

RESEARCH INSIGHTS



Does the Framing of Information on Crime Rates Affect Citizens' Preferences for Anti-Crime Policies?



Anti-crime policy preferences can be swayed by the framing of crime rate information.



Both framing information as an upward trend in crime or a downward trend in crime increased demands for punitive policies as opposed to social policies, when compared to a control group that received no information.



Individuals with no previous information about crime rates were more affected by the treatments than those who were familiar with crime rates in the country.

CONTEXT

Policies often suffer from inter-temporal stickiness that prevents them from addressing the changing needs of the public. Anti-crime policies in Latin America are no exception to this rule but are particularly interesting because of the high stakes and high public finance costs associated with them.

Mass incarceration in the region began as a response to public concern about drug use and in a period when violent crime was at a historical peak. However, crime risks have gone down and evidence suggests that mass incarceration has negative spillover effects for society. Despite this evidence, punitive anti-crime policy persists to the present day which indicates that an information processing problem may be at play.

This experiment tries to shed light on the effect of positive or negative news about crime on demands of anti-crime policies. Different information framings about crime were presented to participants of the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey in Panama.

THE PROJECT

An information experiment was designed and incorporated into the 2016/2017 edition of the Americas Barometer Survey conducted by LAPOP in Panama. The experiment involved presenting infographics consistent with the existence of high crime or low crime regimes to randomly assigned subjects from a pool of 1,521 respondents. Both messages were factually accurate and based on crime statistics for the country. No information was shown to the control group. The survey was administered to a nationally representative stratified sample of Panamanians, and interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format using electronic tablets.

Key Concept



ATTRIBUTE SUBSTITUTION

A cognitive bias in which a simple (knee-jerk) emotional response to a stimulus substitutes for a more thoughtful consideration of the same.

RESULTS

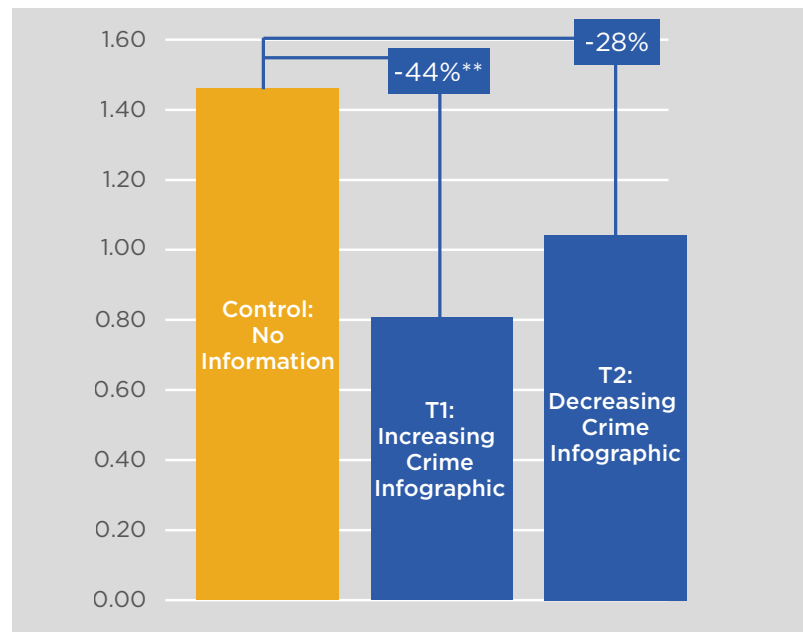
1. The evidence shows that citizens' preference of punitive policies increases with the introduction of information indicating an increase in crime.
2. Yet, the converse is not true. Citizens' preference for punitive policies does not decrease with the introduction of information indicating a decrease in crime. If anything, in relation to the control group, which received no information, respondents also skewed towards punishment (although the effect is not statistically significant).
3. Our findings therefore indicate that all news about crime, regardless of framing, tend to elicit punishment-oriented responses by the electorate.
4. The effect achieved by the information varies depending on the previous level of news consumption of individuals. Those with low access to information react much more strongly to new information than those who are better informed.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. Political communication about crime in and of itself tends to lead citizens to favor punitive policies, and reversing policies in favor of more effective strategies to combat crime is likely to be difficult.
2. Results demonstrate the relevance of information, particularly one-sided if-it-bleeds-it-leads journalism, as it easily drives policy preferences. This highlights the importance of institutions that promote political competition and reduce the incentives of news organizations and social media to exploit individuals' biases and cognitive limitations.
3. Results are consistent with observational and experimental research that has shown that threat-inducing stimuli on topics such as terrorism can generate knee-jerk responses in favor of punitive policies.

Impact of Crime information on Policy Preferences

PREFERENCES FOR SOCIAL POLICIES (POSITIVE) VS. PUNISHMENT POLICIES (NEGATIVE)



AMOUNT OF MONEY NOW ALLOCATED TO PUNITIVE POLICIES

*, **, and *** denote statistical significance at the 10, 5 and 1 percent level, respectively

Key Concept



FRAMING EFFECT

Tendency to reach different conclusions depending on how the information is presented. For example, options can be presented in a way that highlights the positive or negative aspects of the decision, causing each option to be perceived as more - or less - attractive.



FULL STUDY

Gingerisch, D. W., and C. Scartascini. 2018. "A Heavy Hand or a Helping Hand? Information Provision and Citizen Preferences for Anti-Crime Policies."

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