

THE POLITICAL COST OF BEING SOFT ON CRIME AND VOTERS' RESPONSE TO PUBLIC POLICIES

This policy brief discusses how voters respond to public policies with a particular focus on crime control policies. We present the main methodological issues that the researcher faces to disentangle the response of voters to the consequences of policies from the other factors. We present the results of a study of the consequences of the 2006 Italian collective pardon. Using randomness in local variation in recidivism rates we show that Italian voters held the incumbent government responsible for local variations in recidivism caused by the collective pardon. We conclude by discussing the consequences for the evaluation of the electoral response to public policies.

Project Director :

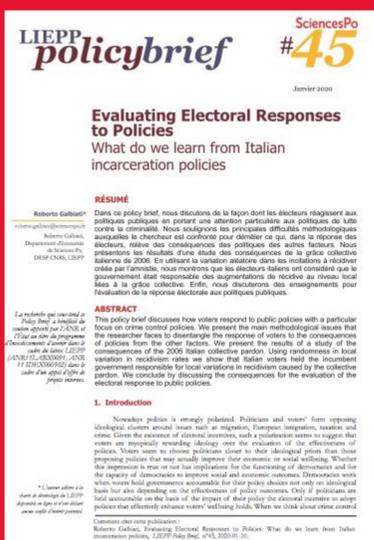
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Publications :

- Galbiati, Roberto. (2020). Evaluating Electoral Responses to Policies. What do we learn from Italian incarceration policies, *Sciences Po LIEPP Policy Brief* n°45.
- Drago, Francesco., Galbiati, Roberto., Sobbrío, Francesco. (2019). The Political Cost of Being Soft on Crime: Evidence from a Natural Experiment. *Journal of the European Economic Association*.
- Abrams, David., Galbiati, Roberto., Henry, Emeric., Philippe, Arnaud. (2019). Electoral Sentencing Cycles, *CEPR Discussion Paper* 14049.



Do voters respond to crime control policies?

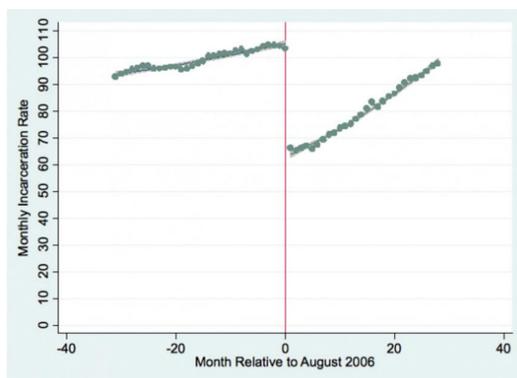
Crime is perceived as a crucial social issue in most Western countries. In the Eurobarometer survey, for instance, crime ranks among the top five most important problems in several European countries (Mastorocco and Minale, 2018). Accordingly, there is a widespread belief that criminal justice policies have a significant impact on voting behavior. Identifying the response of voters to crime control policies shares the same problem with the identification of the effectiveness of other policy choices. Since politicians endogenously choose their policies to enhance their re-election probability we do not have a proper counterfactual to judge what would have been voters' response if different policies were implemented.

In order to be able to properly understand how voters respond to government's policies, the ideal experiment would require the government to randomly manipulate the content of a policy and then this random manipulation mapping into different outcomes. For example, to properly assess the voters' response to a tax increase or cut by the central government, it would be necessary to observe a random variation of its effects across lower level of government, for instance municipalities. Or, given a tougher crime control policy, it would be necessary to observe locally random variation in crime rates. Indeed, conditional on the ideological preferences of voters on these type of policies, the variation in local response would identify the causal effect of the policy outcome on voters' electoral behavior, if any. That is, it is necessary to observe variations in the effects of the policy that are independent both from the voters' and the government's characteristics.

The Italian case study

In a recent paper Drago, Galbiati and Sobbrío (Forthcoming) we address this issue by exploiting a natural experiment. In July 2006, the Italian government implemented a (unanticipated) collective pardon due to a dramatic overcrowding in prisons at that time. As a result, a subset of the prisoners with less than 36 months of residual sentence were released and about the 30% of inmates in Italian prisons are release on August 1st 2006 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Incarceration rates

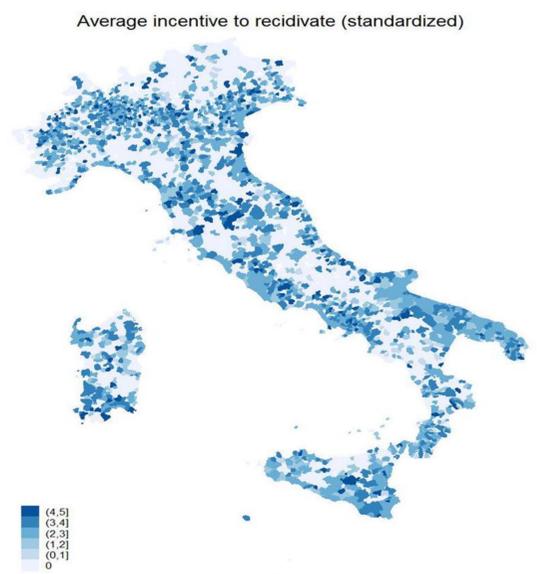


Note: The figure illustrates the variation in the incarceration rate (i.e., per 100,000 people) in Italy before and after the collective pardon bill.

The design of the policy was such that released prisoners who would recidivate within a five-year period, would be charged an additional sentence equal to their residual sentence at the time of their release. This created an incentive to refrain from re-offending for pardoned individuals that increases in the length of the residual sentence. Such an incentive, as shown in previous research (Drago et al., 2009), turns out to randomly distributed across released prisoners. This heterogeneity remains even when aggregating the individual heterogeneity at the municipality where pardoned inmates lived (Figure 2).

When we look at it from the voters' perspective, the design of the collective pardon created a random variation in the recidivism rate across municipalities and in crime rates. As such, by looking at voters' responses to the variation in the incentive to recidivate across municipalities we can assess to what extent they respond to the effects of the crime control policy by holding all the rest equal.

Figure 2. Distribution of the Incentive to Recidivate over Italian Municipalities



The paper first shows that (as expected) municipalities where pardoned individuals had a higher incentive to recidivate. Then, we document that individuals do take into account the observed effects of the policy in their voting decisions. Our main finding shows that in municipalities with higher incentive to recidivate voters "punished" the political coalition who put forward such pardon (center-left) in the first post-pardon parliamentary elections. The effect is quantitatively relevant. A one standard deviation increase in the incentive to recidivate (corresponding to an increase of recidivism of 15.9%) led to a 3.06% increase in the margin of victory of the center-right challenging coalition in the post-pardon national elections (2008) relative to the last election before the pardon (2006).

This shows that worse observable effects of the policy at the local level, imply worse electoral outcome for politicians responsible for such policy.

What are the mechanisms that drive this results? We show that where the incentive to recidivate is higher newspapers report more crime news on pardoned individual recidivating. Moreover, voters update their beliefs about the competence of the incumbent coalition to deal with crime. Importantly, a higher incentive to recidivate was not associated with individuals being more likely to perceive crime as the most important issue in Italy or in their city. This suggests that votes correctly associated the pardon with the recidivism of pardoned inmates and not with crime in general.

General implications for policy analysis

The polarization around issues such as crime, migration and taxation in nowadays politics seems to suggest that voters' are myopically rewarding ideology over the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies. Whether this is true or not has implications for the functioning of democracies and for the capacity of democracies to improve social and economic outcomes. Democracies work when voters hold governments accountable for their policy choices not only on ideological basis but also depending on the effectiveness of policy outcomes. This issue is apparent when we think about crime control policies. More lenient crime-control policies might simply be positively judged by liberal voters and negatively by conservatives independently from the actual effects of policies on crime incidence. Our study shows that despite casual evidence might suggest the contrary, voters keep politicians accountable for the effects of policies as described in retrospective voting models.

These findings are relevant for the political debate in Europe and abroad: voters seem to be responsive to the realized effects of public policies as long as it is possible to identify who is responsible for such.