

Who Pays for Crime? Criminal Violence and Accountability in Latin America¹

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March 10, 2019

Abstract

Are political parties located on different sides of the left-right political spectrum equally punished for policy failures in the area of public security? Against the conventional wisdom, we hold that right-wing parties that “own” the crime issue are *less* likely to be sanctioned by voters. We develop a theory of *reverse partisan accountability* which emphasizes the role of elections as selection devices. We expect voters to punish right-wing incumbents in executive positions less severely for public security failures because the alternative candidates (i.e., left-wing and centrist challengers) will be deemed less competent to address crime regardless of the performance of the right-wing incumbent. We use local crime and electoral data from Chile and Mexico and a difference-in-differences design to test this argument. The results provide strong support for our hypothesis. Additionally, we provide survey evidence from 18 Latin American countries to assess the external validity of the findings.

Keywords: Crime, Accountability, Issue Ownership, Latin America.

Word Count: 9984

¹ We thank Rachel Bowen, Alberto Diaz-Cayeros, Sandra Ley, Anselm Rink, Oscar Pocasangre, Aldo Ponce, Barbara Walter, and seminar participants at UCSD, UCR, MPSA 2018, and APSA 2018 for their valuable comments and suggestions. Soledad Araya provided outstanding research assistance. All errors are our own.

Introduction

The literature on retrospective voting assumes that after negative events citizens will always sanction poor performance (Ferejohn 1986). Other studies similarly suggest that voters will channel their anger and frustration by blaming the government even for negative policy outcomes beyond incumbent control (Achen and Bartels 2016). Both of these arguments, however, fail to take into account the role of issue ownership. Crime, as previous studies have shown, is a problem traditionally “owned” by right-wing parties (Cohen and Smith 2016). How, then, does issue ownership affect the electoral consequences of policy failures around public security? Partisan accountability arguments expect voters to judge incumbents more harshly if they fail to deliver on an issue they “own” (Powell and Whitten 1993). If this is the case, right-wing incumbents should be punished more severely for public security failures. On the contrary, we develop an alternative explanation based on the idea of *reverse partisan accountability*. Specifically, we expect voters to be less likely to punish right-wing incumbents in executive positions because the alternative candidates (i.e., left-wing or centrist challengers) will be deemed less competent to address crime regardless of the performance of the right-wing incumbent.

Addressing this research question is important given the context of high criminality in Latin America and the failure of many governments throughout the region to curb criminal violence. According to a recent report issued by the Citizens’ Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice (a Mexican non-governmental organization), 43 of the 50 most violent cities in the world (outside war zones) are in Latin America. Countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela have several cities on this list. In fact, criminal violence is one of the most compelling and seemingly intractable problems confronting Latin America today. Latin America is often described as the most violent region in the world (Parkinson 2014). While the exact nature of the violence varies by country, some of the factors associated with the persistently high violent

crime rates in Latin America include “the fragmentation of organized crime groups, growing domestic drug consumption markets and conflicts over trafficking routes, as well as local and national government corruption and lack of capacity” (Clavel 2017; for good reviews, also see Rodgers and Baird 2015; Cruz 2016).

In light of this public security crisis, it is not surprising that criminal violence and insecurity top the political agenda in many Latin American countries (Arias and Goldstein 2010). Criminal violence is a prominent issue during national and subnational electoral campaigns in Latin America (Holland 2013; Pérez 2015). The crime problem is also at the forefront of citizens’ minds. In fact, almost one-third of Latin American respondents (29.7%) consider criminal violence to be the most serious problem facing their countries.² Unsurprisingly, the percentage of people who considered crime to be the most serious problem was even higher in the most violent countries: for example, 68.1% in El Salvador and 45.6% in Honduras. Despite an explosion of research on the behavioral effects of crime (Fernandez and Kuenzi 2010; Bateson 2012; Trelles and Carreras 2012; Carreras 2013; Ceobanu, Wood, and Ribeiro 2011; Merolla et al 2013; Berens and Dallendorfer 2017; Ley 2018; Córdova forthcoming), we still know very little about how owning the crime issue affects citizens’ retrospective evaluations of the incumbent and their vote choice.

This paper tackles this question and makes two important contributions to the literature on retrospective and crime voting. First, we provide evidence of the heterogeneous effects of crime in a context where crime is one of the most salient political issues. We develop a theory of *reverse partisan accountability* and argue (against conventional wisdom) that political parties that “own” the crime issue are less likely to be sanctioned by voters. Specifically, we show that voters do not punish right-wing incumbents for failures to provide public security. These findings have

² Source: 2016–2017 round of the AmericasBarometer.

important implications for how people react to negative shocks beyond crime, such as terrorist attacks or natural disasters.

Second, our empirical analyses attempt to address the traditional limitations of research designs when studying crime, such as serial victimization, reverse causality, and post-treatment biases. We exploit short-term spikes in the frequency of crime in the three months before the election. Furthermore, when using survey data, we pay attention to different elements of the statistical theory of design sensitivity, allowing us to reduce sensitivity to unobserved factors. We believe that our study design can contribute to more credible inferences about the consequences of government failures in the provision of public security.

Crime: A Valence Issue Owned by Right-Wing Parties

Crime is one of the most salient issues for Latin American voters, and often a prevalent theme during political campaigns. Even in countries where crime rates are relatively low, such as Argentina or Chile, the widespread public perception of worsening public security leads politicians to spend a lot of time and energy talking about crime, especially during campaigns. Crime, thus, is a paradigmatic example of a valence issue.

All political parties share the goal of providing public security and reducing crime (Marion and Farmer 2003; Burscher, van Spanje, and de Vreese 2015), but they disagree on the policy strategies for reaching that shared goal. Some parties (especially on the left of the political spectrum) see crime as a symptom of broader societal problems such as poverty and exclusion, and tend to favor less repressive policies (e.g., community policing). Other parties (especially on the right of the political spectrum) see crime as deviant behavior resulting from an individual's choice, and therefore advocate for more punitive policy solutions.

Although there is considerable evidence showing that more punitive solutions are not effective in reducing crime (Sherman, Farrington, Welsh, and MacKenzie 2002; Chen and Shapiro 2007), right-wing parties in most countries are still perceived by voters as better able to deal with crime.³ Because parties on the right are more vocal about the problem of crime and propose more visible and immediate policies to combat violent crime, they tend to be recognized as more effective in this policy area. In the United States, for instance, the Republican Party is perceived as better able to handle crime because it repeatedly emphasizes “get-tough” stances on security issues in national campaigns. The Democrats, on the contrary, are perceived as “weak” on crime (Marion and Farmer 2003; Holian 2004). In European elections, right-wing parties are also recognized by voters as more able to deal with crime and can gain a significant electoral advantage when crime is salient (Mayer and Tiberj 2004; Smith 2010).

In the Latin American context, and especially in countries with legacies of civil wars or military regimes, the right also has had prior experience managing security during recent periods of high sociopolitical instability and is better connected with the military and security forces. Some right-wing parties in the region, such as *Renovación Nacional* in Chile and ARENA in El Salvador, are “authoritarian successor parties” (Loxton and Mainwaring 2018) that continue to be associated with military and security issues decades after the transition to democracy. In a careful analysis of elections and security policies in El Salvador, Holland (2013, 52) shows that conservative parties have a “comparative advantage in touting their security credentials.”

In other words, right-wing parties more likely to “own” the crime issue. Political parties are said to “own” particular issues or policy problems when they have “a reputation for policy and program interests, produced by a history of attention, initiative, and innovation toward these problems, which leads voters to believe that one of the parties (and its candidates) is more sincere

³ See Ríos (2015), Moncada (2016), and Duran-Martinez (2018) for alternative crime-reduction strategies.

and committed to doing something about them” (Petrocik 1996). The issue ownership theory of voting contends that parties can gain an electoral advantage when, during campaigns, they emphasize issues that they “own” and which other parties are perceived as less able to handle (Petrocik 1996). According to this theory, political parties try to prime voters to think about certain issues in order to make those policy problems salient in the run-up to elections.

Previous research has demonstrated that political parties can gain an electoral advantage when policy problems that they “own” are salient among the electorate. We know much less, however, about how issue ownership affects electoral accountability. Are voters more or less likely to punish incumbent political parties in elections for policy failures in areas they are perceived to “own”? In this paper, we explore this question by focusing on accountability for violent crime in Latin America.

Crime, Issue Ownership, and Accountability

Our main theoretical proposition is that political parties that “own” an issue are less likely to be sanctioned for poor performance in that policy area. This hypothesis builds upon the well-known characterization of elections as sanctioning and selection mechanisms (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999). While most of the literature on retrospective voting focuses on the role of elections as sanctioning devices, we put equal emphasis on elections as institutional mechanisms for selecting, based on signals of competence, good leaders and policies (Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Fearon 1999; Duch and Stevenson 2008).

Considering elections as a selection device produces distinct theoretical expectations about the impact of issue ownership on electoral accountability. Parties that “own” an issue might be less likely to be punished for failures in that particular policy area because those policy failures make that issue a priority for voters. Voters might react by giving the benefit of the doubt to incumbent

parties that “own” an issue even when they have not produced significant results in that policy area. If conservative parties are perceived as better able to handle crime, an increase in crime under their watch might not lead to electoral punishment because voters consider the alternative parties (e.g., left-wing parties that are perceived as soft on crime) as even less appealing.

Previous studies lend considerable support to this theoretical intuition. Most notably, Arce (2003) shows that an increase in the level of guerrilla activity in Peru led to a decrease in the approval rating of President Alan García (a center-left politician) while a comparable increase in the level of political violence produced an increase in the popularity of President Alberto Fujimori (a conservative who adopted more repressive tactics). The explanation for this finding is worth quoting at length: “higher levels of guerrilla activity ought to hurt a left-leaning government like García’s because voters are likely to attribute the violence to his ‘softness.’ In contrast, higher levels of guerrilla activity may not necessarily hurt a right-leaning government like Fujimori’s because voters are likely to see violence as rationalizing a hard-line stance” (Arce 2003, 577).

In a similar vein, a number of studies suggest that parties on the right are less likely to be sanctioned by voters for high levels of *criminal* violence. An analysis of the 2012 elections in Mexico shows that support for the PRI candidate was depressed in violent states governed by the centrist PRI party even as electoral support for the PAN candidate was not related to the level of criminal violence in states governed by the right-wing PAN party (Vivanco, Olarte, Díaz-Cayeros, and Magaloni 2015).

In the United States, the same patterns appear to hold. In a detailed analysis of the link between issue ownership and partisan politics, Egan (2013) shows that issue ownership results from the Democratic and Republican parties prioritizing different issues (through legislation, spending, etc.), rather than from better performance in those policy areas when they are in power. This has clear implications for accountability. Egan (2013, 118) points out that “voters might

attempt to [hold the parties accountable] by relying on the parties' sustained efforts to address consensus goals—rather than any immediate results.” In other words, “Americans appear to use the heuristic of equating effort with results” (Egan 2013, 230). Republican politicians might be less likely to be sanctioned by voters for public security problems because the Republican Party has gained the reputation of being effective in this policy domain. For instance, Canes-Wrone et al. (2011) demonstrate that legislators from different parties are not equally sanctioned in the area of public security. While Democrats are held accountable for their voting records on crime issues, Republican legislators are not sanctioned by voters even when crime rates increase and their voting records indicate that they are “soft” on crime. In short, the reputation of the Republican Party as the owner of crime issues protects individual politicians from poor performance in this policy area.

The Lack of Fit model originating in political and organizational psychology might also contribute to explaining lesser sanctions on right-wing parties for failures in public security issues. This model presupposes that expectations about a person's success at a particular task affect evaluation processes (Heilman 2001). People who are perceived as lacking stereotypical leadership qualities (e.g., women or ethnic minorities) are evaluated more harshly because performance failures are attributed to a lack of ability. In contrast, performance failures by individuals who possess the stereotypical characteristics of a leader are often attributed to bad luck or exogenous factors, rather than a lack of ability (Deaux and Emswiller 1974; Swim and Sanna 1996). While this argument is often made about individual leaders, there is no reason why this psychological factor would not bias voter evaluations of political parties. The failure of left-wing parties to handle public security issues might be attributed to their lack of ability in this area. On the contrary, parties that “own” the crime issue (i.e., conservative parties) might not be perceived as equally responsible when their policies fail to reduce crime.

There is another (more political) reason that might explain the greater electoral sanctioning of left-wing parties for an increase in crime: voter perceptions are informed not only by the general reputations of political parties, but also by the politicization of crime itself. In an analysis of the politicization of crime in Western Europe, Estrada (2004, 438) argues that “crime is a social problem that is primarily placed on the political agenda by conservatives when social democratic governments are in power.” In fact, right-wing parties can obtain an electoral advantage by criticizing the soft approach of incumbent left-wing parties. Left-wing parties in opposition might not be able to obtain a similar electoral advantage when crime is high because they do not emphasize crime to the same extent. In one of the most sophisticated analyses of the rhetorical choices of political parties during electoral campaigns, Riker (1996, 6) argues and demonstrates that “when one side dominates in the volume of rhetorical appeals on a particular theme, the other side abandons appeals on that theme.” Riker hypothesizes that this is because the latter party has deemed it detrimental to focus on an issue that they are perceived as less able to address. If, as we argue, conservative parties “own” the issue of crime, left-of-center parties are better off not making criminal violence a central issue in their campaigns (even during a crime spike).

This theoretical discussion leads us to expect right-wing parties in Latin America to be punished less severely for policy failures in the area of public security. Since voters consider not only the past performance of incumbent parties but also the available alternatives, right-wing parties that have obtained a reputation as “owners” of the crime issue might be more protected from poor performance in this policy domain. Moreover, left-wing parties in opposition might choose not to emphasize crime issues even when a conservative party in government has not been able to deliver results. Since the policy solutions often advocated by left-wing parties (e.g., individual rights and community policing) are less appealing to voters in contexts of high criminal

violence (Holland 2013), parties on the left might prefer not to politicize crime, because doing so may actually benefit incumbent conservative parties.⁴

This theoretical discussion yields the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Voters are more likely to sanction a left-wing/centrist government than a right-wing government when there is a crime shock.

In the empirical section below, we will test these hypotheses using both aggregate crime and electoral data from Chile and Mexico, as well as individual-level data from the AmericasBarometer. Before doing so, we will consider two alternative arguments: 1) equal retrospective sanctions and 2) partisan accountability.

Equal Retrospective Sanctions

The most straightforward alternative argument is that voters do not take into account the position of the party along the ideological spectrum, and simply sanction parties or leaders retrospectively for their performance in office in prominent policy areas. A large body of literature on retrospective voting (especially economic voting) suggests that voters pay attention to the performance of the incumbent government, and “throw the rascals out” when performance is poor (Fiorina 1981; Key 1966). While more recent studies suggest that a wide range of contextual and individual factors influence the likelihood of sanctioning the executive for poor performance (for a review, see Duch 2007; Stegmaier and Lewis-Beck 2013), the main premises of the retrospective voting argument have not been directly challenged.

⁴ Left-wing parties sometimes combine a preventive and community-policing approach with traditional repressive policy proposals, and sell it as offering a more “holistic approach” to crime. But because left-of-center parties cannot credibly move too much on this policy space, they often prefer to de-emphasize security issues during campaigns.

Given that crime ranks very high among the preoccupations of Latin American voters (Singer 2011; Pion-Berlin and Carreras 2017), we can expect citizens to observe the performance of the government in this area and sanction incumbent parties when crime goes up. In other words, the “retrospective voting” hypothesis would lead us to expect equal sanctions for failures in public security regardless of the ideological position of the governing party:

Alternative hypothesis 2: Citizens are equally likely to sanction a right-wing government and a left-wing/centrist government when there is a crime shock.

Partisan Accountability

While we argue that right-wing parties are punished less severely for security shortcomings, the literature on “partisan accountability” (Kayser and Grafström 2016) would lead us to expect just the opposite. In a classic study of economic voting, Powell and Whitten (1993) argue that left-wing governments tend to deliver lower unemployment rates and right-wing governments deliver lower inflation. Against our main hypothesis, Powell and Whitten (1993) argue that voters use this information to hold governments accountable retrospectively according to their partisan priorities. In other words, right-wing governments are held to a higher standard on inflation and left-wing governments are held to a higher standard on unemployment.

The results of previous research testing the partisan accountability theory are decidedly mixed. While some studies find that left-wing governments are more often sanctioned when unemployment increases and right-wing governments are held more accountable for rising inflation (Powell and Whitten 1993; Dassonneville and Lewis-Beck 2013), other works show few partisan differences or present results that contradict the partisan accountability argument (Swank 1993; Magalhães 2012).

Moreover, these partisan accountability arguments have only been tested using partisan priorities in the economic arena, which might work differently than the area of public security explored in this paper. Although everyone prefers a robust economy, economic policies often involve trade-offs. Left-wing and right-wing parties propose different policies to achieve economic success. When these parties fail (especially in the area of the economy that they “own”), that might send a signal to voters that it is time to support a party with different economic solutions. Our empirical models will allow us to test this alternative hypothesis:

Alternative hypothesis 3: Citizens are more likely to sanction a right-wing government than a left-wing/centrist government when there is a crime shock.

Evidence of Issue Ownership

Our theoretical framework is based on the assumption that right-wing parties “own” the public security issue in Latin America and that voters perceive conservative parties as more able to address crime. Before proceeding to the empirical test of our hypotheses, this section seeks to establish that this assumption is sound. Are right-wing parties actually associated with crime-reduction policies in Latin America? We provide evidence to support this claim by analyzing 59 “state of the union” speeches made by ten presidents in Chile and Mexico. Both countries have had right-wing and non-right-wing presidents in recent decades, which allows within-country variation (we expand on the case selection in the next section).

We acknowledge that using ideological labels to categorize presidents in Latin America is not always an easy task. It is not rare to see politicians making ambiguous ideological statements or violating electoral mandates when they come into power (Stokes 2001). However, our argument is based on the signals provided by political parties during electoral campaigns and in the policymaking process. Right-wing parties and politicians tend to talk more about crime and are

more likely to initiate visible policies (e.g., iron fist policies) to fight crime, even if they do not always deliver better policy results. Analyzing widely publicized presidential speeches is therefore a good way to assess whether right-wing parties focus more on public security issues.

In order to tackle this question, we conduct text analysis based on 59 “state of the union” speeches using a new dataset on presidential speeches in Latin America (Arnold, Doyle, and Wiesehomeier 2017). We identify the frequency of crime-related words in Chile and Mexico to assess whether right-wing parties (or presidents) indeed “own” the crime issue.⁵ Three of the ten presidents studied are coded as right-wing politicians using Baker and Greene’s (2016) ideological scores for presidential candidates in Latin America: Sebastián Piñera, Vicente Fox, and Felipe Calderón

In Table 1 we regress the frequency of crime-related words on a binary indicator of right-wing presidents. The unit of analysis corresponds to each “state of the union.” We also include models with year and country fixed effects.

Table 1. Results of text analysis of presidential speeches (Chile and Mexico)

	Frequency of crime-related words			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Right-wing president	20.94*** (6.03)	17.13*** (8.23)	20.76*** (6.37)	16.61* (9.57)
N	59	59	59	59
Year Fixed Effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
Country Fixed Effects	No	No	Yes	Yes

* p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

⁵ Crime-related words (in Spanish): *delincuencia, crimen, delincuentes, criminales, seguridad, carabinero, carabineros, policia, policias, delitos, narcotraficantes, narcotráfico, criminal, delictual, violencia, delito, criminalidad, delincuenciales, delincuente, policiaca, policiacos, policial, policiales, violentos, pdi (policia de investigaciones)*.

The results show that right-wing presidents use between 17 and 21 more crime-related words per speech than non-right-wing presidents (depending on the specification), which suggests that right-wing politicians (and the parties they represent) should be more likely to be associated with crime-reduction strategies than other politicians.

For instance, Felipe Calderón (PAN-right) mentioned 113 crime-related words in his last speech of 2012. Meanwhile, Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI-center) mentioned only 24 such words in 2013 during his first “state of the union” speech. Similarly, Michelle Bachelet (PS-left) mentioned 11 crime-related words in 2009, while Sebastián Piñera (RN-right) mentioned 72 in 2010.

Another strategy to evaluate the policy priorities of different parties is to compare legislators’ ideological and policy preferences. We do that by using information from recent Chilean and Mexican surveys from the Latin American Parliamentary Elites (PELA) project. As can be observed in Figures A1 and A2 in the online Appendix, legislators from right-wing parties (PAN in Mexico, UDI and RN in Chile) are more likely to prefer budget increases in the area of public security, at the expense of other policy investments such as health and education.

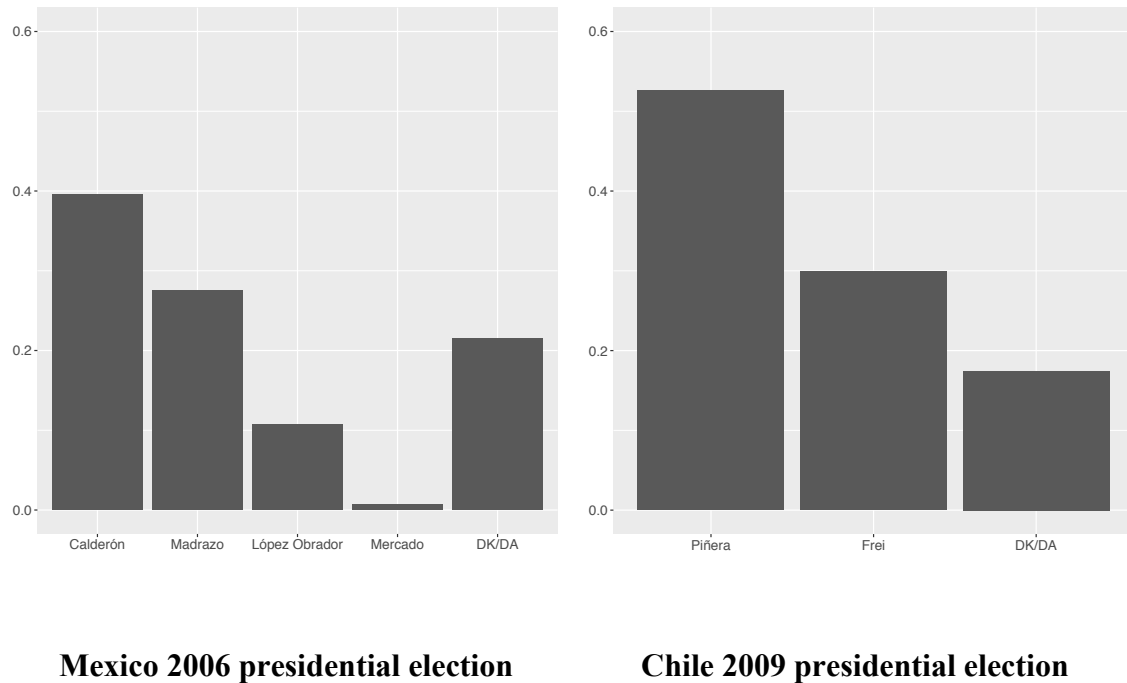
These different policy priorities can only influence public evaluations of the executive and voting behavior if citizens are aware that right-wing parties talk more about crime and propose more punitive solutions. Unfortunately, the survey evidence on this question is sparse. Regional survey barometers such as LAPOP and Latinobarómetro do not ask questions that would allow us to capture citizens’ perception of parties’ policy priorities and issue ownership. However, some CSES election studies include items that can be used to assess citizens’ perception of issue ownership. The CSES 2006 Mexico survey and the 2009 Chile survey, both implemented in electoral years, asked respondents which was the most important problem their countries were facing. A follow-up question asked respondents which candidate/party in the presidential elections appeared more competent to address that problem. As can be observed in Figure 1, in both cases

the candidate of the right-wing party (Calderón in Mexico and Piñera in Chile) was perceived by the public as much more competent in the area of public security. Another useful source for studying this question is the Mexico panel study, which has been conducting surveys during and after elections campaigns in Mexico since 2000.⁶ As can be observed in Figure A3 in the online Appendix, PAN presidential candidates tend to be perceived as more able to fight crime than their centrist (PRI) and left-wing (PRD) competitors. In addition, Figure A4 provides evidence from a survey implemented in Chile that illustrates that a majority of respondents can associate iron-fist crime-reduction policies with right-wing candidates (Visconti 2018).

In sum, the evidence presented in this section suggests that right-wing parties “own” the crime issue. Conservative parties are more likely to talk about crime during campaigns and while in office. They also tend to prefer more punitive solutions to the crime problem, and the limited survey evidence we have suggests that they are perceived by voters as better able to fight crime.

⁶ More information on the Mexican panel studies can be found here: <https://mexicopanelstudy.mit.edu/about>

Figure 1. Party/candidate most competent in the area of public security (Source: CSES)



Data on Crime and Elections

We use local crime and electoral data from Chile and Mexico in order to understand the heterogeneous effects of public security failures on accountability. We collected and analyze crime data at the municipality level for four presidential elections in Chile (2005, 2009, 2013, and 2017) and three in Mexico (2000, 2006, and 2012).

We focus on Chile and Mexico, countries that have had both left-wing and right-wing governments in the last few years, so that we can explore the effect of performance in the area of public security on accountability contingent on the ideology of the incumbent party. Because these countries present very different types of crime, studying both together can expand the scope of our theory and findings. Mexico is characterized by the existence of organized crime and high levels of violence; Chile has one of the lowest crime rates in Latin America, but crime victimization

remains one of the most salient political issues (Dammert 2013). As a consequence, using extreme cases can be seen as a hard test for our argument.

Our study diverges from traditional approaches that use crime rates as the main independent variable, in order to address a crucial problem when studying crime: namely, serial victimization (Bateson 2012; Visconti 2019). Under such circumstances, people might get used to a certain level of crime in their districts and might not react to constant (even high) crime rates in the same way as to a sudden increase in criminal violence shortly before an election. In other words, citizens from municipalities with consistently high crime rates might stop sanctioning governments for failures in the provision of public security in their localities. We therefore hold that it is important to distinguish between municipalities that have experienced a sudden increase in crime before the election, and municipalities that have not.

Using “crime shocks,” defined here as a sudden rise in crime in the three months before an election, instead of crime rates can help us reduce the concerns associated with serial victimization.⁷ A treated municipality is one experiencing an unusually high rate of crime activities, while a control municipality is one with stable crime rates in the year preceding the election. We expect a greater sanction against the incumbent in the former localities and we expect people in the latter to not respond in the same way to evenly distributed failures to provide public security across time. We focus on the last three months before the presidential elections based on evidence showing that citizens evaluate the short-term performance of the government and do not assess its entire period in office (Healy and Lenz 2014; Achen and Bartels 2016;).

In the case of Chile, we use crimes of greater social connotation, which corresponds to a “criminological-bureaucratic category of offenses comprising burglary, thefts, homicides, and

⁷ Marshall (2018) follows a similar approach, using homicide shocks to leverage plausibly exogenous variation in homicide counts within municipalities as an attempt to capture idiosyncratic short deviations from longer-term trends. Our strategy takes inspiration from this approach since we want to exploit a sudden rise in crime that occurs shortly before an election to mitigate the problem of serial victimization.

rape” (Hathazy 2013, 249).⁸ In the case of Mexico, only data on homicides is available at the municipal level over time, so we focus on that particular type of crime.⁹

In order to identify which municipalities are “treated,” we gather information on the number of crimes committed in each municipality in the 12 months prior to the presidential election. In particular, we assess which proportion of the total number of crimes was committed in each of the four quarters preceding the election. The proportion of crime in a given quarter corresponds to the total number of crimes in that quarter divided by the annual total number of crimes. Therefore, the sum of the four quarters should be equal to one. When we refer to the first quarter this corresponds to the timeframe between 12 and 9 months before the election, and when we refer to the fourth quarter this corresponds to the three months before the election.

A municipality will be labeled as treated in our empirical analysis if two conditions are fulfilled: (1) none of the first three quarters have proportions of crime greater than quarter 4 (three months before election), and (2) there is an increase in crime between quarter 3 and quarter 4 that is greater than 10 percentage points. As a result, point (1) allows us to exclude municipalities where there might be an increase in crime in quarter 4 (compared to quarter 3) but where crime rates were considerably higher in quarters 1 and 2; and point (2) allows us to identify places with a sudden rise in crime that occurs shortly before a presidential election. In the appendix we include empirical results using slightly different rates of increase in crime between the third and the fourth quarters (5% and 15%) as robustness checks.

⁸ The Chilean crime data were obtained from a governmental agency, the Center for the Study and Analysis of Crime (CEAD), and are available in the following website: <http://cead.spd.gov.cl/estadisticas-delictuales/>.

⁹ These data were obtained from the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and are available here: <http://www.inegi.org.mx/>.

The following equation summarizes the strategy for identifying treated municipalities in Chile and Mexico. The proportion of crime by quarter in a municipality m is represented by q_1 , q_2 , q_3 , and q_4 ; and we know that $q_1 + q_2 + q_3 + q_4 = 1$.

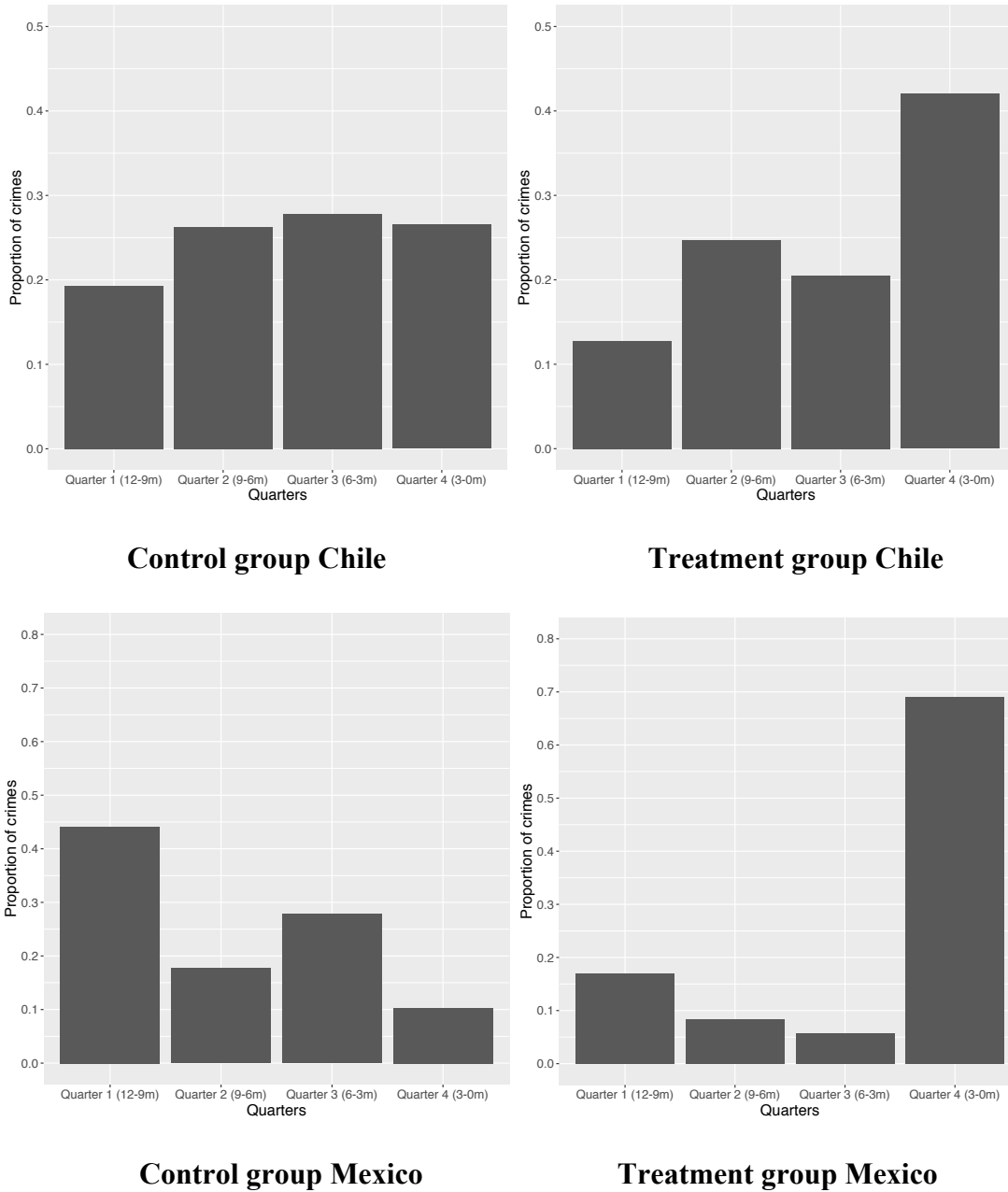
Crime shock _{m} =

1: $q_4 - q_1 \geq 0$ and $q_4 - q_2 \geq 0$ and $q_4 - q_3 > 0.1$

0: otherwise

Figure 2 shows the average proportion of crime for the first (12–9 months before the election), second (9–6 months before the election), third (6–3 months before the election), and fourth (3 months before the election) quarters in Chile and Mexico. We can clearly observe that in the treatment group the proportion of crimes experienced a sudden increase shortly before the election and that there is no quarter with higher crimes rates than the fourth quarter. In the control group, we do not see a similar increase in the proportion of crimes in the last quarter before the election.

Figure 2. Distribution of proportion of crime



The dependent variable corresponds to the change in the vote for the incumbent between consecutive presidential elections. This indicator provides a more precise measurement of voter assessment of government performance than just the incumbent vote share since it considers the evolution of preferences across time (Murillo and Visconti 2017).

Regarding the ideology of the president's party, we use Baker and Greene's (2016) ideological scores for presidential candidates in Latin America. These scholars developed an indicator that goes from 0 to 20 along the left-right scale. When incumbent presidents have a score greater than 15, we classify them as right-wing politicians. In Chile and Mexico: Sebastián Piñera, Vicente Fox, and Felipe Calderón are classified as right-wing presidents; all of the other presidents are non-right-wing. These three presidents also belong to political parties that are widely categorized as right-wing or conservative (*Renovación Nacional* -RN- in Chile and *Partido Acción Nacional* -PAN- in Mexico).¹⁰

Finally, our empirical models include pretreatment covariates such as the socioeconomic and demographic characteristic of municipalities that are usually used as predictors of vote choice in Latin America (see Carlin, Singer, and Zechmeister 2015). Since the unit of analysis is the municipality-election year, all the municipal characteristics were obtained for periods before the corresponding election (see the supplementary appendix for more details and sources). In the case of Chile, we use the following covariates: natural logarithm of total population, income index, education index, and crime rates in the twelve months before the election (the total number of crimes divided by the population).¹¹ In the case of Mexico, we use the following covariates: natural logarithm of total population, illiteracy, marginalization index, and crime rates in the twelve months before the election.

Regarding our empirical strategy, we employ a generalized difference-in-differences design. Specifically, we study the effect of crime shocks on the changes in the vote share for the incumbent party in presidential elections at the municipal level. In addition to estimating the effects

¹⁰ Since incumbent presidents in Chile and Mexico cannot run for immediate reelection, our models assess whether right-wing *parties* (rather than individual politicians) pay a lower electoral price for a spike in crime shortly before the election.

¹¹ Note the distinction we make between the proportion of crimes (used to determine treated and control municipalities) and crime rates (used as a control). The former is useful to identify sudden increases in crime, and the second to adjust for the severity of crime regardless of its distribution across quarters.

of a crime shock, we are interested in its heterogeneity depending on whether the president is right-wing or not. This design is implemented with the following OLS regression:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 I_i + \beta_3 I * T_i + \beta_4 X_i + \sigma_n + \omega_t + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

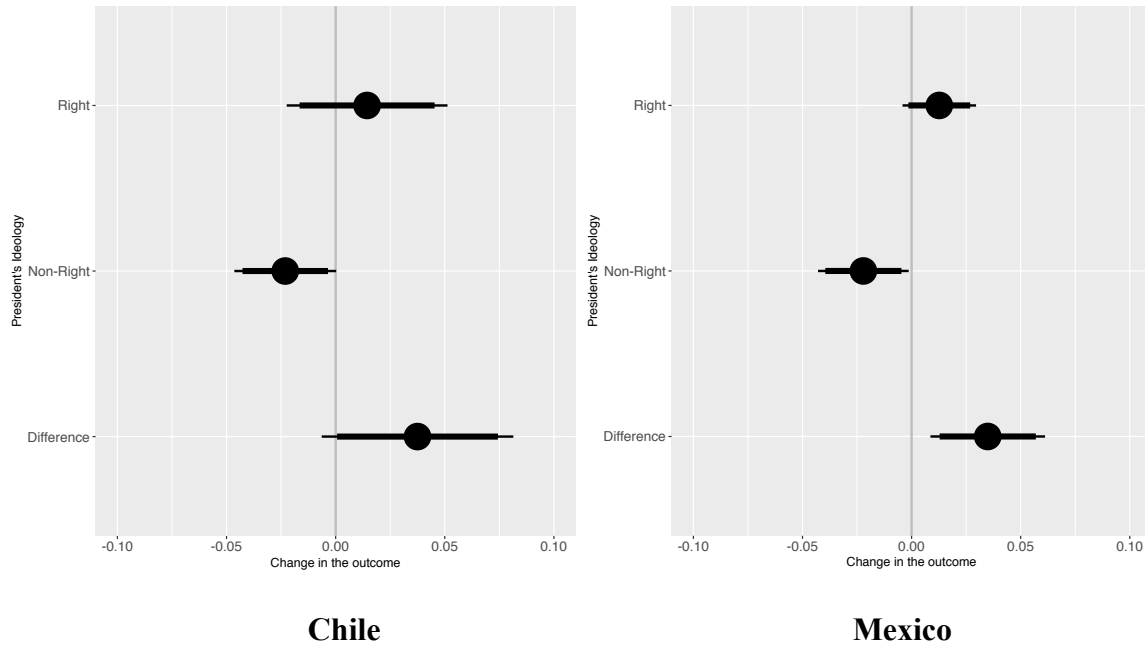
Y represents the change in the vote share for the incumbent between consecutive presidential elections. T corresponds to a binary indicator that identifies the existence of a crime shock in the municipality. I is an indicator that captures whether there is a right-wing incumbent, X is a vector of pretreatment covariates (socioeconomic and demographic characteristics), σ_n represents municipality fixed effects, and ω_t year fixed effects. The unit of observation is a municipality-electoral year. The coefficients of interest are β_1 , which depicts the impact of a crime-shock when the country has a non-right-wing president, and β_3 , which captures the difference between right-wing presidents and non-right-wing.¹² We clustered the standard errors at the municipality level. We estimate different models for Chile and Mexico.

Results: The Impact of Crime on Accountability in Chile and Mexico

Figure 3 summarizes the main results when implementing equation 1 in Chile and Mexico. The plot provides the point estimates and 90% and 95% confidence intervals for the impact of crime shocks on voting for the incumbent when he or she belongs to a non-right-wing and right-wing party, and the difference between both point estimates.

¹² Or in other words, the change in effect between non-right-wing and right-wing incumbents.

Figure 3: Heterogenous effects of crime shocks using electoral data



The results are consistent with our theoretical intuitions. In fact, the plots show that right-wing parties are not sanctioned for a crime shock, while non-right-wing incumbent parties suffer a substantial decline in electoral support when there is a failure in the provision of public security. The difference between these two effects is significant at the 0.1 level in Chile and at the 0.01 level in Mexico. We report the estimates and standard errors in tables A2 and A3 in the online Appendix, and implement robustness checks by excluding covariates one by one.

In sum, a sudden increase in the frequency of crime at the municipal level before a presidential election has a negative effect on the incumbent vote share but only for non-right-wing incumbents. These empirical models also allow us to reject the alternative hypotheses 2 and 3. In particular, there is no evidence in any of the models presented here that a public security failure (i.e., a crime shock) leads to an homogenous sanction across the ideological spectrum or to a stronger sanction for right-wing parties that “own” the crime issue.

External Validity: Survey Data

Are these results explained by some particularity of the Mexican or Chilean cases? To provide further evidence for our theoretical arguments and assess their external validity, Figure 4 reports the impact of crime victimization on voting for the incumbent in 18 Latin America countries using survey data from the AmericasBarometer.

A number of methodological challenges complicate the study of the political effects of crime when using survey data. The first one is reverse causality, which means that the outcome might also be affecting the treatment. For instance, voters who dislike the government might be more likely to report a crime to make the government look ineffective. The second methodological challenge is the existence of post-treatment bias, which refers to adjusting for characteristics that can be affected by exposure to crime (e.g., income levels, security perceptions, support for the government, etc.).

When using survey data, the first concern can be partially addressed by subsetting the sample only to subjects who voted for the government in the previous elections. This decision allows ruling out by design individuals who might over-report crime because they never liked the government. Also, this helps to reduce the heterogeneity of the sample, which contributes to the primary goal of decreasing sensitivity to hidden biases (Rosenbaum 2004). To address the second concern, we do not adjust for covariates that can be influenced by crime victimization, such as income, presidential approval, trust in the government, etc. We only focus on “placebo covariates”—i.e., slow-changing individual characteristics that should not be modified by the treatment such as gender, age, and education.¹³

In this analysis we rely on Latin American Public Opinion Project data and use four waves of surveys. Our accountability model at the individual level assumes that crime victimization

¹³ We are not adjusting for variables such as partisanship and ideology because they might be affected by exposure to crime. However, focusing on people who already voted for the incumbent allows us to control for political preferences.

signals to citizens that the government's public security policies are failing. This is a reasonable assumption: Individuals lack the capacity and incentives to obtain detailed information about the policy performance of the government (Downs 1957), so they often behave as "cognitive misers" and rely on heuristics (Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Lupia 1994). Suffering a violent crime is a potent heuristic that is readily available to citizens when they evaluate the performance of the government or make voting decisions.

One of the scope conditions of our theory is that we assume that a right-wing incumbent competes against centrist and/or left-wing parties. This is almost always the case in Latin American party systems where conservative parties in power tend to be challenged by left-of-center political forces. If a right-wing party in government faces a viable right-wing contender, our theoretical framework might not apply. Using the Baker and Greene (2016) dataset, we identified five country-years where there is a right-wing incumbent and challenger at the same time (Colombia 2010 and 2014, Guatemala 2011 and 2015, and Paraguay 2008). We therefore excluded these cases from the survey analysis.

The design mimics equation 1, where Y is a binary indicator for voting for the incumbent. Since we subset the sample to subjects who voted for the incumbent in the previous election, the outcome captures defection from the incumbent (1: repeated vote for the government, 0: defection from the government), which is similar in nature to the outcome used in the aggregate-level analysis data (i.e., the change in incumbent vote share).¹⁴ T is an indicator of crime victimization,¹⁵ I is an indicator that captures whether there is a right-wing president at the time when the survey

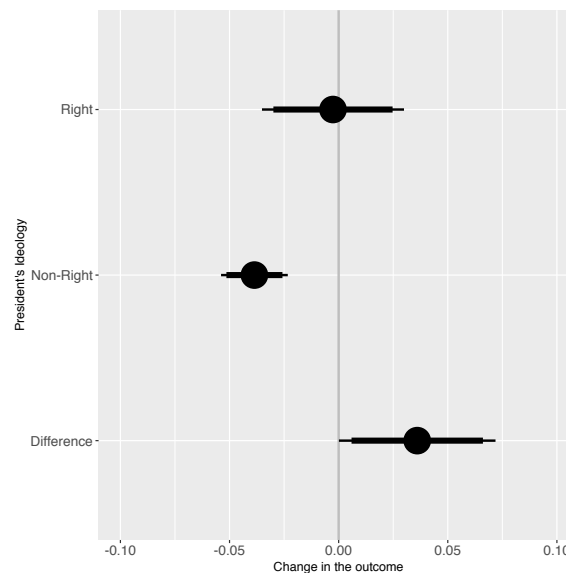
¹⁴ The outcome in the survey analysis is a dummy variable based on a LAPOP survey item (VB 20) that asks respondents how they would vote if the next presidential elections were being held this week. Respondents are asked whether they would abstain, leave the ballot blank, vote for the incumbent party, or support a different party in this hypothetical election. Respondents do not have to mention candidates by name. We generate a binary indicator coded as 1 if respondents indicate an intention of voting for the incumbent and 0 otherwise.

¹⁵ We use a LAPOP survey item (VIC1EXT) that asks respondents the following question: "Have you been a victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months? That is, have you been a victim of robbery, burglary, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, violent threats, or any other type of crime in the past 12 months?"

is conducted,¹⁶ X is a vector of placebo covariates (age, education, and gender), σ_n represents municipality fixed effects, and ω_t year fixed effects (LAPOP 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014). The coefficients of interests are β_1 , which depicts the impact of crime victimization on non-right-wing presidents, and β_3 which captures the difference between right-wing and non-right-wing presidents.

Figure 4 shows the impact of crime victimization on non-right and right-wing presidents, and the difference between these two effects. The plot provides the point estimates and 90% and 95% confidence intervals. Table A4 summarizes these findings and implements robustness checks by excluding covariates one by one.

Figure 4: Heterogenous effects of crime victimization using survey data



¹⁶ We use the same strategy we employed in the aggregate analysis to identify right-wing presidents. Presidents are categorized as right-wing when they have an ideology score greater than 15 in the 0–20 left-right scale in the Baker and Greene (2016) dataset.

The findings from Mexico, Chile, and 18 Latin American countries show the same empirical pattern. Voters punish non-right-wing incumbents for crime, but do not sanction right-wing governments for the same negative event. These results provide robust evidence for the *reverse partisan accountability* argument described in the previous sections.

The LAPOP survey data also allows us to test whether perceptions of crime have a differential impact on accountability depending on the ideology of the incumbent party. Previous research has shown that the perception of crime (or the perception of governmental performance in the area of public security) is related to vote choice and presidential approval (Pérez 2015; Romero, Magaloni, and Díaz-Cayeros 2016, Ley 2017). In the models above we focus on crime victimization because perceptions might be endogenous to people's electoral choices.¹⁷ However, if we use perceptions of crime as the main independent variable, the results are very similar. In other words, people who perceive crime to be high are more likely to sanction non-right incumbents than right incumbents (see Table A9 in the online Appendix).

Discussion and Conclusion

Elections serve two distinct functions in a democratic system. First, they allow voters to sanction incumbent parties for policy failures, and reward them for good performance. Second, they facilitate the selection of competent leaders. Most studies of democratic accountability (especially in the economic arena) expect citizens to evaluate the performance of the government retrospectively and vote accordingly. In this paper, we develop a theory of *reverse partisan accountability* that leads to different expectations in the public security policy domain. When criminal violence is a salient policy issue, citizens might sanction right-wing incumbents less severely for policy failures (e.g., a crime shock) because the alternative parties (i.e., left-wing and

¹⁷ Reverse causality might be less of a concern in this analysis because we are studying people who at least in time $t-1$ supported the incumbent.

centrist challengers) will be deemed less competent to address crime problems. Our theoretical framework therefore emphasizes the role of elections as selection devices.

Studying the impact of crime on political behavior can be complicated by methodological concerns such as serial victimization and reverse causality. To address these issues, we use sudden increases in crime before elections and implement a difference-in-differences design when using aggregate data, and we follow a design-based approach by constructing an observational study that reduces sensitivity to unmeasured biases when using survey data. We find that voters punish left- and right-wing governments differently. An increase in crime leads to a decline in electoral support for left-wing or centrist incumbents. However, that negative effect vanishes when the incumbent is located on the right of the political spectrum.

The arguments advanced in this paper call attention to the link between issue ownership and accountability, which has largely flown under the radar in the literature. Voters might be reluctant to sanction an incumbent party for poor performance on an issue that is clearly “owned” by that party, especially if that issue is salient at the time of the election. Poor performance might be chalked up to bad luck or external factors, rather than to the incumbent’s lack of ability. Moreover, other parties that do not “own” the issue will be perceived as less able to deal with this policy challenge. This theory of *reverse partisan accountability* is less applicable to the economic realm because in most contexts, no party “owns” this policy area exclusively. Right-wing parties might be perceived as better able to handle one aspect of the economy (e.g., inflation), whereas left-wing parties might be seen as better able to deal with another aspect of the economy (e.g., unemployment). That said, our theoretical framework should apply to many other policy areas in which one of the parties is perceived to have a clear edge in terms of reputation and expertise. For instance, if the immigration issue is salient (as it is now in Europe), right-wing parties might not be severely sanctioned for perceived policy failures because other parties have a worse reputation

in this policy domain. In a similar vein, Green parties in office might receive a smaller sanction for poor performance in environmental policies because they are perceived as better able to handle this policy domain than other political parties. While these questions are well beyond the scope of this study, they are suggestive of the wider set of puzzles our results place on the table.

The findings in this paper suggest that issue ownership complicates blame attribution in the area of public security. Left-of-center parties may be blamed for failures in this policy domain, while right-wing parties may get a pass. In a recent study, Ley (2017) shows that blame attribution for public insecurity in Mexico is also complicated by the fact that different levels of government (i.e., national, regional, and local) are often controlled by different parties. Voters are more likely to hold local authorities accountable for crime when the same party controls the national government. While looking at this question in detail in a broader cross-national setting would require a different research design, the results presented in this paper (combined with those of Ley) suggest that citizens take several elements into consideration when deciding which party or governmental level is to blame for crime and insecurity. Right-wing mayors might receive smaller electoral sanctions when there are left-wing incumbents at the regional or national level because voters are likely to blame left-wing governments for an increase in crime. On the other hand, left-wing mayors might be heavily sanctioned irrespective of the ideology of the governor or the president. This is another fruitful avenue for further research.

These findings also have relevant political and policy implications. For example, the adoption of iron fist policies has been associated with violations of citizens' rights (Fuentes 2004), the use of extralegal detentions (Dammert and Malone 2006), and the deterioration of procedural rights (Holland 2013). These strategies can be linked to right-wing politicians in Honduras, Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, and Brazil, among other countries (Cohen and Smith 2016; Holland 2013; Magaloni, Franco, and Melo 2015). Our results suggest that adopting iron-fist policies might

be a good electoral strategy for right-wing parties because it shows to voters that these parties indeed are making an effort to curb criminal violence. Conservative parties might adopt strong-handed policies that erode citizens' rights to maintain their reputation as "owners" of the crime issue and keep their brands intact (Lupu 2016).¹⁸ In so doing, however, these policies can perpetuate violence and exacerbate social tensions (poor citizens tend to suffer more from state abuses) without addressing the roots of the crime problem. Further research should continue to assess whether the adoption of punitive and repressive policies by right-wing parties is driven by electoral calculations.

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¹⁸ This does not mean that all right-wing politicians can be linked to iron-fist policies. Some of them propose punitive strategies to combat crime that do not imply a deterioration of procedural rights.

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