

## **Electoral politics in extraordinary times: The effects of policy assessments and trust in government on electoral choices during the COVID-19 crisis**

### **Abstract**

Based on a five-wave panel survey in eleven countries during the Covid-19 crisis, we study the effects of policy assessments (satisfaction with the way the government handled the crisis) and trust in government on vote intentions. For the analysis, we rely on well-known concepts from theories on economic voting and political support. The results indicate that both policy assessments and trust in government had massive effects on vote intentions during the Covid-19 crisis. Contrasting with previous results, we do not find a negativity bias of voters during the pandemic. Our results also show that voters perceived the Covid-19 through their partisan perceptual screen (retrospective vote choice and partisan identification), which largely influenced their vote intentions. We conclude that the Covid-19 crisis did not disrupt electoral politics but that voters specific and diffuse support for the government shaped the fate of incumbent governments.

Keywords: Covid-19, vote intention, policy evaluation, political trust, electoral system

**Word count: 8900**

## **Introduction**

The Covid-19 crisis provides us with the opportunity to test some long-standing questions about the impact of public policies on the vote which have so far been mainly studied in the context of economic voting: What is the effect of the Covid-19 crisis on the vote for incumbents? Are they punished or rewarded for their responses to the pandemic? Does the reaction of the public to the crisis and to the government's handling thereof reinforce the vote for the incumbents, or do incumbents lose votes during the crisis? Is the reaction the same for all types of voters, independently of their political predispositions, or does it vary on the basis of their perceptual screen or partisan expectations? And if it varies, which type of voter is most affected by the pandemic, or by perceptions of how governments have dealt with the crisis? These are the questions we try to answer in this study.

To answer these questions, we focus on two key indicators, which echo two strands of literature. First, we take our cues from the literature on economic voting, which studies the voters' response to the governments' handling of the economy. We argue that the voters' retrospective assessment of governments' policies (the general mechanism of economic voting) can also be applied to other types of government responses, including that of governments during the Covid-19 crisis. Second, we rely on the literature on political trust, and, more specifically, trust in government. Following Easton (1965), we distinguish between specific and diffuse political support. While retrospective assessments of the governments' policies are indicative of specific support for the government, trust in the government refers to diffuse support. The latter is more general and is more resistant to change than specific support. Nevertheless, as Easton (1975) has already pointed out, changing specific support may spill over into diffuse support. In this paper, we investigate how performance evaluations and trust influence support for incumbents during the pandemic. Based on the literature on partisan

predispositions, we are particularly interested in how past vote choice and partisan identity moderate the effect of performance evaluations and trust on vote intentions.

In what follows, we first present our theoretical expectations. Next, we describe our research design. Then, we present our results, and we conclude with a summary and brief discussion of our results. We argue that both strands of literature upon which we rely provide useful insights into the analysis of the electoral impact of the Covid-19 crisis. The effects of both retrospective assessments of the governments' responses to the pandemic and of changing trust in the governments on the vote intentions are sizeable. However, the pattern of effects is complicated by multiple prior political predispositions. We find that previous vote intentions provide a perceptual screen for voters: citizens who voted for the government tend to trust it more, and to evaluate its pandemic policies better. However, this perceptual screen can either be reinforced or broken by increasing (dis-)satisfaction or (dis-)trust, and this dramatically affects support for the government. Finally, we find that beyond this perceptual screen, more deeply entrenched partisan identities also affect how performance evaluations and trust influence vote choice in times of crisis.

### **Theoretical framework**

This article sets out to understand electoral support for governments in times of Covid-19 – and more particularly how voters rewarded or punished incumbent governments in times of crisis. Yet, prior to the individual mechanisms accounting for government support in times of crises, the general impact of being an incumbent on voters' support needs to be considered. Indeed, while incumbency may be advantageous in terms of electoral support, it is only up to a certain point. Even when voters positively evaluate a government, the 'cost of ruling' (for too long) negatively affects incumbents' reelection chances (Bartels and Zaller 2001). This pattern

is alternatively labeled “cost of ruling” (Nannestad and Paldam 1999), “fatigue with incumbents” (Bartels and Zaller 2001), “law of shrinking support” (Cuzan 2015), or simply “incumbency disadvantage” (Chatterjee and Eyigungor 2020). Importantly, the cost of ruling is based on electoral accountability – and not simply a desire to replace incumbents (“not a game of musical chairs”): governing parties tend to lose vote shares the longer they are in power, because voters come to believe that their policies (mis-)represent them (Wlezien 2017). Thus, the cost of ruling mechanism is based on policy evaluations. Indeed, negative performance evaluations have a stronger effect on government support than positive evaluations: incumbent support is considerably affected by the accumulation of negative judgment (Green and Jennings 2012). This mechanism has also been shown to apply in times of crisis (Malet and Kriesi 2019). Considered as a “law of politics” (Cuzan 2019), and supported by established findings, we can expect that incumbents have generally lost electoral support throughout the pandemic. In this paper, we consider the “cost of ruling” as a null hypothesis (H0): despite all factors that are likely to influence support for the incumbent, electoral support for the governments in place during the pandemic is expected to have decreased.

Beyond this general tendency, voters generally hold incumbent governments electorally accountable for their specific policies, as shown by the vast literature on economic voting (see, for example, Duch and Stevenson 2008, Stegmaier, Lewis-Beck, and Park 2017). Indeed, their support of incumbents is shaped by their beliefs and evaluations of the government’s policies. This extensively supported theory holds in “normal times”, but also in times of crisis – whichever its nature. For instance, incumbents have been severely punished at the polls during the financial crisis 2008-12 (e.g. Bellucci 2014, Bremer, Hutter, and Kriesi 2020, Magalhães 2014) or as a result of setbacks in an unpopular war (e.g. Karol and Miguel 2007 in the case of the Iraq war). Yet, governments are not always sanctioned in the polls following crises. For

instance, voters have been shown to reward skilled crisis management in natural disasters, sometimes over an extended period of time (e.g. Healy and Malhotra 2009, Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011, Eriksson 2016). Given the extraordinary salience of the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the direct incidence of the governments' policy responses on the voters' daily lives, we can assume that voters paid particular attention to the problem pressure induced by the crisis and to the corresponding government responses. It is also very likely that the voters' assessments of the way their government managed the crisis influenced their vote intentions for incumbents: we can expect that they rewarded or punished the incumbent parties according to their assessments of government policy during the crisis. As a matter of fact, during dramatic crises, voters do pay specific attention to the situation and to political leaders, which directly affects their electoral fortunes (Ashworth, Bueno de Mesquita, and Friedenbergr 2018). In this paper, we focus on individual-level effects of policy assessments on vote choice. In particular, we consider the voters' overall satisfaction with their governments' management of the crisis, as it likely varies as a function of the government's responses to the crisis. We contend that increased satisfaction with the government's handling of the covid-19 crisis results in a higher likelihood to support the incumbent (H1a).

Yet, shorter-term retrospective policy assessments are not the only form of citizens' evaluation of the government in times of crisis. We also expect longer term attachments to the government, such as trust in the government, to influence vote intentions in times of pandemic. Overall, trust in the government provides diffuse support for the government, independently of the vicissitudes of the government's policymaking, while low levels of political trust, in turn, are associated with support for the opposition (Citrin 1974, Hetherington 1998, Bélanger 2017). Moreover, a link has been established at the aggregate level between declining political trust and support for radical challenger parties (Arzheimer 2009, Mudde 2007). Generally, valence attributes play a role for the voters' choices in times of pandemic. For instance, Bisbee and

Honig (2022), in their analysis of primary elections in the US and local elections in France during Covid-times, have shown that anxiety alters the intensity of voters' preferences for the status quo, inducing a political flight to safety toward establishment candidates. In this study, we test the effect of trust in the government as a valence attribute. Specifically, we contend that higher levels of trust are associated with voting for the incumbent government (H1b).

Overall, we contend that mechanisms of specific support (satisfaction with the way the government handles the crisis) and diffuse support (trust in government) influence individual vote choice for the government in times of crisis. This influence can be positive and lead to electoral reward of incumbent governments, or negative and result in punishment at the polls. Yet, satisfaction and trust are not exogenous evaluations. Citizens' assessments are never strictly independent from their previous beliefs. Thus, we contend that past satisfaction and trust induce future satisfaction and trust (H1c).

*H1: Satisfaction (specific support)/trust (diffuse support) hypotheses*

*H1a: general policy assessment hypothesis (specific support):* Voters' (increasing/decreasing) satisfaction with the government's management of the crisis is associated with (higher/lower) support for incumbents.

*H1b: general trust hypothesis (diffuse support):* Voters' (increasing/decreasing) trust in the government in times of the crisis is associated with (higher/lower) support for incumbents.

*H1c: path dependence effect:* past satisfaction and trust induce future satisfaction and trust, which reinforces the incumbent vote.

Government support in times of crisis is certainly shaped by additional prior political dispositions. Indeed, the effect of retrospective assessments of government performance is likely to be moderated by partisanship. This expectation lies at the very heart of the founding studies of electoral behavior. In their seminal work, Campbell et al. (1960) have shown how partisanship matters when citizens think about politics, and particularly when they receive and process information in view of vote choice. In their words, partisanship is a "perceptual screen

through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation". Simply put, the Michigan model emphasizes three determinants of vote choice - party, candidates, and issues. Thinking of the model in terms of retrospective voting in times of crisis, we want to examine how partisan identity and/or prior vote choice condition the effect of satisfaction and trust on vote intentions.

Strikingly, most investigations of vote choice examine the influence of one type of political predisposition only, generally either partisanship or prior vote choice. We contend that it is important to grasp both layers of political predispositions to understand the effects of satisfaction and trust on vote choice during a crisis such as the pandemic of Covid-19. Indeed, we think prior vote choice, as well as more deeply rooted partisan identity, affect satisfaction or trust in the government in times of crisis, and in turn the decision to vote for incumbents or not.

Partisanship can bias voters' perceptions of economic and crisis conditions, and thereby influence performance assessments (Jones 2020; Healy and Malhotra 2013; Bartels 2002; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997). First, we develop a hypothesis on the perceptual screen of the past vote choice (H2), in line with established theories of retrospective voting. Past vote choice has two types of effects on citizens' evaluating their governments. On the one hand, as a result of motivated reasoning (e.g. Lenz 2009, Druckman 2012, Lodge and Taber 2013) and cues taking (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018), incumbent voters perceive the government's performance differently from opposition voters and abstainers. We hypothesize that, because of motivated reasoning, in times of Covid-19, incumbent voters tend to be more satisfied with the government, and to trust it more. Moreover, the levels of satisfaction with the government and of trust in the government have a greater effect on the incumbent voters' choices than on the choices of the opposition voters/abstainers (H2a). This effect is reinforced by the fact that incumbent voters are also more likely to follow government cues than opposition voters or

abstainers. On the other hand, partisanship induces the voters to react differently to the performance they perceive, i.e. satisfaction or dissatisfaction, trust or distrust have different effects on their vote intentions, depending on partisanship. Even if partisans tend to resist opinion change, some of them nevertheless change their opinions. Blais et al. (2010) outline the opposition between proponents of partisans resisting most political change (in line with Zaller 1992), and research which finds that individuals actually update their evaluations of policy and issues, despite their prior partisan dispositions (Gerber and Greene 1999). In the first case, scholars argue that voters selectively process the information they receive based on their prior beliefs, and that they are “too stubborn to change their perceptions and judgements” (Taber and Lodge 2006). In the second case, partisan resistance may break down. For instance, Gaines et al. (2007) show that some partisan voters tend to revise (even minimally) their opinions when confronted with information that contradicts their preferences.

We argue that, should they, for whatever reason, become more dissatisfied or distrustful in the course of the crisis, incumbent voters are likely to react more strongly to their increasing dissatisfaction/distrust. The reason is that incumbent voters have higher expectations with respect to government performance than opposition voters or abstainers. If these expectations are not matched, they may be more frustrated than opposition voters or abstainers who do not expect much from the government in the first place. Similar mechanism apply with regard to democratic frustration; when government delivery, or policy, clashes with expectations, it generates greater frustration (Harrison 2020). In other words, if the incumbent voters’ positive perceptual screen is broken by their negative perceptions of the government’s responses - or their increasing government distrust, electoral consequences are expected to be more consequential (H2b). If, however, incumbent voters are increasingly satisfied with or trustful of the governments they voted for, their electoral preferences are even more strongly reinforced (H2c). By contrast, opposition voters and abstainers are not very likely to update their electoral



preferences, even if their perception of the government's response to the crisis clashes with their previous vote choice (H2c).

*H2: The perceptual screen of the vote*

*H2a: Perceptual screen:* Citizens who have voted for the incumbent tend to trust government more, and to evaluate its policies more favorably, and they are, therefore, more likely to vote for incumbents again.

*H2b: Costs of breaking the perceptual screen:* The effects of increasing dissatisfaction and distrust on vote intentions are stronger for incumbent voters.

*H2c: Reinforced perceptual screen:* The effects of increased satisfaction or increased trust on vote intentions are stronger for incumbent voters.

In addition, we contend that focusing on past vote choice cannot disentangle the full complexity of the relationship between satisfaction or trust and vote choice in times of crisis. Perceptions and evaluations are not only influenced by the perceptual screen of consistency with prior vote choice. Indeed, partisan bias of prior vote choice, as Campbell et al. (1960) contend, is also influenced by partisan identity. We thus elaborate a further hypothesis which builds on the perceptual screen created by partisan identity (H3).

Arguably, partisan identity and incumbent voting interact in models of voting behavior. For instance, weak opposition identifiers tend to vote more often for incumbent presidents, while weak identifiers of the incumbent party are more likely to vote for an opposition candidate (Weisberg 2002). Partisan differences are moderated by situations in which a person's preferred party has won or lost the election (Kernell & Mullinix 2013). In times of Covid-19, we contend that the partisan bias does not affect all types of incumbent voters to the same extent. Thus, incumbent voters who strongly identify with the incumbent party may be less likely to update their electoral choices than incumbent voters who do not identify with this party. Indeed, the perceptual screen is expected to be the strongest for voters whose vote and party identity align. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the effects of changing satisfaction and

trust on vote intentions are weaker for voters who identify with a party (H3a). On the other hand, incumbent voters who do not identify with the incumbent party may be affected most dramatically by changing perceptions of the government. While their past vote choice provides them with a perceptual screen, their unaligned partisan identity does not prevent them from radical electoral updates. In other words, they are the incumbent voters who are more likely to be disillusioned by their government in times of crisis – with no partisan attachment that prevents them from vote switching. In line with previous findings, less aligned incumbent voters can update their electoral preferences more easily according to events and political crises. Thus, we expect that dissatisfaction/distrust have a particularly strong effect on the vote for incumbent voters who do not identify with the party (H3b)

*H3: Partisan expectations:*

*H3a: Resisting party identifiers:* The effects of changing satisfaction and trust on vote intentions are weaker for voters who identify with a party.

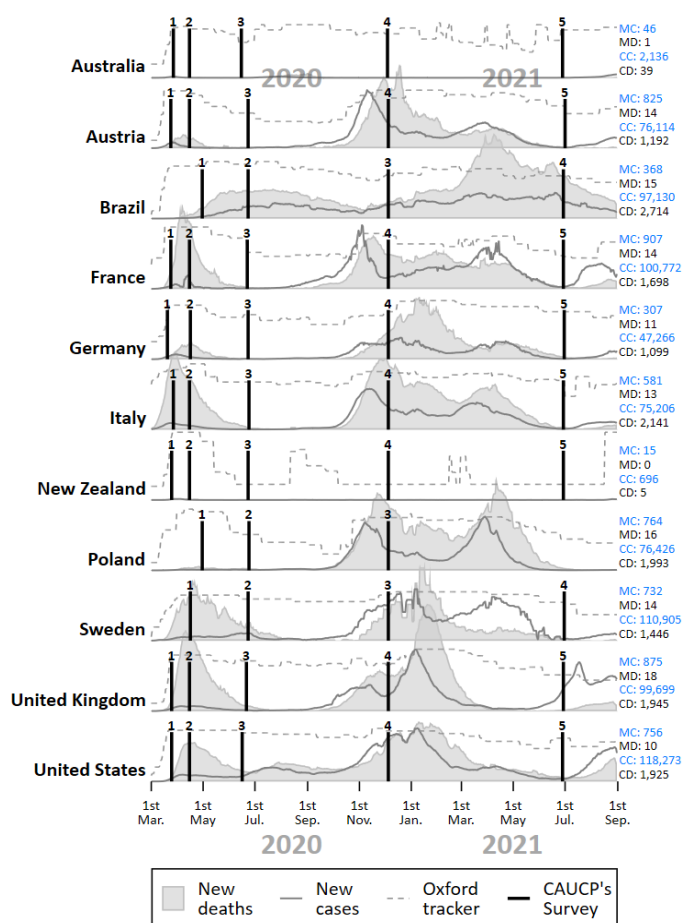
*H3b: Disillusioned incumbent voter:* Increasing dissatisfaction/distrust have a particularly strong effect on vote intentions of incumbent voters who do not identify with the party.

### **Data and operationalization**

For our analyses, we rely on a panel dataset collected in the ‘Comparative Attitudes Under Covid19 Project’ (CAUCP), which surveyed public opinion in 11 advanced democracies throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (Brouard et al. 2022). The 11 countries included are Australia, Austria, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, the UK, and the US. The case selection relies on the combination of multiple country-level characteristics to offer a broad scope in terms of institutions and sanitary situation. Data was collected in advanced democracies from Western Europe (Austria, France, Italy, UK), Eastern Europe (Poland), Northern Europe (Sweden), the Americas (USA, Brazil) and Oceania (Australia, New Zealand). Including countries from both hemispheres is necessary to capture

the inversed seasonal dynamic of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The Covid-19 pandemics affected countries differently: from the hardest hit (Brazil, USA, UK) to the least affected (Australia, New Zealand). Policy responses to the pandemic also varied across cases – from the most constraining countries (New Zealand, France, Italy) to the less constraining ones (Sweden, USA, Brazil). Finally, this case selection covers variation along the major institutional dimensions: length of democratic rule, centralized or decentralized governance, presidential and parliamentary systems.

Surveys were conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) on a quota sample, stratified by age, gender, occupation, and region. In this paper, we rely on a five-wave panel with N=30,212 unique respondents. The five waves were successively fielded in mid-March 2020, mid-April 2020, end of June 2020, early December of 2020, and late June-early July 2021 (see *Figure A1* in the Appendix for the overall structure of the survey waves). The CAUCP survey was initiated together with the first health restrictions in mid-March 2020 in Europe. The data was then collected a month after the breakout of the pandemic (April 2020), as its intensity lowered in the Northern Hemisphere but surged in the Southern one (June-July 2020), about a year after the start of the pandemic during the second pandemic wave in the Northern hemisphere (December 2020), and finally in the summer 2021, as the prospect of better pandemic management and early vaccinations implied lower mortality of Covid-19 and less constraining policies. The data collection covered the first two years of the Covid-19 crisis over different levels of intensity of the pandemic and over different levels of stringency of the policy response (with reversed dynamics of these indicators between Northern and Southern hemispheres). *Figure 1* shows the temporality of the waves of the CAUCP panel together with indicators on the strength of the pandemic (number of new cases and covid-related deaths, Ritchie et al. 2021) and on the stringency of governments' response to the pandemic (Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker, Hale et al. 2020).

**Figure 1:** Panel structure and pandemic indicators

Notes: MC=Maximum Cases (daily weighted on 7 days);  
 MD=Maximum Deaths (daily weighted on 7 days);  
 CC=Cumulative Cases; CD=Cumulative Deaths

Eight countries out of the eleven in our dataset have five panel waves, while Brazil and Sweden have only four waves, and Poland only three. However, the last waves in Italy and the US are not included in the following analysis, since their governments changed between wave 4 and wave 5 (in the US as the result of elections and in Italy as the result of the replacement of the Conte II government by a grand coalition government under Mario Draghi). Changing government compositions would introduce additional factors that affect the relationship of interest in unpredictable ways. In New Zealand and Poland, elections were also held in the period covered by our study, but incumbents won the elections and the composition of governments did not change. Overall, this gives 38 country-wave pairs, which will constitute the upper-level in our multi-level mixed-effects regression analyses.

The dependent variable in our analysis is vote intention in a given panel wave. In line with our interest in electoral reward or punishment of incumbents, we distinguish between two types of electoral behavior: voting for an incumbent party vs. other electoral choices, i.e. voting for an opposition party or abstention. We use this simple dichotomous in the following analyses to investigate the evolution of incumbent support over the different panel waves and to identify the factors which determine the electoral punishment and reward of the incumbents.

We operationalize our key independent variables – policy evaluation and trust in government with three indicators. Policy assessments are measured by a 4-points scale referring to the respondents' satisfaction with the way the government handled the crisis (completely, quite, not very, not at all satisfied). Trust in government is operationalized by an analogous 4-points scale which measures the answer to the question “how much do you trust the government?” (trust completely, trust somewhat, don't trust a lot, don't trust at all). For each of these two variables we use three indicators: the lagged variable, which measures the level of satisfaction or trust in the previous wave, and two variables of change in satisfaction and trust. We therefore look at variables of increased satisfaction/trust and increased dissatisfaction/distrust, i.e. the positive or negative difference between two successive waves. To facilitate comparison of their effects, we rescaled these variables to the 0-1 range.

Our independent variables include several indicators for the individuals' political predispositions. To investigate the perceptual screen of voters (H2), we rely on retrospective vote choice (whether the respondent has voted for the incumbent government or not). To explore partisan expectations (H3), we use a variable of partisan identification (feeling close to a party), recoded into three categories: identification with an incumbent party (sometimes several options in case of government coalitions), with an opposition party, or no partisan identification. Additionally, we use a dichotomous variable for previous vote intention (lagged vote intention in the previous wave), which distinguishes between incumbent vote and vote for

the opposition/abstaining. In addition, we also control for general ideological predisposition operationalized with the respondents' self-placement on the 11-points left-right scale (with don't knows recoded to the midpoint of the scale). We include a dummy indicator for the ideological orientation of the government (center-left vs center-right) and an interaction of this indicator with ideological self-placement to take into account the (non-)alignment of the respondents' and the government's ideological orientations. We also control for sociodemographic factors at the individual level: age, age squared, gender and education. *Table A1* in the Appendix provides descriptives for all the variables.

Additionally, we introduce a set of contextual level variables characterizing the country-wave pairs. A dummy for the pairs referring to the second wave allows us to operationalize the rally-around-the-flag effect that occurred in the first weeks of the pandemic (Kritzinger et al. 2021). The number of deaths due to Covid taken from Ritchie et al. (2021) serves as our indicator for problem pressure, which we introduce in two ways – the logged cumulated number of deaths at the previous wave and the additional number of deaths (logged) between the previous and the current wave. Similarly, we introduce two indicators for the intensity of the government's policy response to the crisis based on the stringency index (Hale et al. 2020).

Our panel data allow us to control for reverse causality. We know that evaluations and vote choice are possibly endogenous: policy evaluations may affect vote choice, but vote choice may also affect policy evaluations (Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs 1997). Indeed, the time dimension is crucial to correctly assess the interaction between partisanship and evaluation or trust (Marsh and Tilley 2010). Relying on panel data, we measure the independent variables of interest (policy assessments, trust in government) both as lagged levels and as changes between an earlier time point and the current time point. Relying on changes for the independent variables should go a long way in controlling for endogeneity, which is above all associated

with levels We estimate our models with multi-level logit regressions<sup>1</sup>. In these models, the upper level consists of our 38 country-wave pairs, the lower level of the individual respondents. As our panel study includes five waves, there are up to four pairs of waves per country for which we can analyze the two versions of the dependent variable<sup>2</sup>. For readability purposes, we consider vote choice at times (t), and we note lagged variables over one wave (t-1), over two waves (t-2), and over three waves (t-3). We use clustered standard errors. The variance of the upper-level intercepts is always highly significant, which indicates that we need to use multi-level estimation procedures.

## Results

We examine our hypotheses on support for incumbents in times of pandemic sequentially and incrementally. First, we investigate electoral support for incumbents in times of the pandemic based on our the null hypothesis (H0): incumbents suffer from the “cost of ruling” over time. To assess this expectation in a straight-forward way, *Table 1* shows the evolution of vote intentions for the incumbent governments throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The erosion of incumbent vote intentions over time is clear-cut: incumbents lose a larger share of their own voters than they gain from opponent voters and abstainers (left part of *Table 1*). For instance, 21.6 percent of incumbent supporters at (t-3) had switched to opposition support or abstention at time (t), whereas only 6.5 percent of other voters switched to the incumbent over the same period. Yet, incumbent voters only make up a minority of voters compared to opposition voters

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<sup>1</sup> We used the *melogit* procedure of Stata.

<sup>2</sup> Panel attrition is high in the CAUCP dataset with about 14% of panelists participating to all the survey waves (see Brouard et al. 2022). However, this trend has little impact on our analysis since we rely on lagged variables, i.e. pairs of waves, and on average, CAUCP respondents have participated in about two waves. We have tested our hypotheses for longer lags as well, and they turn out to be largely similar to the results presented here.

and abstainers combined in the electorate at large. Still, the proportion of voters moving from incumbents to the opposition voters-abstainers is higher than the other way around. For instance, over three waves of our panel, 7.5 percent of all voters had switched from incumbents to another vote, while only 4.3 percent of voters switched to incumbent support.

**Table 1:** the erosion of incumbent support: shares of stable and changing voters at (t-1), (t-2), and (t-3)

	<b>Within electorates</b>		<b>Electorate at large</b>		
	Vote intention (t-1)		Vote intention (t-1)		
Vote intention	Opp./Abstain	Incumbent	Opp./Abstain	Incumbent	Total
Opp./Abstain	94.2	<b>14.5</b>	63.1	<b>4.8</b>	67.9
Incumbent	<b>5.8</b>	85.5	<b>3.9</b>	28.2	32.1
Total	100.0	100.0			100.0
N	18,738	9,228	18,738	9,228	27,966
	Vote intention (t-2)		Vote intention (t-2)		
Vote intention	Opp./Abstain	Incumbent	Opp./Abstain	Incumbent	Total
Opp./Abstain	93.8	<b>18.0</b>	62.5	<b>6.0</b>	68.5
Incumbent	<b>6.2</b>	82.0	<b>4.1</b>	27.4	31.5
Total	100.0	100.0			100.0
N	11,992	6,009	11,992	6,009	18,001
	Vote intention (t-3)		Vote intention (t-3)		
Vote intention	Opp./Abstain	Incumbent	Opp./Abstain	Incumbent	Total
Opp./Abstain	93.5	<b>21.6</b>	61.3	<b>7.5</b>	68.7
Incumbent	<b>6.5</b>	78.4	<b>4.3</b>	27.0	31.3
Total	100.0	100.0			100.0
N	6,735	3,544	6,735	3,544	10,279

Initial descriptive results clearly support the “cost of ruling” hypothesis during the Covid-19 crisis. Overall, incumbent governments were electorally punished rather than rewarded – although cross-country patterns vary significantly (*Table 2*). Indeed, the “cost of ruling” is especially pronounced in some countries, notably Austria and the UK, or Poland. In the long run, the share of switchers from the incumbent government is ten times bigger than that of



switchers to the incumbent from different initial vote intentions in Austria or in the UK<sup>3</sup>. However, electoral switches towards and from the incumbents are largely balanced in several countries, and almost balanced even in Italy and in France. Moreover, contradicting the “cost or ruling” theory, some incumbents gained more vote intentions than they lost. For instance, both in the short and the longer run, the Australian government increased its share of vote intentions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Table 2:** the erosion of incumbent support, by country: shares of stable and changing voters with variable lags (one and three lags)

	Change vote intention from (t-1)				Change vote intention from (t-3)					
	Stable	From Incumbent	To Incumbent	Total	Stable	From Incumbent	To Incumbent	Total		
Austria	87.0	<b>9.3</b>	3.8	100.0	1,783	75.1	<b>22.8</b>	2.1	100.0	724
Brazil	85.5	7.2	7.4	100.0	1,767	81.3	10.6	8.1	100.0	433
New Zealand	88.8	6.5	4.6	100.0	1,638	85.0	8.7	6.4	100.0	738
Germany	88.8	5.8	5.5	100.0	4,53	85.4	8.4	6.2	100.0	1,646
Italy	89.1	6.2	4.7	100.0	1,903	87.4	6.4	6.2	100.0	609
UK	92.1	4.9	3.0	100.0	2,954	88.0	<b>10.6</b>	1.4	100.0	1,213
Australia	92.1	3.1	<b>4.8</b>	100.0	1,951	88.8	3.9	<b>7.2</b>	100.0	636
USA	94.5	2.8	2.8	100.0	2,342	91.2	3.7	5.2	100.0	794
Sweden	93.5	3.8	2.7	100.0	1,764	91.4	5.5	3.2	100.0	439
Poland*	91.3	<b>6.7</b>	2.0	100.0	1,06	92.0	<b>6.2</b>	1.8	100.0	625
France	95.1	2.4	2.4	100.0	6,274	93.8	3.5	2.7	100.0	3,047
Total	91.4	4.8	3.9	100.0	27,966	88.3	<b>7.5</b>	4.3	100.0	10,279

\* Because Poland is only included in three waves of the panel, the right-hand side of the table is calculated at (t-2)

The country variations in vote intentions for the incumbent suggest that mechanisms beyond the “cost of ruling” influenced electoral support during the pandemic. In the remainder of this paper, we explore how policy satisfaction and trust influenced incumbent support (H1), and

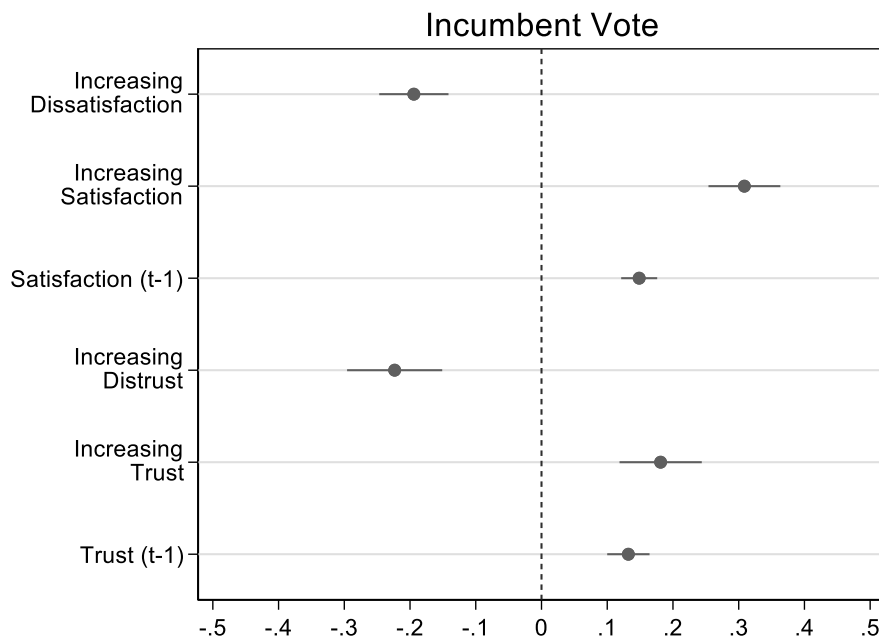
<sup>3</sup> Because of the Brexit crisis, and the resulting political crisis, overlap with the pandemic, we cannot attribute the cost of ruling to the Covid-19 crisis only in the UK – most likely, both events have contributed to the electoral punishment in incumbents.

how these relations are shaped by perceptual screens and partisan expectations (H2 and H3). To better interpret our results, we present the figures of the conditional marginal effects of our variables of interests – full results of our multilevel mixed-effects models are in Appendix *Table A2*. Before discussing our results in detail, we should note that the included control variables have limited effects on support for the incumbent governments. Indeed, sociodemographic variables hardly impact support for incumbents, but we observe that the respondents' left-right orientation, the ideological orientation of the government (left or right) and their interaction have sizeable effects. We also observe a clear rally-around-the-flag effect, as support for the incumbent government is higher in the second wave of the panel (a month after the outburst of the pandemic). Contextual level indicators hardly affect support for the incumbent government: the stringency of Covid-19 related measures does not affect support, while the number of deaths caused by the pandemic minimally decreases support for incumbent governments.

First, we examine our general policy assessment and trust hypotheses, which posit that increasing satisfaction with the way the government is handling the crisis (H1a) and increasing trust in the government (H1b) in times of pandemic should be associated with higher support for incumbents – as well as the reversed effect for decreasing satisfaction and trust. *Figure 2* provides the baseline confirmation of our first pair of sub-hypotheses (based on model M1 in *Table A2*). As expected, increasing satisfaction, as well as increasing, trust during the pandemic are associated with a higher probability of supporting the incumbent government. Thus, changing from not satisfied to completely satisfied with the government's handling of the pandemic increases the likelihood of incumbent electoral support by 30 percentage points, and changing from not trusting to completely trusting the government increases incumbent support by roughly 20 percentage points. Conversely, increasing dissatisfaction and distrust over time decreases the probability of supporting the incumbent government by a maximum of

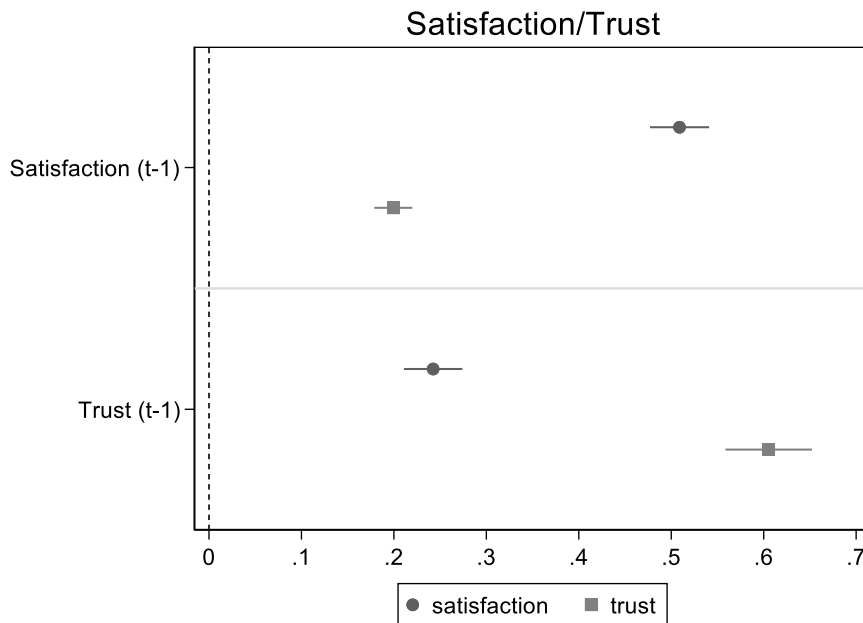
about 20 percentage points. Note that the effects of changes in the two directions are of similar magnitude. These findings support our hypotheses that both changing specific support (policy performance evaluation) and changing diffuse support (trust in the government to handle the crisis) are strongly associated with support for the incumbent (H1a and H1b confirmed).

**Figure 2:** The effects of changing and lagged satisfaction and trust on vote intentions: conditional marginal effects (estimates reported in Table A3)



In addition, past satisfaction and past trust also have a positive influence on incumbent vote choice. Indeed, as hypothesized, trust and satisfaction are not exogenous judgements formed at time (t), but they are path dependent on earlier beliefs, which reinforces one's vote choice as a result of motivated reasoning (H1c confirmed). As a matter of fact, both satisfaction with the government, and trust in the government are influenced by past trust and satisfaction (*Figure 3*). Current satisfaction mainly depends on past satisfaction, and the same applies for trust. However, past satisfaction with government performance also enhances current trust and vice-versa. There are, indeed, spillover effects from performance evaluations (specific support) to trust in government (diffuse support), but diffuse support also enhances specific support.

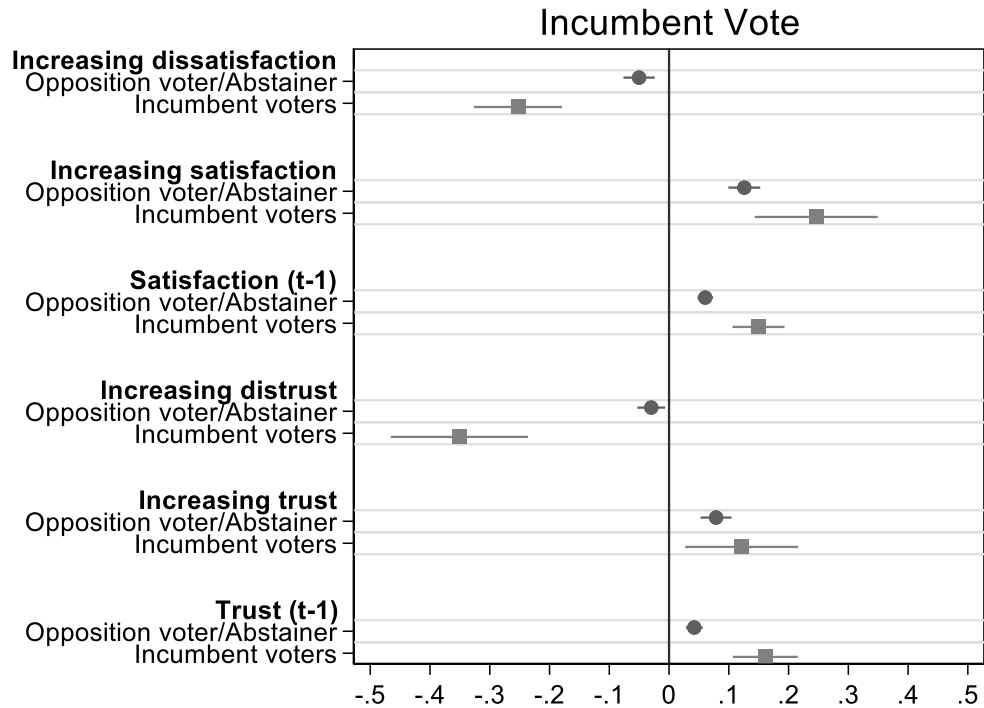
**Figure 3:** the path-dependent effects of lagged satisfaction/trust on satisfaction and trust: conditional marginal effects (Table A4)



In a second step, we examine our hypothesis on the perceptual screen of past vote choice on the vote intention (H2). To recall, we expect incumbent voters and opposition voters/abstainers to evaluate and trust the government differently in times of crisis, and incumbent voters to be more strongly influenced by trust and performance evaluations in their vote choice (H2a). Moreover, we expect incumbent voters to be differently affected by increasing dissatisfaction/distrust (H2b) and increasing satisfaction/trust (H2c).

The perceptual screen of vote intentions, indeed, induces incumbent voters to motivated reasoning: not only are they more satisfied with the government's management of the crisis than opposition voters and abstainers (mean satisfaction for incumbent voters and opposition voters/abstainers = .70 and .41 (difference=.29, SD=.002, sign=.000), mean trust=.63 and .35 (difference=.28, SD=.002, sign=.000)), lagged satisfaction and trust also have a stronger effect on their vote, which confirms H2a (see *Figure 4*).

**Figure 4:** The effects of changing and lagged satisfaction and trust on vote intentions, moderated by lagged vote intentions: conditional marginal effects (full result in Table A5)



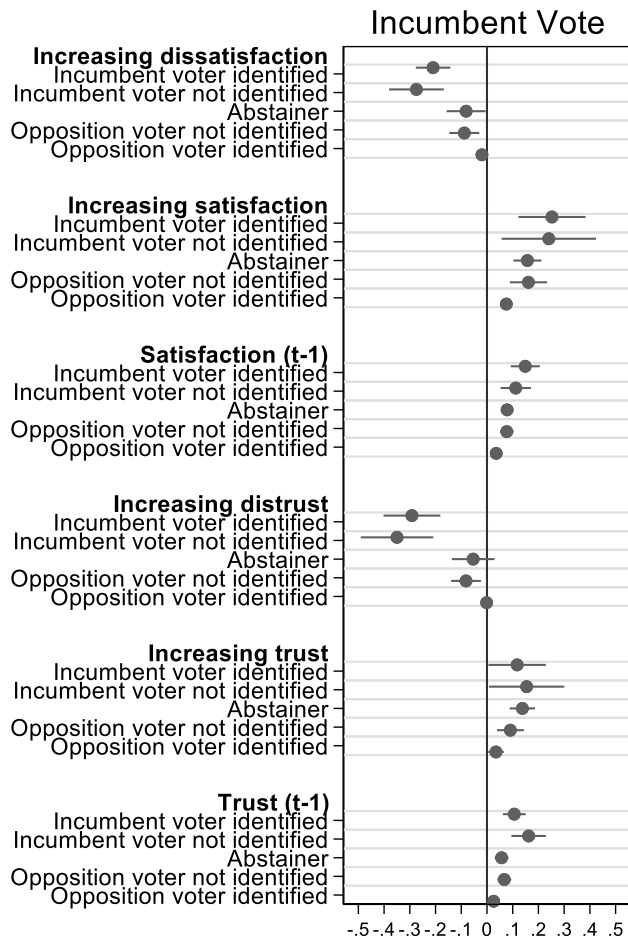
In addition, our models also provide strong support for the electoral consequences of breaking (H2b) or reinforcing (H2c) the perceptual screen of previous vote choice (*Figure 4*, based on model M2 in *Table A2*). Indeed, the effects of increasing dissatisfaction and increasing distrust are much stronger for incumbent voters than for opposition voters-abstainers. While the probability of voting for the incumbent decreases by less than 5 points for newly dissatisfied or distrustful opposition/abstention voters, breaking the perceptual screen of incumbent voters results in a dramatic reduction of the probability of supporting the incumbent (of respectively 25 for increasing dissatisfaction and 35 points for increasing distrust) (H2b confirmed). Similarly, vote intentions of incumbent voters who become increasingly satisfied with government policy are also more positively affected than vote intentions of other voters. However, while the effect of increasing trust is positive, too, the difference between voter types is not statistically significant (i.e. H2c is only partially confirmed). Except for the weaker

effects of increasing trust, these results confirm the importance of the perceptual screen for voters in times of Covid-19, not only in case it is maintained, but also in case it breaks down.

In a final step, we investigate how the perceptual screen (and the cost or reward associated with breaking or reinforcing it) affects different types of party identifiers. We hypothesized that beyond the perceptual screen of past vote choice, more deeply entrenched partisan identification should also affect the influence of (dis-)satisfaction and (dis-)trust on vote choice. To recall, our hypothesis expects that changing satisfaction and trust would minimally influence vote choice for voters who identify with a party, since their preferences are more deeply rooted (H3a). Conversely, we expect that increasing dissatisfaction or distrust would more dramatically affect vote choice for incumbent voters who do not identify with the incumbent party, as they may be the most disillusioned voters (H3b). As is shown in *Figure 5* (based on model M3 *Table A2*), our two sub-hypotheses are only very partially confirmed.

Indeed, the effects of satisfaction/trust and dissatisfaction/distrust on vote intentions are weakest for opposition identifiers. Vote intentions for citizens who did not vote for the incumbent, and who identify with another party, are virtually unaffected by variations in satisfaction and trust during the pandemic (except for a small positive effect on support for incumbents of increasing satisfaction). This finding gives partial support to hypothesis H3a: party identifiers tend to resist the effect of government evaluation and trust in their vote choice decision. However, among incumbent voters, performance evaluations and trust have a strong effect on their vote intentions, whether they identify with the incumbent parties or not. Thus, we find only a weak confirmation for H3b: while effects of increasing dissatisfaction/distrust for incumbent voters who do not identify with incumbent parties are particularly strong, they are not significantly different from the corresponding effects for incumbent party identifiers.

**Figure 5:** The effects of changing and lagged satisfaction and trust on vote intentions, moderated by lagged party identifications: conditional marginal effects (Full results in Table A6)



**Discussion and conclusion**

We started out by testing our null-hypothesis about the cost-of-ruling. Overall, we found support for the cost-of-ruling hypothesis during the Covid-19 crisis. However, the considerable country-differences in this respect suggested that the cost-of-ruling is moderated by some additional mechanisms. We tested the effects of performance evaluations (specific support) and trust in government (diffuse support) on the incumbent vote in three steps. First, we found that past satisfaction and trust as well as changing satisfaction and trust have the expected effects on incumbent voting: it is increased by past and increasing satisfaction and trust, and decreased

by increasing dissatisfaction and distrust. Importantly, the effects of increasing satisfaction/trust and decreasing satisfaction/trust are roughly comparable, which disconfirms the notion of “negativity bias” (Soroka 2014) or “grievance asymmetry” (Nannestad and Paldam 2002), well-known from the economic voting literature. This literature also suggested that, under crisis conditions, the increased salience of the economy tends to increase the impact of the “negativity bias” on the vote choice (Singer 2011).

Distinguishing between incumbent voters and opposition voters/abstainers in the second step, we found that the apparent asymmetry between punishing and rewarding that the economic voting literature found is likely to be attributable to a particularly strong negative reaction among disillusioned incumbent voters, i.e. incumbent voters whose perceptual screen has been broken either with respect to performance evaluations or trust or both. Normally, voters stick to their previous vote choice. Underpinned by motivated reasoning, incumbent voters are more likely to be satisfied with the government’s performance and they are also more likely to trust the government, which induces them to stick to their previous electoral choice, and vice-versa for opposition voters and abstainers. But if, for whatever reason, they lose trust in the government or become dissatisfied with its performance, then they react particularly dramatically.

In the third step, we tested whether this dramatic reaction was influenced by party identification. However, we could not find significant differences between incumbent voters who identify with their party and those who don’t. Contrary to our expectations, disillusionment has the same strong effect on both types of incumbent voters. Party identification only matters among opposition voters: those who are identified are hardly influenced at all by performance considerations or trust in government, while those who are not identified with opposition parties are somewhat more susceptible to react to such considerations.



During the Covid-19 crisis, incumbent voters had a lot of opportunities to become dissatisfied with the way their government managed the crisis and to lose trust in their government: they may have been put off by the government's lockdown measures, which for some voters went too far, while for others they did not go far enough. They may have been dissatisfied with the economic measures of the government, which did not alleviate enough the crisis' economic fallout for them, or which were too costly in their view. They may have become critical of the government's vaccination policy, which for some was too imposing while others would have liked it to be even more strict. With the exception of the economic measures, the policies adopted by the governments hardly aligned with traditional ideological divides, which facilitated the possibility for the perceptual screens to break down. We have not pursued the reasons for the breakdown of the perceptual screen of incumbent voters in this paper. This would be the next step in the analysis of the electoral consequences of the Covid-19 crisis.

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