

Facts or Feelings about Crime: Exploring the Security-Discontent Nexus in Europe

Arbolino R.^a, Boffardi R.^a, Conte A.^b, Santos A.^c

^a Department of Human and Social Science, University of Naples L'Orientale, Naples – Italy

^b Joint Research Centre, European Commission, Seville – Spain

^c Université libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium.

Abstract: Across European regions, electoral support for parties emphasising crime and public order has increased in recent years. While these parties frequently frame insecurity as a central political issue, it remains unclear whether their electoral success is driven by actual crime rates or by citizens' perceptions of insecurity, and whether these dynamics extend to broader forms of political discontent, including Eurosceptic attitudes. A growing body of literature shows that political reactions to crime are often shaped less by objective exposure than by perceived risk, which is influenced by media coverage, indirect experience, and political framing (Ajzenman et al., 2023; Callanan, 2012). This distinction is particularly relevant in the European context, where responsibility for security is shared across levels of governance and attribution of blame may extend beyond national incumbents.

When crime increases—or when it is perceived to increase—security becomes more salient in voters' priorities, advantaging parties that claim credibility on law-and-order issues (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008). In European Parliament elections, such dynamics may reinforce support for actors that frame insecurity as a cross-border challenge associated with migration, weak external borders, or insufficient EU coordination. At the same time, rising insecurity may function as a signal of governance failure in a multi-level polity. In a system characterised by blurred competences, voters may attribute crime not only to domestic government shortcomings but also to perceived inefficiencies at the European level, fostering electoral shifts toward parties that question or contest the current trajectory of integration (Drago et al., 2020; Carreras & Visconti, 2022). Over time, persistent or amplified perceptions of insecurity can erode institutional trust more broadly (Jackson et al., 2009; Cozzubo et al., 2021), nurturing anti-establishment orientations and reinforcing Eurosceptic attitudes.

Using a regional panel dataset for European regions covering three European Parliament electoral periods over 2009-2024, this paper examines these mechanisms in two steps. First, we construct two region-level electoral indices. The first captures crime-oriented electoral votes, and the second Euroscepticism-oriented electoral votes. Information on parties' position on the two dimensions (support for law-and-order and favour of European Integration) under analysis is extracted from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, and data on regional votes from the European NUTS-Level election dataset developed by Schraff et al. (2022). Second, using a system of simultaneous equations, we analyse whether an increase in electoral support for parties emphasising crime-related narratives is associated with subsequent changes in Eurosceptic voting.

We find that perceived crime, rather than actual crime rates, drives electoral support for law-and-order parties. In fact, actual crime rates show no robust effect on voting behaviour. Furthermore, lagged increases in crime-related electoral support correlate positively with higher levels of Eurosceptic voting. These findings suggest that insecurity political narratives serve as a transmission channel, linking local or national concerns to broader political discontent within the European Union.

By jointly modelling objective and subjective dimensions of crime within a multi-level European setting, the paper contributes to the literature on issue salience, political accountability, trust erosion, and the geographies of discontent, highlighting the central role of perceptions in mediating the political consequences of insecurity across Europe.

Keywords: Euroscepticism; Crime; Elections; Discontent

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