

Abstract

Do voters reward or punish elected officials for pandemics? Recent research on natural disasters finds evidence for partisan retrospection, which maintains that voters' decisions to reward or punish incumbents following a disaster are influenced by whether or not the elected official is co-partisan. We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic similarly affected voters' responses to reward or punish incumbents. We contend with increasing COVID-19 infection rates and deaths, voters supported incumbents who were co-partisan and opposed incumbents who were not co-partisan. We look for evidence of pandemic partisan retrospection by estimating the net effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the 2020 U.S. presidential and Senate elections. We find that voters were more likely to punish incumbents who were not co-partisan and more likely to reward incumbents who were co-partisan in counties with higher pandemic infection and death rates. Our results support pandemic partisan retrospection and suggest that, in the aggregate, the pandemic had an overall impact on voter choice similar to what occurs after natural disasters.