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# Evaluating Electoral Responses to Policies

## What do we learn from Italian incarceration policies

### RÉSUMÉ

**Roberto Galbiati\***[roberto.galbiati@sciencespo.fr](mailto:roberto.galbiati@sciencespo.fr)Roberto Galbiati,  
Département d'économie  
de Sciences Po,  
DESP CNRS, LIEPP

Dans ce policy brief, nous discutons de la façon dont les électeurs réagissent aux politiques publiques en portant une attention particulière aux politiques de lutte contre la criminalité. Nous soulignons les principales difficultés méthodologiques auxquelles le chercheur est confronté pour démêler ce qui, dans la réponse des électeurs, relève des conséquences des politiques des autres facteurs. Nous présentons les résultats d'une étude des conséquences de la grâce collective italienne de 2006. En utilisant la variation aléatoire dans les incitations à récidiver créée par l'amnistie, nous montrons que les électeurs italiens ont considéré que le gouvernement était responsable des augmentations de récidive au niveau local liées à la grâce collective. Enfin, nous discuterons des enseignements pour l'évaluation de la réponse électorale aux politiques publiques.

### ABSTRACT

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.

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### 1. Introduction

Nowadays politics is strongly polarized. Politicians and voters' form opposing ideological clusters around issues such as migration, European integration, taxation and crime. Given the existence of electoral incentives, such a polarization seems to suggest that voters are myopically rewarding ideology over the evaluation of the effectiveness of policies. Voters seem to choose politicians closer to their ideological priors than those proposing policies that may actually improve their economic or social wellbeing. Whether this impression 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. Only if politicians are held accountable on the basis of the impact of their policy the electoral incentive to adopt policies that effectively enhance voters' wellbeing holds. When we think about crime control

\* L'auteur adhère à la charte de déontologie du LIEPP disponible en ligne et n'ont déclaré aucun conflit d'intérêt potentiel.

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policies this issue turns out to be even more apparent. Crime is perceived as a crucial social issue in most western countries. For instance, as reported by Mastrococco and Minale (2018), European citizens report that crime is on the top of their concerns. While voters seem to care about crime on the policy side, there is evidence that that politicians behave as if criminal justice policies have a significant impact on voting behavior. Elected officials tend to spend more to control crime or become more severe in their decisions concerning criminal behavior when elections approach (see for instance Levitt, 1997; Abrams et al. 2019; Berdejo and Yuchtman, 2013). This possible correlation between voters' concerns and politicians' behavior could be driven by ideological clustering, strategical responses or effort to find more effective crime policies. For instance, more lenient crime-control policies might simply be positively judged by liberal and negatively by conservatives independently from the actual effects of policies on crime incidence and politicians would adapt to preferences independently of the actual outcome of the policy. Thus, we may end up observing penalties and incarceration rates increasing or decreasing independently of their effect on crime rates.

In this policy brief, we will discuss what we know about how voters' respond to the consequences of public policies with a particular focus on criminal justice. In what follows we introduce the main methodological challenges. Then we present a brief summary of the state of the art of the literature in political economy about the subject. Finally, we discuss the results of a case study that addresses the main methodological issues.

## 2. Methodological Issues

In order to be able to assess whether and how voters respond to government's policies, the ideal experiment would require the government to randomly manipulate policies (e.g. their domain of application or their intensity) and then this random manipulation mapping into different outcomes. For example, in order to evaluate if voters' respond to the effects of tax increases or cuts by the central government, it would be necessary to observe a random variation of its effects across lower level of government, for instance regions or municipalities. Or, given a tougher crime control policy, it would be necessary to observe locally random variation in penalties and understand whether differential penalties map into different crime rates. With this kind of variation, 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. In this case, we would have an ideal counterfactual to assess if and to what extent the effects of policy decisions affect voters' outcomes and in turn their electoral response holding all else constant.

## 3. Related Literature

Understanding accountability is at the core of research in political economy, an incentive mechanism linking political choices, outcomes and voters' responses is assumed in standard models (see Ashworth, 2012 for an extensive review of the literature). Given the importance of the issue, a recent active literature has focused on understanding whether voters correctly link politicians' actions to outcomes or are subject to systematic attribution error. Existing papers trying to identify whether voters hold politicians accountable either rely on endogenous governments policy choices or on exogenous variations in voters' well-being that are due to events orthogonal to governments policies. In the first case, a few papers focus on the effects of natural disasters. Under the assumption that the timing of natural events is independent from the electoral cycle and the identity of incumbent governments, these papers evaluate how voters respond to disaster preparedness and relief spending (Healy and Malhotra 2009). Papers focusing on exogenous variation of voters' wellbeing assume that these events might be interpreted by voters as the result of a governments policy (e.g., Bagues and Esteve-Volart, 2013; Healy et al. 2010). All these papers provide some mixed evidence about the drivers of voters' response to policy choices and outcomes. The mixed evidence partially depends on differences in the contexts of analysis and partially on the difficulties to have a clean identification allowing to understand whether voters respond to government actions or variations in wellbeing that are orthogonal to governments' choices.

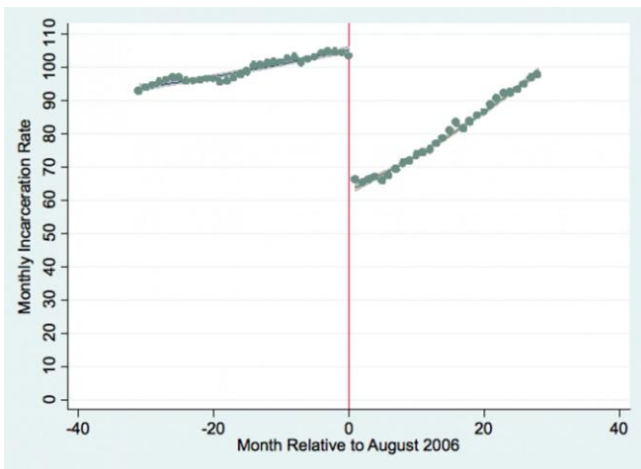
## 4. The Italian case study

In a recent paper Drago, Galbiati and Sobbrivo (Forthcoming) we assess how voters' respond to the consequences of the choices of an incumbent government by focusing on the consequences of the 2006 Italian pardon Bill. Despite the importance of crime for voters, existing studies on the link between crime control policies and voters' decisions are mostly correlational and provide mixed evidence (Hall 2001; Krieger 2011). In the paper based on the Italian case study we exploit a natural experiment that allows us to have a proper counterfactual to evaluate the voters' response to the consequences of the policy keeping their ideology and the impact of the policy on ideological stands constant.

In July 2006, the Italian government implemented a collective pardon due to a dramatic overcrowding in prisons at that time. The pardon is discussed and voted by the Italian Parliament (with the law 241.2006) but it is promoted and then implemented by the incumbent center-left government. The policy was not part of the campaign platform of the majority coalition but was rather a decision taken because of the immediate

need to reduce prison overcrowding. As a result of the collective pardon, 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 released on August 1st 2006 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Incarceration rates**



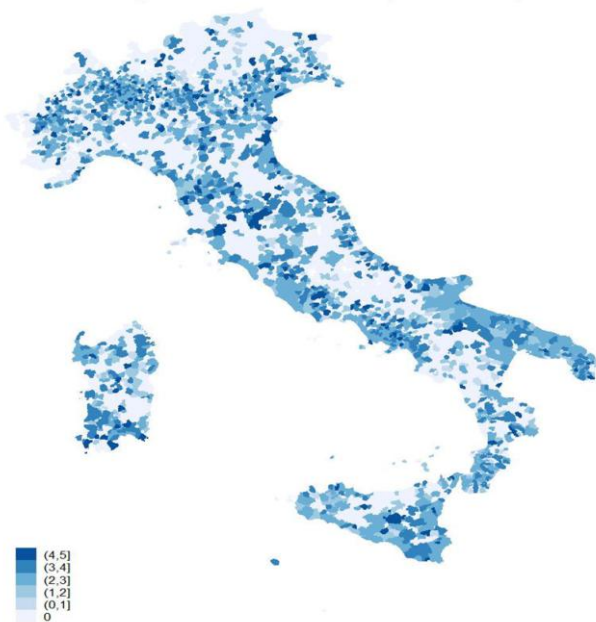
Note : The figure illustrates the variation in the incarceration rate (i.e., per 100,000 people) in Italy before and after the collective pardon bill.

The pardon applied to convicts for a large set of felonies. Those excluded were terrorism, mafia crimes and sexual abuses against children. What makes the intervention interesting for our purposes is that it worked as a conditional suspension of incarceration. According to Article 2 of the law, all those that benefited from the incarceration term reduction who recommitted a crime within five years, lost their right to pardon. Thus, in the five-years following their release from prison, former inmates granted collective pardon faced an additional expected sentence equal to the residual sentence pardoned by the bill. This provision implies that as far as the residual pardoned sentence is as good as random, the conditional sentence suspension provided a random incentive to commit crime from the perspective of former inmates. The following example helps to clarify how individual incentives to reoffend are randomized by the law. Consider two criminals convicted of the same crime. Both inmates had a residual sentence equal to or less than three years on July 31, 2006. As a consequence of the new law they are both released from prison on August, 2006. Suppose that the first individual had a residual sentence of two years and that the second individual entered in prison one year after the first individual. Hence, the second inmate had a pardoned residual sentence of three years. Over the following five years, for any crime category, they face a difference in expected sentence of one year. For example, if they commit a car theft that carries a sentence of three years, the first individual would be sentenced to five years in prison (three years for the theft plus two year from the pardoned residual sentence), while the second

individual would be sentenced to six years (three years plus three years of residual sentence). It is worth noting that the difference in the timing of incarceration comes both from whether or not a criminal entered prison directly upon the day of apprehension and on when the crime was committed.

Thus, the Pardon law ends up randomizing at the individual level the incentives to recidivate. This heterogeneity remains even when aggregating the individual heterogeneity at the municipality where pardoned inmates lived (Figure 2). As a consequence, the setting emerging after the implementation of the Italian collective pardon is very similar to the ideal experiment described above: we have a national policy, with idiosyncratic local application and voters that observe the national level decisions and the local consequences without direct observation of the local variation in the incentives to reoffend.

**Figure 2: Average Incentive to Recidivate (standardized) across Italian Municipalities**



Thus, 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.

Drago, Galbiati and Sobbrío (2019) we first show that, in line with what we expected and what found in other papers using individual variation, municipalities where pardoned individuals had a higher incentive to recidivate experienced higher reoffending rates. Then, we provide evidence that individuals do take into account the observed effects of the policy in their voting decisions. By matching data on the 2006 and 2008 General Elections to data on crime rates, incentives to reoffend and other observables at the municipality level it is possible to assess how voters responded to variations in the incentive to recidivate and reoffending. It turns out

that in municipalities with higher incentive to recidivate voters “punished” the political coalition of the incumbent government (at the moment of the pardon approval) 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). These results, show that worse observable effects of the policy at the local level, imply worse electoral outcome for politicians responsible for such policy.

The paper also describes the mechanisms that drive the main results. The role of the media in conveying information about the consequences of the pardon is relevant. Newspapers report more crime news on pardoned individual recidivating where the incentive to recidivate is higher. Moreover, voters update their beliefs about the competence of the incumbent coalition to deal with crime in response to variations in the incentives to recidivate. Importantly, a higher incentive to recidivate is not associated with individuals being more likely to perceive crime as the most important issue in Italy or in their area of residence. This suggests that votes correctly associated the pardon with the recidivism of pardoned inmates and not with crime in general.

## 5. Discussion

Under the methodological viewpoint, the Italian case study has a series of advantages with respect to other empirical studies on accountability. First, it analyzes actual (voting) behavior rather than just self-reported preferences which typically elicit opinions not necessarily correlated with actual behavior. Moreover, we study a national level policy over a salient issue. Hence, our findings are informative of the overall change in the support for the government as a result of a policy. Differently from the previous studies, we are able to observe exogenous variations in the outcome of a policy which voters can clearly map into a governments policy choice on a salient issue. That is, our empirical design allows to isolate the analysis from any possible attribution error intrinsically present in other papers. Hence, our empirical design provides a direct and clean test on how voters respond to government's policies and, ultimately, on politicians accountability. 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. How does this square with the evidence on political debate and the mixed evidence on voters' sophistication? Are Italian voters more sophisticated than others? These different findings can be reconciled by observing that Italy had two elections in a short time and voters were strongly primed about the relevance of crime. This probably made them focusing on the issue and on its short run consequences. Taken together all these results deliver a picture where while ideology matters, the short run consequences of politics are strongly taken into account by voters. The real challenge for forward-looking policy makers is to make voters aware of both the short and long run consequences of policies. How this can be done it is a matter of further research.

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Andreana Khristova, Samira Jebli

Sciences Po - LIEPP  
27 rue Saint Guillaume  
75007 Paris - France  
liepp@sciencespo.fr

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