Middle East (Spindler, 2015). Images of perilous boat arrivals dominated the Italian media and anti-immigrant parties rose to power and popularity, including Matteo Salvini's right-wing *Lega* party, which formed a winning coalition with the populist *Movimento 5 Stelle* in the 2018 general election (Dennison & Geddes, 2021; Hoque, 2024). The right-wing populist party *Fratelli d'Italia*, led by PM Giorgia Meloni, is Italy's current ruling party.

Politicians on Italy's right wing tend to paint immigrants as a threat to the economic wellbeing of Italians, often implying a rigid dichotomy between accepting immigrants and preventing native unemployment from rising. This pattern is very visible in the rhetoric that the most prominent right-wing politicians spread via social media platforms.

In 2021, Giorgia Meloni wrote on Twitter[1], "While unemployment is skyrocketing and businesses are on their knees, the left is calling for more immigrants to be brought in to be used as cheap labor in the fields", implying that an increased immigrant population would negatively impact natives' unemployment. A similar implication was made in 2019 by the *Lega* party's official Twitter account when they criticized their opponents for wanting to regularize immigrants, retorting "Jobs for unemployed Italians!"

It is common to see politicians encourage the belief that any jobs obtained by immigrants should have gone to Italians, pushing a narrative that immigrants cannot exist in the labor market without harming Italians. For example, Matteo Salvini wrote in 2016 that "economic migrants come AFTER the 4 million Italians who are unemployed" and Giorgia Meloni's wrote in 2021 that "while we risk millions of unemployed, the 'workers' union' is busy asking the new government for automatic citizenship for immigrants".

These kinds of messages seem strange in light of Italy's struggle with declining birth rates and an aging population. Out of all EU countries, Italy has the highest median age and one of the lowest shares of children in its population (Eurostat). Immigration brings working-age people to Italy who can provide labor, contribute to the welfare system, and support the large population of retirees. So why do conservatives push the idea that immigration will have negative economic effects for Italians?

Confused by this contradiction, I was motivated to investigate whether immigration truly led to increased unemployment in Italy and other receiving countries, and whether there were situations in which immigrants could be accepted and integrated in a local labor market without negative outcomes for natives.

[1] Social media posts cited were originally written in Italian.

In its current state, the literature regarding immigration's effects on natives' labor market outcomes yields mixed results. Rather than settling on whether immigration has a positive, negative, or negligible impact on natives' wages and unemployment rates, various studies provide data to support all three conclusions. Studies focused on Italy found positive, negative, and negligible effects on natives depending on their education, skill, and industry of employment. There is evidence to suggest that labor market rigidities or more intensive use of immigrant labor can prevent negative effects on natives. See section 1.1 for a detailed review of the literature.

The present study uses time series analyses to investigate the effects of immigration on the unemployment rates of Italians overall and the employment of Italians within specific economic sectors. Overall unemployment rates were separated by natives' level of educational attainment to search for potential differences in effects.

1.1 Literature Review

There is a large body of research that investigates the effect of immigration on native citizens' labor market outcomes. These studies have often situated themselves in reaction to debates in receiving countries about immigration's potential to harm their economies. Major economic concerns in OECD countries include fears that immigrants will take jobs away from natives, drive down wages, or be a drain on public funds (Edo et al., 2020). Many studies have used large, short-term influxes of migrants as natural experiments, investigating the impact of the influx on the labor market outcomes (usually wages, unemployment rates, or both) of existing citizens. Across the literature, there is no definitive answer as to whether immigration has a positive, negative, or negligible effect on these outcomes. The diversity of effects has been

attributed to variety in immigrants' similarity to native workers and in native economies' ability to put immigrant labor to good use.

One influential early study in this format is David Card's 1990 study on the Mariel Boatlift, which brought a large influx of Cubans to Miami and caused a 7% increase to Miami's labor force. The study used data from the 1980 census and Current Population Survey to assess the immigration wave's impact on the labor market on natives who, like the migrants, were classified as less-skilled. Card found that the inflow had "virtually no effect" on the wages or unemployment rates of less-skilled natives, even those who were Cuban immigrants from earlier influxes (Card, 1990, p. 256). He proposed that this could be due to an expansion of employment in industries that use immigrant labor intensively, but found no data to support this. Instead, he theorized that the Mariel immigrants replaced established Cuban immigrants as the latter moved on to better jobs.

Contrastingly, an early study by Borjas, Freeman, and Katz (1996) found immigration to be associated with a decline in the wages of U.S. workers with a high school diploma or less. The study analyzed data from the 1980 and 1990 censuses to compare the economic outcomes of working-age natives across skill levels (defined by their educational attainment) and across areas with or without large immigrant inflows. Borjas further refined the practice of classifying immigrants by skill level in a 2003 study. Here, he focused on a large wave of immigration to the U.S. from 1980 to 2000 and discovered variation in work experience between immigrants with the same education level. He assumed that workers with equal education but differing work experience were not perfect substitutes, and accounted for both factors when identifying natives that could be substituted by incoming immigrants. In doing so, Borjas again found immigration to be associated with a decline in native wages: a 10% increase in immigrant supply was found

to reduce the wage of the average competing native worker by 3.2% (with larger impacts on natives with less education).

Both of the former studies focus on wages, but alongside Card's 1990 study they inform a body of future work that assesses immigration's impact on both wages and unemployment. For example, a 2017 study by Aydemir and Kirdar places a similar emphasis on the substitutability of immigrants and natives, and like Card, uses a short and intense period of immigration as a natural experiment. The study focuses on a 1989 politically-motivated migration of ethnic Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey and investigates the movement's impact on the employment rate of Turkey's existing workers. It found that the 10% increase in the labor supply caused by the movement resulted in a 2.6 percentage point increase in the unemployment rate of native men 14 months after the end of the 3-month influx. The increase was 7 percentage points for young men with a high school degree or less. The authors explain that the incoming Turks are very good substitutes for existing Turks (given that they share a language and ethnicity and come from a neighboring country) and theorize that substitutability could account for their study finding a much larger impact compared to other research.

Fusaro and López-Bazo (2021) also find effects on unemployment that differ based on the education level of natives, and they similarly attribute the nature of these effects to substitutability. Their study focuses on immigration to the Italian provinces in the period following the Great Recession and European sovereign debt crisis (defined here as 2009–2017), and while it finds a negligible effect on natives' employment overall, it finds positive effects on employment for certain groups of natives. Employment increased for highly-educated natives but not low-educated natives, for skilled manual native workers but not those in low-skilled occupations or white collar jobs, and for women overall but not men overall. There was a

particular increase in employment for highly-educated native women employed in skilled manual labor. The authors theorize that immigrants were good substitutes for skilled native women occupied in housework or childcare, and that by taking on this labor, immigrants facilitated their pursuit of employment. Providing a possible reason for the lack of negative employment effects, the authors explain that immigrants likely were not substituted for similarly educated and skilled natives because of labor market regulations that make it expensive to fire and replace workers. Additionally, the study only analyzes short-term effects, and the authors note that long-term effects could differ.

Another examination of short-term effects is Labanca's 2016 study of migration to Italy following the Arab Spring. In 2011, Italy saw a 23% increase to its population of immigrants from countries affected by the Arab Spring, but this increase dissipated by the end of the year as migrants moved through Italy to other countries. The study found no effect on the wages of natives and noted that this is consistent with the inflexibility of the Italian wage-setting mechanism. Immigration's impact on natives' employment differed by industry: with positive effects in the construction and educational services industries, but negative effects in wholesale trade, hotels, and restaurants. The author suggests that positive effects may be due to immigrants generating demand for housing and education (both schooling for young immigrants and language classes for adults). Due to the temporary nature of the migration flow, effects dissipate over time, and this study cannot compare short term and longer term effects. Other studies can, however, such as Cohen-Goldner and Paserman's (2011) examination of immigration to Israel from former Soviet Union countries in the 1990s. Much like Borjas (2003), they classify workers based on education, experience, and geographic location and thereby isolate impacts on different sets of natives. In segments based on occupation, they find negative effects on natives' wages,

but in segments based on education the effects are positive. Possibly this is due to the difficulty of applying schooling or experience gained outside of Israel to the Israeli job market. Overall, they find that in the short-term, a 10% increase in immigrants' share of the population results in a 1–3% decrease in natives' wages. However, they find that this effect dissolves after 4 to 7 years. Additionally, they find no effect of immigration on employment, neither in the short term nor the medium term.

A possible explanation for the dissipation of effects over time is offered by Gonzalez and Ortega (2011), who examined an influx of migrants to Spain from 2001 to 2006. During this period, the foreign-born share of the Spanish population increased from 6–13% with a total inflow of over 3 million immigrants, a large fraction of whom came from Latin America. As native Spanish speakers, these immigrants could compete well with similarly unskilled native workers and could theoretically drive down wages or take job opportunities from unemployed Spaniards. Nonetheless, the study found the wave to have no effect on the wages and unemployment rates of unskilled natives. The authors found that this could be explained by increases in total employment which absorbed the addition of migrants to the labor supply. Regions receiving large numbers of migrants saw industries such as retail and construction begin to use unskilled labor more intensively. The authors cite then-preliminary research by Dustmann and Glitz (2015), which provides another example of this kind of absorption. These authors focused on a period of large migration flows to West Germany from 1985–1995 and found that 71% of the economy's "overall adjustment to immigration-induced labor supply shocks in the tradable sector" could be explained by firms modifying how intensively they use low and medium skill labor (Dustmann & Glitz, 2015, p. 714). While they found no effect on wages in the tradable sector, there was a negative effect in the non-tradable sector. Perhaps the dissipation

of effects over time seen in Cohen-Goldner and Paserman's study (2011) is due to a similar absorption that occurred more slowly.

The literature does not settle on whether immigration has a positive, negative, or negligible effect on natives' labor market outcomes; rather, it provides data that supports all three of these conclusions to varying degrees. Potential explanations for this variation lie in the diverse characteristics of the immigrants, natives, and economies involved. Natives often experience different effects depending on their education level and skillset (Aydemir & Kirdar, 2017; Borjas et al., 2020; Cohen-Goldner & Paserman, 2011; Fusaro & López-Bazo, 2021) or depending on what sector they work in (Dustmann & Glitz, 2015; Labanca, 2016). There are situations where labor market rigidities can prevent negative impacts to natives' wages (Labanca, 2016) and employment (Fusaro & López-Bazo, 2021). Furthermore, negative effects can be prevented through more intensive use of the types of labor that immigrants provide (Dustmann & Glitz, 2015; Gonzalez & Ortega, 2011).

2 Method

I decided to approach my question with a time series. My goal was to compare Italy's immigrant population to Italian citizens' unemployment rates in order to see what trends they followed and if those trends aligned.

My data comes from the EU Labor Force Survey, and I accessed it using the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Data Explorer tool. I was primarily interested in the population of immigrants from outside of Europe, since these immigrants receive so much attention in Italian immigration discourse, but the data on immigrants' country of origin was too limited to make use

of[2]. There was, however, very thorough data on the education level of the Italian immigrant population.

I decided to use the population of immigrants with lower levels of education as an estimate for the population of immigrants from outside the EU. Specifically, I obtained data for the population of working-age foreign citizens residing in Italy with a level of education defined as "Basic" or "Less than basic". Those with these levels of education constitute roughly half of Italy's working-age foreign-citizen population throughout the years for which data was available. The ILO uses aggregate education levels from UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). ISCED defines four levels: Less than basic, Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced. "Less than basic" refers to those with no education or only early childhood education, "Basic" includes completed primary or lower secondary education, "Intermediate" includes completed upper secondary education or post-secondary non-university programs, and "Advanced" includes any completed tertiary education.

I also separated the unemployment rates of Italian citizens by education level. Informed by studies in the literature (Borjas et al., 1996; Fusaro & López-Bazo, 2021), I hypothesized that influxes of low-education immigrants might have a more negative impact on Italians with a similar level of education, since with similar qualifications they would be likely to compete for the same jobs. I obtained data for the unemployment rate of Italian citizens overall, as well as the individual rates for Italian citizens with Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced education levels. I didn't include the rate for "Less than basic" because those at this level consistently make up less than 2% of the Italian working age population.

[2] See 4.1 Limitations

I graphed the unemployment rates with the working-age population of low-education non-citizens from 2006 to 2023, the years for which data was available. This is shown in Figure 1 (see Results section).

Additionally, I obtained Italian data on the employment of Italian citizens and foreign citizens in specific sectors (also from the ILO Data Explorer). Informed by studies in the literature that showed different effects for natives in different industries (Dustmann & Glitz, 2015; Labanca, 2016), I wondered if potential effects on the employment of natives would differ between sectors. The broad sectors within the EU Labor Force Survey data are service, industry, and agriculture. For each sector, I graphed its number of employed citizens and non-citizens over time (data was available from 2013 to 2023). Additionally, I calculated projected employment numbers to show, for each group, what the numbers would be if the ratio of citizens to non-citizens had stayed the same over time amid changes in the total number employed. To do so, I calculated what percent of total employment each group constituted in 2013 and multiplied that percentage by each subsequent year's total employment. This data is shown in Figures 2–4 (see Results section).

3 Results

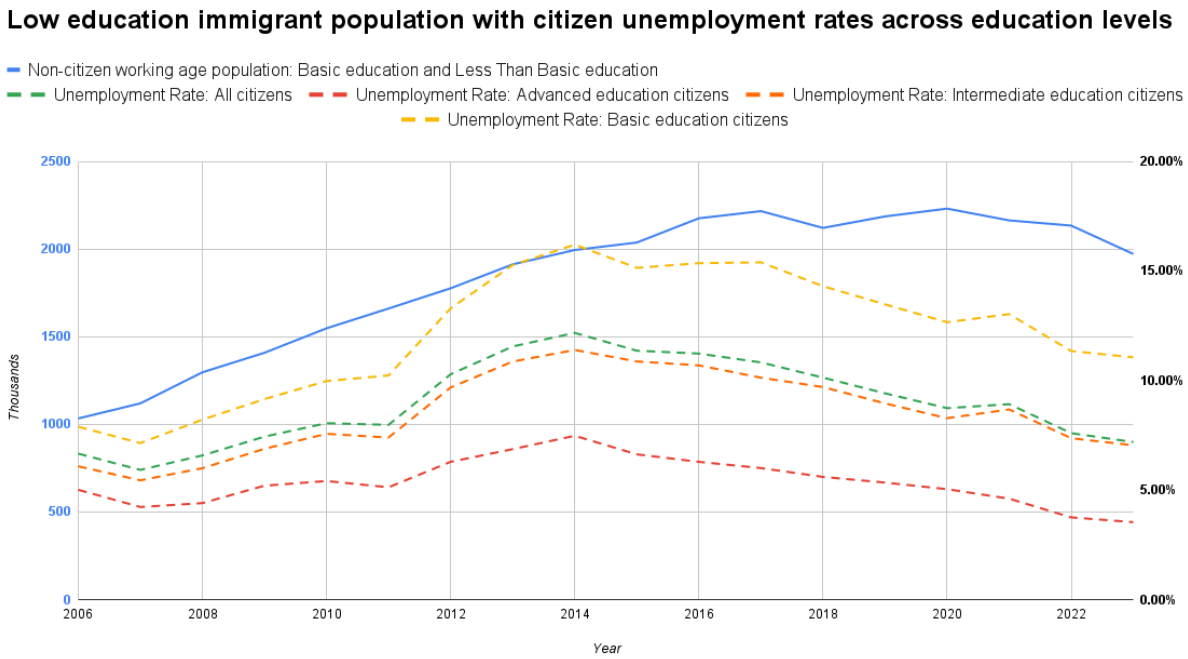

Figure 1. The low-education non-citizen working-age population rose steadily from just above 1 million in 2006 to about 2.2 million in 2016 before leveling off. The education-based unemployment rates for Italian citizens all followed the same pattern. The rates dipped by less than a percentage point in 2007, then increased by 1–2 percentage points from 2008 to 2010. From 2011 to 2014 the rates increased again by 2–6 percentage points (with lower education levels seeing a larger increase in unemployment). Finally, all of the unemployment rates saw a steady decrease from 2014 to 2023. Within that time frame, all rates except that of Italians at the Advanced level of education saw a slight uptick in 2021.

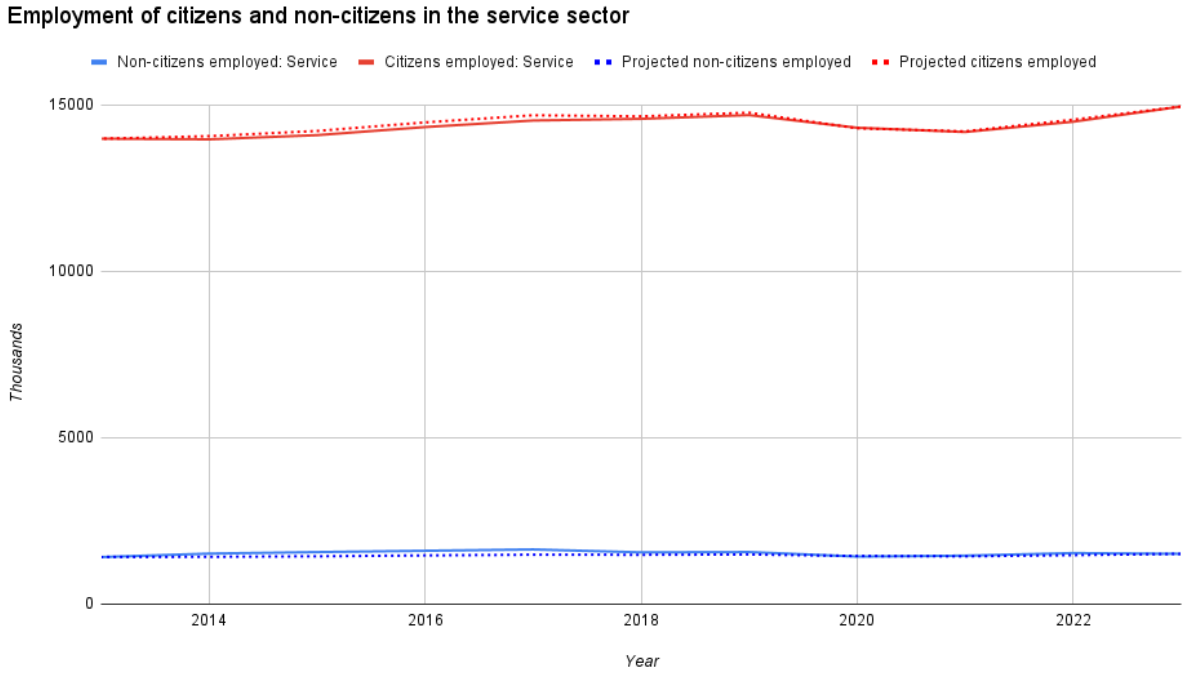

Figure 2. In the service sector, the populations of employed citizens and non-citizens both remained stable. There are roughly ten times as many employed citizens as non-citizens. The number of employed citizens stayed close to 14 million and within 7% of its original 2013 value. The number of employed non-citizens was roughly 1.4 million in 2013 and rose to about 1.6 million in 2017 (a roughly 16% increase) before returning to about 1.5 million (within 7% of the 2013 value) by 2023. The projected numbers stayed very close to the true numbers for both citizens and non-citizens, aligning with the fact that the percentage of non-citizens in this sector stays within 9–10.1%.

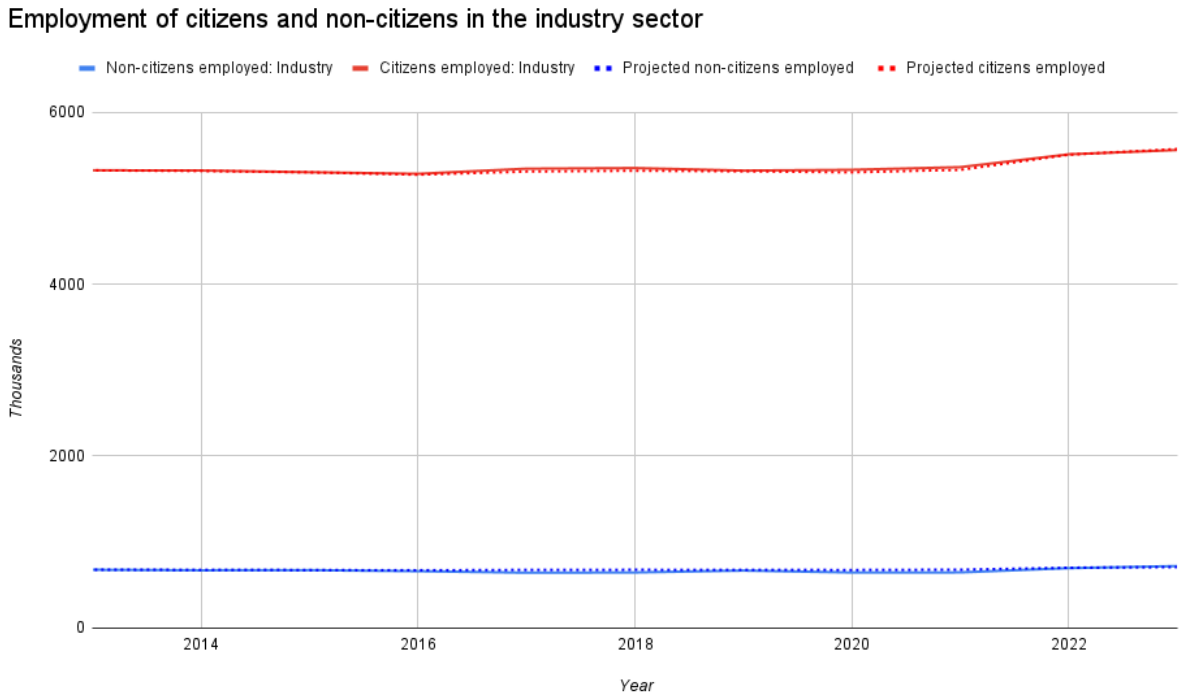

Figure 3. The populations of employed citizens and non-citizens in the industry sector also remained stable. The number of employed citizens stayed close to 5.3 million except for a slight rise to around 5.5 million in the last two years (staying within 5% of the 2013 value). The number of employed non-citizens saw slight increases and decreases, peaking at about 720 thousand in 2023 and staying within 7% of its 2013 value of roughly 677 thousand. The projected numbers stayed very close to the true numbers for both citizens and non-citizens, aligning with the fact that the percentage of non-citizens in this sector stays within 10.7–11.5%.

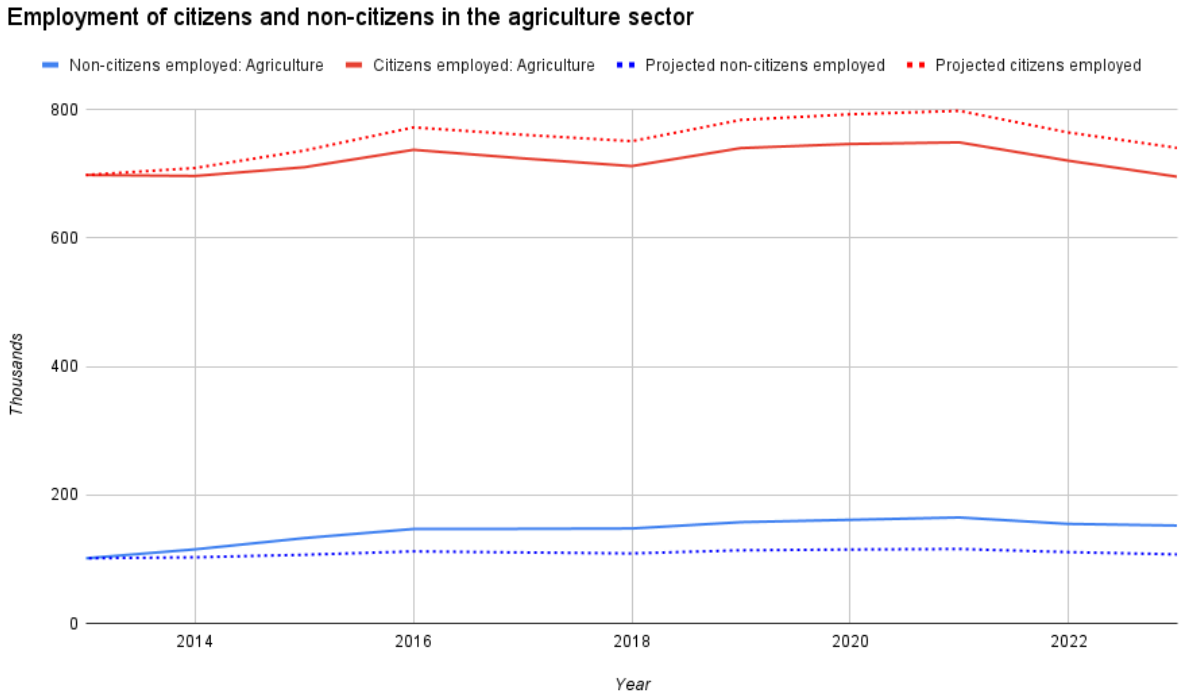

Figure 4. The data for the agriculture sector shows more dynamic populations of employed citizens and non-citizens. The population of employed citizens started and ended just below 700 thousand but saw a peak of roughly 748 thousand in 2021. Throughout the time range, it saw increases and decreases of 3–7% that alternated every two to three years. The steepest change was a drop of 55,000 between 2021 and 2023. The non-citizen population increased consistently from 2013 to 2021 by about 62% (from roughly 101 thousand to 164 thousand) before declining by about 7% until 2023. Unlike the other sectors, the projected numbers differ noticeably from the actual numbers. From 2014 onward, the projected number of citizens employed is slightly higher than the actual number, and the projected number of non-citizens employed is slightly lower than the actual number. This aligns with the fact that the percentage of non-citizens in this sector rises from about 12.67% to roughly 18% over the 10 year period, a vast increase compared to the other sectors.

4 Discussion

The data displayed in Figure 1 allowed me to investigate whether changes in the immigrant population appear to influence changes in native unemployment rates. If immigrants were taking jobs away from natives, I would expect changes in the population of low-education immigrants to align with changes in the unemployment rates of their closest substitutes: native Italians with Basic education. I wouldn't expect to see the same relationship between the immigrant population and more highly educated natives, since studies in the literature support the idea that highly-educated or highly-skilled natives see less negative or even positive labor market outcome effects from immigration waves (Aydemir & Kirdar, 2017; Borjas et al., 2020; Cohen-Goldner & Paserman, 2011; Fusaro & López-Bazo, 2021).

The data does not align with this prediction. Instead, as the immigrant population steadily increases from 2006 to 2016, the unemployment rate of Basic-education Italians closely follows the trends of the other unemployment rates. It does increase from 2006 to 2014, but then decreases steadily until 2020 even as the immigrant population continues to rise. The fact that all of the unemployment rates very closely follow the same trends supports the conclusion that, at least in annual data, they primarily respond to factors other than immigration.

Moving on to analysis of individual sectors, only one sector showed a large increase in the employed non-citizen population and in the non-citizen share of the total employed population, and that was the agriculture industry (see Figure 4). From 2013 to 2021, the population of non-citizens employed in agriculture increased by over 60% and non-citizens' share of those employed in agriculture increased by over 5 percentage points (roughly 12.67–18.05%). Interestingly, the employment of Italian citizens doesn't seem to respond negatively to this; over the same period, that population sees a net gain (all periods of decline

lasted 2 years or less). After 2021, both populations decline. It's possible that, as seen in Germany and Spain, the large addition of immigrants has been absorbed by more intensive use of the kinds of labor they provide (Dustmann & Glitz, 2015; Gonzalez & Ortega, 2011).

4.1 Limitations

One limitation of this study is the time frame for which I was able to obtain data. My data was only available at an annual scale, meaning that short-term effects that dissipate within a year could potentially be obscured. The literature includes cases where negative effects on natives' labor market outcomes dissolve over time (Cohen-Goldner and Paserman, 2011; Labanca, 2016).

Additionally, I would have liked to learn more about non-citizens' countries of origin, but this data was very limited within the ILO database. The data on non-citizens' country of birth includes Albania, Bangladesh, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Romania (certain years include even fewer country classifications) before all individuals of other nationalities into a catchall category labeled "Other Countries". For my years of interest, the "Other Countries" category always constituted the majority. This left me struggling to identify immigration from outside of the EU. I was particularly interested in the population of refugees who arrived during the 2015 migrant crisis and later waves of migration across the Mediterranean. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 75% of refugees and migrants who arrived in Europe in 2015 were fleeing dangers in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Spindler, 2015). In the future, it could be productive to study influxes of immigrants from these countries specifically, from the Middle East and Africa more broadly, or who are refugees.

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