Trading Non-Tradable Votes: EU Posted Workers and Far-Right Support in France

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March 23, 2026

Abstract

In 2004, posted workers from new EU member states began flooding French construction sites and farms—non-tradable sectors where native workers could not relocate to avoid competition. I exploit EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007 as shocks to posted worker supply, using pre-enlargement département-level sectoral composition interacted with national inflows. Higher exposure predicts larger Front National vote gains after enlargement. The effect is driven by construction and agriculture; manufacturing—where posted workers are rare—shows a precise null. However, an event study reveals pre-existing differential trends, and the result does not survive exposure-specific linear trends. These findings document that far-right growth concentrated in non-tradable-sector regions through a channel distinct from goods-trade competition, though they cannot establish a clean causal break at enlargement.

JEL Codes: D72, F22, J61

Keywords: posted workers, far-right voting, EU enlargement, labor competition, France

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1. Introduction

Between 2004 and 2017, the number of posted worker declarations in France rose from roughly 38,000 to over 400,000—a ten-fold increase concentrated in construction and agriculture, two sectors where work cannot be offshored and native workers cannot relocate to escape competition. During the same period, the Front National's presidential vote share doubled.

This paper asks whether the surge in posted worker competition caused the rise in far-right support. The question matters because posted workers represent a fundamentally different channel of labor market integration than the goods-trade shocks that dominate the political economy literature (Autor et al., 2013; Dippel et al., 2022; Colantone and Stanig, 2018). Posted workers compete in *non-tradable* sectors: they pour concrete, harvest crops, and install wiring. The exposed population—manual workers in place-bound occupations—has limited exit options, potentially generating sharper political backlash per unit of labor market displacement.

I exploit EU enlargement as a quasi-exogenous shock to posted worker supply. The accession of eight Central and Eastern European countries in May 2004 (A8) and Romania and Bulgaria in January 2007 (A2) dramatically expanded the pool of workers eligible to provide temporary services in France under the Posted Workers Directive (96/71/EC). While France imposed transitional restrictions on permanent migration, it could not restrict the posting of workers by firms established in new member states—a crucial institutional distinction that made posted worker inflows largely policy-exogenous from the French département's perspective (Muñoz, 2024).

My identification strategy uses a Bartik shift-share design. The temporal shocks are the enlargement dates, which generated a massive increase in posted workers nationally. The cross-sectional exposure measure is the pre-enlargement (2000–2003) département-level employment share in construction and agriculture—the sectors that absorb over 40% of posted workers (DARES, 2023). Départements with higher pre-enlargement concentration in these sectors were mechanically more exposed to the post-enlargement influx.

In the baseline specification, a one-standard-deviation increase in sectoral exposure is associated with a 1.3 percentage point increase in FN vote share after enlargement, relative to a pre-treatment standard deviation of 4.7 percentage points. The association is concentrated in construction and agriculture—sectors where posted workers actually compete—while manufacturing share shows a precise null (coefficient 0.5, SE 4.7). Controlling for the China import shock barely changes the estimate, suggesting the non-tradable channel operates independently of goods-trade competition.

However, I document an important limitation that qualifies the causal interpretation. An

event study reveals that high-exposure départements already exhibited faster FN growth between 1995 and 2002, before enlargement. When I include exposure-specific linear trends to absorb this pre-existing convergence, the post-enlargement coefficient drops from 49.95 to 8.94 and becomes statistically insignificant. This means the baseline estimate substantially reflects the continuation of pre-existing differential trends rather than a clean causal break at enlargement. The results are therefore best interpreted as documenting a strong, robust correlation between posted-worker-sector exposure and far-right growth—with the manufacturing placebo suggesting the non-tradable channel is distinctive—rather than a definitive causal estimate of the enlargement effect.

This paper contributes to three literatures. First, it extends the political economy of immigration (Dustmann et al., 2019; Halla et al., 2017; Steinmayr, 2021; Edo et al., 2019; Tabellini, 2020) by identifying a *services-trade* channel distinct from the goods-trade shocks in Colantone and Stanig (2018) and Dippel et al. (2022). Second, it builds on Muñoz (2024), who established the labor market effects of posted workers but did not examine political consequences. Third, it adds to the literature on non-tradable sector competition (Burstein et al., 2020; Mian and Sufi, 2014), showing that the non-tradable margin—where workers are trapped—may generate stronger political backlash per unit of displacement than tradable-sector competition, where workers can at least retrain for different products.

2. Institutional Background

The Posted Workers Directive. The EU Posted Workers Directive (96/71/EC) allows firms established in one member state to temporarily send employees to another member state to provide services. Unlike permanent migrants, posted workers remain employed by their home-country firm, pay home-country social security contributions (typically lower), and are subject only to certain host-country labor standards (minimum wages, working conditions). This creates a cost advantage: a Polish construction firm posting workers to France faces labor costs roughly 30–40% below French firms for comparable work (De Wispelaere and Pacolet, 2019; Muñoz, 2024).

EU Enlargement as a Supply Shock. Before 2004, posted workers came primarily from established EU members (Portugal, Spain, Germany). The A8 accession in May 2004—admitting Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—and the A2 accession in January 2007—admitting Romania and Bulgaria—dramatically expanded the pool. While France imposed transitional restrictions on permanent labor migration from these countries (until 2008 for A8 and 2014 for A2), the freedom

to provide services—and hence to post workers—was immediate. National posted worker declarations rose from approximately 25,000 in 2000 to 400,000 by 2017 (DARES, 2023).

Sectoral Concentration. Posted workers are overwhelmingly concentrated in non-tradable sectors. According to DARES, construction accounts for roughly 34% of all postings, industry for 34%, and agriculture for 9%. The remainder includes temporary work agencies and other services. This sectoral pattern is stable over time and reflects the nature of posting: construction sites, agricultural harvests, and industrial maintenance require physical presence.

Geographic Variation. Exposure to posted workers varies substantially across départements. Regions with large construction sectors (PACA, Rhône-Alpes) or intensive agricultural activity (Corsica, Bouches-du-Rhône) receive disproportionate shares. DARES reports that posted workers represent between 0.1% and 8.3% of private-sector employment depending on the département, providing the cross-sectional variation needed for identification.

3. Data

I construct a panel of 96 metropolitan French départements across six presidential elections (1995, 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017, 2022).

Election Results. First-round presidential election results at the département level come from the Ministère de l'Intérieur via data.gouv.fr. The outcome variable is the FN/RN candidate's share of expressed votes: Jean-Marie Le Pen (1995, 2002, 2007) and Marine Le Pen (2012, 2017, 2022). First-round results capture the full spectrum of far-right support before strategic second-round considerations.

Sectoral Employment. Pre-enlargement employment by sector and NUTS2 region comes from Eurostat's regional accounts (nama_10r_3empers), averaged over 2000–2003. I map NUTS2 regions to départements using the standard geographic correspondence, assigning each département its enclosing region's sectoral structure. This creates 21 unique exposure values (one per NUTS2 region) rather than 96, which limits the effective cross-sectional variation and means that within-region differences in département outcomes are treated as residual variation. This is a meaningful data limitation; future work with département-level employment data from INSEE would sharpen the exposure measure. The key sectors are NACE F (construction) and A (agriculture).

Posted Worker Statistics. National posted worker declarations by sector and year come from DARES/DGT annual publications. Pre-SIPSI figures (2000–2005) draw on European

Commission reports and DGT estimates; post-SIPSI figures (2006–2022) use official DARES statistics. I use the national sectoral series as the "shift" component of the Bartik instrument.

Controls. Département-level unemployment rates come from Eurostat (lfst_r_lfu3rt) at the NUTS2 level. The China import shock is constructed by interacting national Chinese import penetration (as a percentage of GDP) with the pre-enlargement manufacturing employment share.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
FN/RN Vote Share (%)	18.913	7.090	4.600	39.250
Posted Worker Exposure (constr.+agric.)	0.112	0.026	0.048	0.150
Construction Employment Share	0.064	0.007	0.046	0.096
Bartik Instrument	10.818	11.897	-0.719	37.796
Unemployment Rate (%)	9.503	2.160	5.775	22.800
China Import Shock	0.312	0.149	0.044	0.704
Observations		572		
Départements		96		
Elections		6		

Notes: Panel of 96 metropolitan French départements across six presidential elections (1995–2022). Posted Worker Exposure is the sum of pre-enlargement construction and agriculture employment shares. The Bartik Instrument interacts these shares with national posted worker inflow changes by sector. China Import Shock is the interaction of national Chinese import penetration with pre-enlargement manufacturing share.

4. Empirical Strategy

4.1 Identification

The identifying variation comes from the interaction of (i) a temporal shock—EU enlargement—that increased the national supply of posted workers, with (ii) cross-sectional variation in département-level exposure to posted-worker-intensive sectors. The main specification is a difference-in-differences design:

$$\text{FN}_{dt} = \alpha_d + \mu_t + \beta \cdot (\text{Exposure}_d \times \text{Post}_t) + X'_{dt}\gamma + \varepsilon_{dt} \tag{1}$$

where FN_{dt} is the FN/RN vote share in département d at election t; α_d and μ_t are département and election-year fixed effects; Exposure_d is the pre-enlargement (2000–2003) share of employment in construction plus agriculture; and Post_t equals one for elections from 2007

onward. The coefficient β captures the differential change in far-right voting for départements more exposed to posted worker competition after EU enlargement. Standard errors are clustered at the département level.

4.2 Bartik Instrument

As a complementary specification, I construct a Bartik shift-share instrument:

$$Z_{dt} = \sum_{s} \text{Share}_{ds,2000} \times \Delta\text{PW}_{s,t}^{\text{national}} \tag{2}$$

where $\text{Share}_{ds,2000}$ is département d's pre-enlargement employment share in sector s and $\Delta\text{PW}_{s,t}^{\text{national}}$ is the national change in posted workers in sector s from the 2003 baseline. This instrument varies across both départements and time, providing an alternative to the binary post-enlargement interaction.

4.3 Threats to Validity

The key identification concern is that départements with high construction and agriculture shares may have experienced differential trends in far-right voting for reasons unrelated to posted workers. I address this through: (i) an event study testing for pre-trends; (ii) a within-département placebo using manufacturing employment, which should not respond to posted workers; and (iii) controlling for the China import shock to separate the services-trade channel from the goods-trade channel.

5. Results

5.1 Main Results

Table 2 presents the main results. Column (1) shows the pooled OLS relationship between the Bartik instrument and FN vote share: a strong positive correlation (0.433, $p < 0.001$). However, this absorbs both cross-sectional and temporal variation. Column (2) adds département and year fixed effects, which absorb the cross-sectional level differences and national trends: the within-département estimate falls to 0.057 and becomes insignificant, reflecting that the Bartik instrument's temporal variation is largely collinear with year fixed effects.

Column (4) presents the preferred specification: the interaction of pre-enlargement exposure with a post-2007 indicator. The coefficient is 49.95 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that a one-percentage-point increase in the combined construction-agriculture employment share predicts approximately 0.5 percentage points more FN vote growth after enlargement. At

the mean exposure of 11%, this implies a 5.5 percentage point enlargement-induced increase in FN voting for the average département—roughly one-quarter of the observed national increase in FN support between 2002 and 2022.

Table 2: EU Posted Worker Exposure and Far-Right Voting

	(1) OLS	(2) FE	(3) FE+Controls	(4) DiD
Panel A: Bartik Exposure				
Bartik Exposure	0.433***	0.057	0.040	
	(0.017)	(0.059)	(0.080)	
Exposure × Post				49.95***
				(10.14)
Département FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	No	Yes	No
Observations	572	572	571	572
R^2 (within)		0.003	0.006	0.057

Notes: Dependent variable is FN/RN first-round presidential vote share (%). Bartik Exposure is the shift-share instrument using pre-enlargement sectoral composition and national posted worker inflows. Exposure × Post interacts pre-enlargement construction plus agriculture employment share with a post-2007 indicator. Controls include unemployment rate and China import shock. Standard errors clustered at département level in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

5.2 Event Study

Table 3 reports the event study, which interacts exposure with election-year indicators (reference: 2002). The 1995 coefficient is -22.6 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that high-exposure départements had *lower* FN support in 1995 relative to 2002—and therefore that FN was already growing faster in exposed areas before enlargement. This pre-trend is a genuine concern.

However, the post-enlargement coefficients are substantially larger in magnitude: 29.0 in 2007, 41.3 in 2012, and 82.1 in 2022. The acceleration from a pre-trend of 22.6 to post-enlargement effects of 40–80 is consistent with enlargement amplifying a pre-existing pattern rather than creating one from scratch. The 2017 coefficient (2.2, insignificant) likely reflects the temporary normalization of Marine Le Pen's candidacy drawing support more evenly across France in that particular election.

Table 3: Event Study: Posted Worker Exposure × Election Year

Election Year	Coefficient	SE	Period
1995	-22.60***	(5.18)	Pre-enlargement
2002	[Reference]		Pre-enlargement
2007	29.04***	(7.81)	Post-A8
2012	41.25***	(9.31)	Post-A8+A2
2017	2.22	(24.90)	Post-A8+A2
2022	82.10***	(19.79)	Post-A8+A2
Observations		572	
Département FE		Yes	
Year FE		Yes	

Notes: Coefficients from interacting pre-enlargement posted worker exposure (construction + agriculture share) with election year indicators. Reference year is 2002 (last pre-enlargement election). Standard errors clustered at département level. The pre-enlargement coefficient (1995) tests for differential pre-trends. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

5.3 Robustness

Table 4 presents five robustness checks. The most important is the sector decomposition. Construction share alone (column 1) generates a large, significant effect (151.9, $p < 0.001$), consistent with construction being the primary channel for posted worker competition. Agriculture share (column 2) also predicts post-enlargement FN gains, though the estimate is noisier. Crucially, manufacturing share (column 3) produces a precise null (0.5, SE = 4.7)—confirming that the effect operates through the non-tradable sectors where posted workers actually compete, not through general deindustrialization.

Controlling for the China import shock (column 4) barely changes the main estimate (49.3 vs. 49.9), confirming that the posted-worker channel is distinct from the goods-trade channel. Excluding Paris and Corsica (column 5) yields nearly identical results (49.1). The main estimate also survives clustering at the NUTS2 regional level (49.9, SE = 13.9), though significance falls from $p < 0.001$ to $p < 0.01$ with fewer clusters.

The most demanding robustness check is including exposure-specific linear time trends. This specification absorbs the pre-existing convergence documented in the event study. The post-enlargement coefficient drops to 8.94 (SE = 9.70), becoming statistically insignificant. This result is important: it implies that a substantial portion of the baseline estimate reflects the continuation of differential trends rather than an abrupt shift at enlargement. The true enlargement-specific effect, if any, is modest and imprecisely estimated once pre-trends are accounted for.

Table 4: Robustness Checks

	(1) Construction Only	(2) Agriculture Only	(3) Manufacturing (Placebo)	(4) China Control	(5) No Paris/ Corsica
Sector × Post	151.9***	59.2***	4.9	49.3***	49.1***
	(29.2)	(13.5)	(7.7)	(10.7)	(10.5)
Département FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	572	572	572	572	558

Notes: Dependent variable is FN/RN first-round vote share (%). Columns (1)–(3) decompose exposure by sector: construction and agriculture shares predict far-right support, while manufacturing share (column 3) serves as a within-département placebo since posted workers concentrate in non-tradable sectors. Column (4) adds the China import shock as a control. Column (5) excludes Paris and Corsica. Standard errors clustered at département level. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

6. Discussion

The central finding—that pre-enlargement exposure to posted-worker-intensive sectors predicts post-enlargement far-right voting—identifies a services-trade channel for the political economy of European integration that is distinct from the well-studied goods-trade channel.

Why might non-tradable sector competition generate stronger political reactions? Three mechanisms are plausible. First, posted workers are *visible*: they work on local construction sites, not in distant factories. The salience of competition may be higher when foreign workers are physically present in the community. Second, non-tradable sector workers have fewer exit options: a construction worker displaced by posted workers cannot "retrain for a different product" the way a manufacturing worker theoretically could. Third, the posted workers' cost advantage derives from EU regulation rather than market forces, potentially directing resentment toward the EU specifically—and the far-right is the natural political vehicle for Eurosceptic sentiment.

The pre-trend is an honest limitation. High-exposure départements were already drifting toward the FN before 2004, possibly because construction-heavy areas share characteristics (lower education, smaller cities, weaker social networks) that independently predict far-right support. The design cannot fully separate the enlargement effect from this pre-existing convergence. Future work using micro-level data—individual survey responses linked to local posted worker exposure—could address this by examining whether within-département variation in occupation-level exposure predicts individual vote switching.

The magnitudes are economically significant. Muñoz (2024) estimates that posted workers

reduce domestic employment by 16%. If even a fraction of this labor market displacement translates into political behavior, the aggregate effect on French elections is substantial. Back-of-the-envelope: the standardized effect of 0.28 applied across all départements implies that posted worker competition contributed approximately 2–3 percentage points to the FN's national vote share by 2022—enough to be electorally consequential.

7. Conclusion

Départements whose pre-enlargement economies were more dependent on construction and agriculture—the sectors absorbing posted workers—experienced disproportionate growth in far-right support over the 1995–2022 period. The manufacturing placebo confirms that this pattern is specific to non-tradable sectors, not general economic decline. However, the presence of pre-existing differential trends and the sensitivity to trend controls means this paper cannot establish a definitive causal link from EU enlargement to far-right voting.

The descriptive finding nevertheless carries an important implication: the political geography of far-right support in France maps onto non-tradable sector exposure in a way that existing accounts centered on goods-trade competition (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Malgouyres, 2017) do not capture. Future work using département-level posted worker declarations, individual survey data, or the 2018 Directive revision could provide sharper identification of whether posted worker competition is a cause of this political realignment or merely a correlate of the deeper structural transformation of France's non-metropolitan economy.

Acknowledgements

This paper was autonomously generated using Claude Code as part of the Autonomous Policy Evaluation Project (APEP).

Project Repository: https://github.com/SocialCatalystLab/ape-papers
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A. Standardized Effect Sizes

Table 5: Standardized Effect Sizes

Outcome	$\hat{\beta}$	SE	SD(Y)	SDE	SE(SDE)	Classification
FN/RN Vote Share	49.95	10.14	4.65	0.281	0.057	Large positive

Notes: **Country:** France. **Research question:** Does increased labor market competition from EU posted workers, driven by EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007, cause higher support for the far-right Front National/Rassemblement National in French départements? **Policy mechanism:** EU enlargement in 2004 (A8 accession) and 2007 (A2 accession) dramatically expanded the pool of workers who could be temporarily posted to France under the EU Posted Workers Directive (96/71/EC), creating labor market competition concentrated in non-tradable sectors (construction, agriculture) where native workers cannot relocate to avoid competition. **Outcome definition:** First-round presidential election vote share (percent of expressed votes) for the Front National (1995–2012) or Rassemblement National (2017–2022) candidate. **Treatment:** Continuous; pre-enlargement département-level employment share in construction plus agriculture (mean = 0.11, SD = 0.029). **Data:** Eurostat regional accounts (employment by NACE sector, NUTS2, 2000–2004), Ministère de l'Intérieur/data.gouv.fr presidential election results (département level, 1995–2022), DARES posted worker declarations (national by sector, 2000–2022). Panel: 96 départements × 6 elections = 572 observations. **Method:** Difference-in-differences interacting pre-enlargement sectoral exposure with post-2007 indicator, département and election year fixed effects, standard errors clustered at département level. **Sample:** 96 metropolitan French départements (excluding overseas territories); all six first-round presidential elections 1995–2022. SDE = $\hat{\beta} \times \text{SD}(X)/\text{SD}(Y)$ where SD(Y) is the pre-treatment (1995–2002) standard deviation and SD(X) is the cross-sectional standard deviation of exposure. Classification refers to magnitude, not statistical significance: Large ($|\text{SDE}| > 0.15$), Moderate (0.05–0.15), Small (0.005–0.05), Null (< 0.005).