

Crime Perception and Voting Behavior: Evidence from Individual Data

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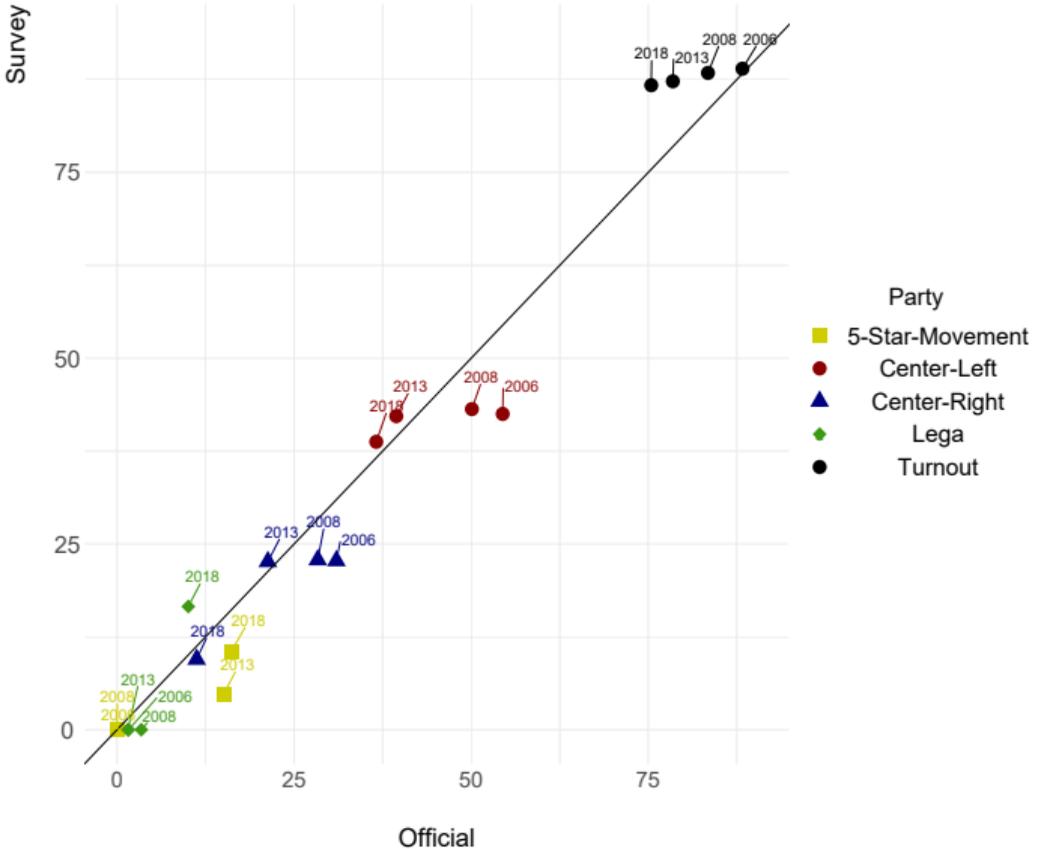
Motivation: The Micro-Level Gap

- Democracies worldwide see a surge in **populism**, often driven by the link between **Immigration & Crime**
- Existing literature shows a link, but results rely on **aggregate data** (municipal/regional)
- **The Research Gap:** We lack understanding of how small, sudden crime *shocks* at the street level, close to an election, affect **individual voting choice**
- **Key Questions:**
 1. Is voting sensitive to **nearby crime** (within 30 days)?
 2. Do crimes by **immigrants** trigger **different** political responses than those by Italians?

What We Do

- **Focus:** Individual-level analysis across **multiple elections** (national and administrative, 2013-2018)
- **Data:** Retrospective survey of **5,000 geolocated individuals** in Bologna, merged with **≈ 11,000 geocoded crime news articles**
- **Methodology:** We isolate the **causal effect** of the offender's nationality on individual voting behavior

Survey vs. Official Data



What We Find

- When focusing on **general elections**, no clear results when crimes are lumped together
- Somewhat surprisingly, crimes committed by immigrants **reduce** support for populist parties (Lega and M5S) but **increase** that for *Law & Order* ones (Center Right)
- Specifically, **high skilled/educated** voters abandon M5S, **low skilled/low educated** abandon Lega, and **female** voters drive the increase of Center Right
- Things are different in **administrative elections**

Setting: Bologna, the “Red Stronghold”

- **Context:** Bologna (Northern Italy) → historically a strong Left-wing city
- **Implication:** The observed effect of *party-switching* to the Right is likely a *lower bound*, due to the high social/identity cost of changing vote
- **Crime Information Source:** *Bologna Today* (online, free, non-affiliated local newspaper)
- **Coverage:** $\approx 41\%$ of reported crimes are attributed to immigrants (close to national averages for property crime)

Measurement: Hyper-Local and Salient Exposure

- **Operational Definition:** crime exposure is measured by the occurrence of a **reported** criminal event:
 1. Within a **200-meter radius** of the individual's residence
 2. In the **30 days** immediately preceding the election day (maximizing short-term salience)
 - Coincides with "*par condicio*" period (Law 28/2000)
- **Distinction:** We classify articles using a dictionary-based algorithm into **Italian Crime** (*CI*) vs. **Non-Italian Crime** (*CNI*)

Spatial Crime Distribution by Year

● at least one crime news by immigrants

● at least one crime news by Italians

Empirical Strategy: Causal Identification

- We employ an Individual-Level **Differences-in-Differences (DiD)** model:

$$\text{VoteP}_{it} = \alpha_{it} + \beta_{it} + \gamma_i + \delta_t \times \theta_d + \epsilon_{it}$$

- **Identification Power:**
 1. **Individual Fixed Effects (γ_i):** Controls for all time-invariant individual characteristics (baseline ideology, average income)
 2. **District \times Year Fixed Effects ($\delta_t \times \theta_d$):** Controls for all common shocks and trends specific to a district in a given year
- **Conclusion:** Coefficient β captures the **change in voting** associated only with the **local and temporary** variation in crime exposure

National Elections: Aggregate Crime (Total)

Dep.	M5S		Lega		Center Right		Center Left		Abstention	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Total Crimes	-0.012** (0.004)	-0.011* (0.005)	-0.005 (0.010)	-0.005 (0.012)	0.010 (0.006)	0.010 (0.006)	0.007** (0.003)	0.004** (0.001)	0.007** (0.003)	0.007** (0.002)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
Districts fixed effects × Year fixed effects		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
R ²	0.05	0.05	0.16	0.16	0.11	0.11	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01
Observations	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624

- **Mixed Result:** The overall effect of total crime is ambiguous and provides no clear direction for Right-wing voting
- **Takeaway:** It is crucial to disaggregate by nationality to isolate the political effect

The Key Finding: Italian vs. Immigrant Crime

Dep.	M5S		Lega		Center Right		Center Left		Abstention	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Crimes by Italians	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.004 (0.007)	0.000 (0.014)	-0.002 (0.014)	0.002 (0.013)	0.004 (0.013)	0.004 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	0.005 (0.005)	0.007 (0.005)
Crimes by immigrants	-0.023** (0.007)	-0.021** (0.007)	-0.015** (0.004)	-0.010 (0.007)	0.021** (0.006)	0.021** (0.008)	0.007 (0.006)	0.008 (0.006)	0.005 (0.010)	0.001 (0.011)
Individual fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	
Districts fixed effects × Year fixed effects		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
R ²	0.05	0.05	0.16	0.16	0.11	0.11	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01
Observations	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624	9624

- **Crimes by Italians:** No significant effect on voting → “normal” crime does not shift allegiance
- **Crimes by Immigrants:**
 1. Strong **drop** in support for ambiguous populist parties (M5S and Lega)
 2. Significant **increase** in support for the **Centre-Right** (*Law & Order* party)

Robustness: Causality and Pre-Trends

- **Placebo Test (Post-Election):**

▶ Table

- Crime exposure **after** the election day has **no effect** on the vote
- This confirms the effect is driven by **salience** and **perception** leading up to the election

- **No Pre-Trends (Diff-in-Disc):**

▶ Graph by Italians

▶ Graph by Immigrants

- Graphical analysis confirms that Left- and Right-leaning areas **did not** have diverging crime exposure trends **before** the vote
- This supports the **exogeneity** of the short-term shock

Heterogeneity Analysis: Who Drives the Effect?

- We examine how the crime effect varies based on individual characteristics:
 - Gender (Male vs. Female) [▶ Table](#)
 - Education (High vs. Low) [▶ Table](#)
 - Skills (High vs. Low) [▶ Table](#)

The Mechanisms: Women and Populist Segmentation

- **Gender:** The increase in support for the Center-Right is driven mainly by **women**
 - **Interpretation:** Women are potentially more sensitive to personal safety concerns, making them more likely to reward the *Law & Order* option
- **Education / Skills (Populism Segmentation):**
 - **High-Skilled** voters abandon **M5S**
 - **Low-Skilled** voters abandon **Lega**
 - **Interpretation:** M5S is seen as ineffective by the higher-skilled segment, while Lega loses its vulnerable base (low-skilled) to the more explicit Center-Right

- **Crimes by Italians:**

- Main effect: **punishment of the incumbent** (Centre-Left loses support)
- Consistent with local crime being seen as the sitting administration's fault

- **Crimes by Immigrants:**

- Main effect: Increase in **abstention**
- **Mechanism:** In a Left-leaning context (Bologna), voters face a *high social cost* to switch to the Right-wing party, and thus prefer to abstain

Conclusion and Implications

- Short-term crime exposure affects voting **only** when it is framed as a political issue (immigration/security)
- **Political Implication:** populist parties with ambiguous stances (M5S/Lega) are penalized, while explicit **Law & Order** parties (Centre-Right) are rewarded
- **Bologna Implication:** The observed effect is a **lower bound**, highlighting the *strength* of the mechanism

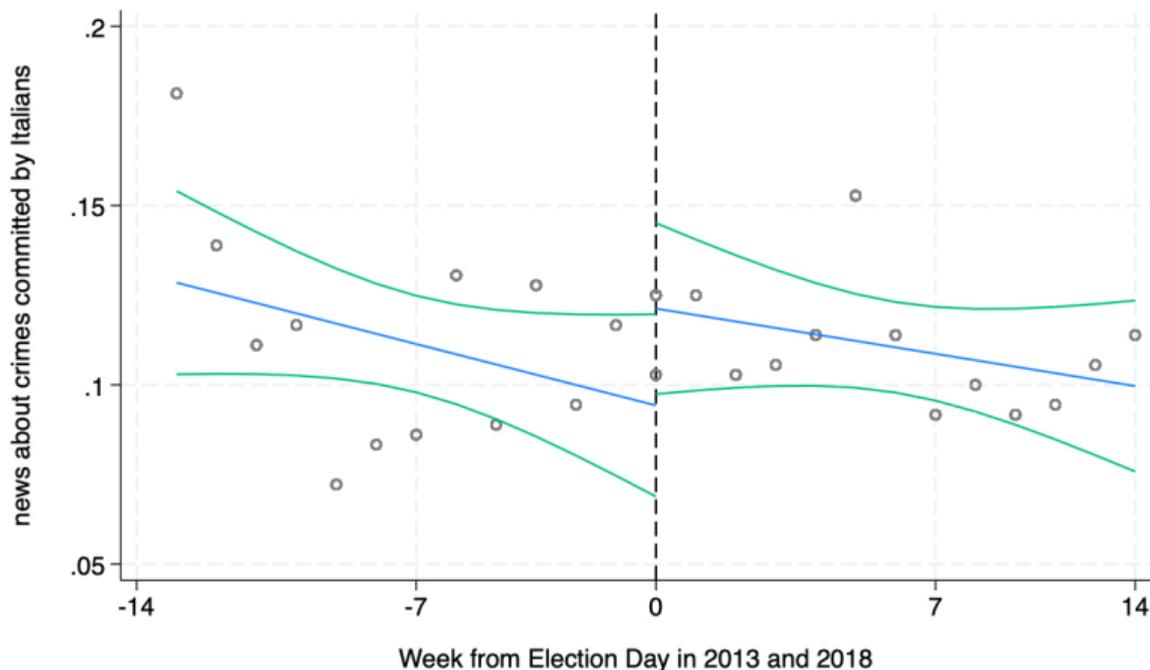
Thank you!

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Diff-in-Disc Estimates: Crime by Italians Before Elections

▶ Back

- Difference in crime exposure between zones historically aligned with Right vs. Left parties, around the electoral cutoff \rightarrow *differential number of crimes (Right - Left) over time, focusing on the pre- and post-election periods*



Diff-in-Disc Estimates: Crime by Immigrants Before Elections

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- Difference in crime exposure between zones historically aligned with Right vs. Left parties, around the electoral cutoff \rightarrow differential number of crimes (*Right - Left*) over time, focusing on the pre- and post-election periods

