

# How did trust in the police change in COVID-19 times? A longitudinal study

Daive Panizzolo, Michele Roccato\*, Silvia Russo

Department of Psychology, University of Turin, Torino, Italy

\*Corresponding author. Department of Psychology, University of Turin, Via Verdi 10, 10124 Torino, Italy. E-mail: [michele.roccato@unito.it](mailto:michele.roccato@unito.it).

## ABSTRACT

Using a unique longitudinal database (large quota sample of the Italian adult population,  $n = 2,223$ ) structured in seven waves, we analysed how trust in the police changed in the 3.5 years between June 2019 (i.e. before the outbreak of COVID-19) and October 2022 (i.e. after COVID-19). A latent growth model showed that trust in the police changed following a cubic trend. It was stable between June 2019 and April 2020, decreased between April 2020 and April 2022, and increased between April 2022 and October 2022, not returning to prepandemic levels. Two complementary models showed that this change differed from those of two other *super partes* institutions (the President of the Republic and the judiciary), which showed quadratic trends. The variables that, according to the literature, explain the absolute level of trust in the police were not associated with its change. Strengths, weaknesses, and possible developments of the study are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Trust in the police, that is, the belief that police officers are accountable, upright, and genuinely concerned about the safety of the community they serve and belong to, is a core element of policing (Tyler and Fagan 2008). In ‘normal times’, citizens who trust the police tend to cooperate with police officers and share useful information with them, which generally makes their jobs easier and more effective (Jackson et al. 2013). In emergency situations, trust in the police is even more important, as it helps to ensure that citizens comply with the demanding behaviours required to restore and protect the well-being of the community (Kahan 2003).

Trust in the police is influenced by various demographic and socioeconomic factors (Hu et al. 2020). The literature has shown that women (Han et al. 2017), older people (Wu and Sun 2009; Van Craen 2013), people with average to low levels of education (Sun et al. 2012; Han et al. 2017), people with high social status, and people living in safe neighbourhoods tend to trust the police more than the rest of the population (Van Craen 2013; Boateng 2018). In addition, some authors have shown that higher levels of satisfaction with democracy predict higher levels of trust in the police (e.g. Jang et al. 2010; Cao et al. 2012; Boateng 2018). The quality of the actual relationship between police officers and citizens is another relevant predictor of trust in the police, which shows an interesting asymmetry: A single negative interaction with police officers has a very negative impact on citizens’ trust in the police, while multiple positive encounters with police

officers generally have little to no positive impact on trust (Skoogan 2006).

The few longitudinal studies available show that trust in the police is a relatively stable variable in the long term, resisting media pressure and the spread of unfavourable news about police work and behaviour (Jackson et al. 2013; Kääriäinen et al. 2016; Banjak-Corle et al. 2021; Nägel and Lutter 2021). Italy, where we conducted this study, is no exception to this picture. In 2011, 72 per cent of citizens indicated a high or very high level of trust in the police; in 2019, the rate was 73 per cent (see <https://www.eticapa.it/eticapa/la-fiducia-nelle-istituzioni-situazione-al-maggio-2022/>). In 2020, however, the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as will be explained in the next section, caused some relevant changes in trust in political institutions. Did this dramatic exogenous shock also affect trust in the police?

## EXOGENOUS SHOCKS AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

The term ‘exogenous shocks’ refers to relevant critical events such as wars (Parker 1995), terrorist attacks (Perrin and Smolek 2009), or health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Bol et al. 2021), which pose a serious threat to the survival of individuals and societies. From a social-psychological perspective, exogenous shocks trigger negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and collective angst (Porat et al. 2019; Erhardt et al. 2021).

In addition, they affect the well-being of individuals and jeopardize their personal sense of control over their lives (Landau et al. 2015).

After the outbreak of such critical events, an increase in trust in political institutions is systematically observed in public opinion (Mueller 1970; Lee 1977; Chatagnier 2012). This specific increase in institutional trust, known as the ‘rally effect’, is usually temporary (from a few days to about 6–8 months; Gaines 2002; Hetherington and Nelson 2003) and fulfils two crucial functions. On the one hand, it leads to public opinion responding to the emergency *en bloc*, as a unified body. This leads to citizens supporting the government’s decisions, even if they are demanding and potentially unpopular (Parker 1995; Lazarus et al. 2020). On the other hand, rally effects increase individual well-being by alleviating the negative emotions mentioned above (Porat et al. 2019) and restoring the previously impaired sense of personal control over people’s lives. Recently, Colloca et al. (2024) showed that in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, public trust increased only for national political institutions (the political parties, the parliament, and local administrations), while it remained essentially stable for national *super partes* institutions (the judiciary, the President of the Republic, and the police). However, these authors did not distinguish between these institutions. In the present longitudinal study, we wanted to analyse in more detail the trend of public trust in the police in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

## EXOGENOUS SHOCKS AND TRUST IN THE POLICE

The impact of exogenous shocks on trust in the police has hardly been studied, especially when it comes to public health emergencies (Lum et al. 2022; Nam et al. 2024). This is surprising, given that trust in the police is of paramount importance during critical events. Indeed, police forces represent the real connection between the government, which is responsible for implementing the most effective measures to combat the emergency, and citizens, who must personally contribute to combating the crisis by complying with the required safety precautions. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens had to contribute to the fight against the outbreak of the disease by accepting not to earn money if they were self-employed, respecting lockdown and curfews, not meeting relatives and friends, taking new vaccines, etc. (Laufs and Waseem 2020; Blair et al. 2022; Ivković et al. 2022a; Lum et al. 2022).

Unlike what happened in previous public health emergencies, the police, in this case, had to adapt quickly to a number of drastic changes. First, police forces had the crucial task of monitoring citizens’ compliance with the government protocol and sanctioning violations, often without adequate training and clear instructions, which put them at risk of making controversial decisions (Maskály et al. 2021a, 2021b; Ivković et al. 2022b, 2024). In addition, the pandemic has seen a change in both the provision of police services and crime patterns, with an apparent reduction in the number of crimes, calls, and deployments (Laufs and Waseem 2020; Aitkenhead et al. 2022; Lum et al. 2022). The police used technological means more consistently than before, which increased the efficiency of operations but occasionally led to the violation of citizens’ rights and privacy

(Aitkenhead et al. 2022; Ivković et al. 2022b). Protests fuelled by conspiracy theories and feelings of rejection of government regulations, as well as other causes (e.g. the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests), posed a serious challenge for police officers who had to balance between enforcing public health measures and maintaining public order (Laufs and Waseem 2020; Aitkenhead et al. 2022). In this overall situation, stress levels among officers increased, and police authorities endeavoured to use personal protective equipment and change deployment methods to prevent the spread of infection (Laufs and Waseem 2020; Maskály et al. 2021a, 2021b; Ivković et al. 2022b, 2024).

However, as with exogenous shocks of different natures (e.g. Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2020), there are few studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public trust in the police, and the few available results do not provide a complete understanding of the long-term impact of the recent pandemic on public support for the police (e.g. Laufs and Waseem 2020; Nam et al. 2024). Overall, there are two points of contention when it comes to the consequences of exogenous shocks on police-community relations (Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2020).

On the one hand, in line with the general literature on rally effects, one could argue that exogenous shocks could lead to an immediate and short-term increase in trust in the police. This increase could be a beneficial consequence of relief efforts on the public image of the police. A longitudinal study examining a period between the 6 months before and the 19 months after the March 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid (Dinesen and Jæger 2013) produced results consistent with this idea, albeit only in the very short term. Using data from different waves of the Spanish ‘EuroBarometer’ surveys, these authors showed that trust in the police did indeed increase in the 7 days following the attack and then began a downward trend, returning to precrisis levels after 7 months. Interestingly, a similar trend was found in relation to trust in the justice system, but not in relation to trust in political institutions (where the increase in public trust lasted longer, from 14 to 19 months) and in other *super partes* institutions such as the army or religious institutions, where there was little or no fluctuation in trust levels. In line with these studies, an increase in trust in the police was observed in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in various countries such as Serbia (Janković and Cvetković 2020), Israel (Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2020), Slovenia (Hafner-Fink and Uhan 2020), the Czech Republic (Tabery and Pilnacek 2021), Uganda (Blair et al. 2022), South Korea (Nam et al. 2024), and Great Britain (Aitkenhead et al. 2022).

On the other hand, however, it could be argued that an immediate increase in public trust in the police, as well as its persistence over time, should not be taken for granted, since the cost of police emergencies should not be ignored. For example, a review of a large body of empirical research on police-terrorism and police-community relations in Israel has shown that exceptional policing operations conducted over an extended period of time have a negative impact on public trust in the police (Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2014). In this regard, citizens might be unwilling to either put aside ordinary police duties or give up their personal freedom for too long. In addition, police officers may adopt militaristic ways of working to fulfil their extraordinary duties, leading to an increasing sense of frustration and unrest among the public (Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2014, 2020; Laufs and Waseem 2020).

The few available longitudinal studies on the effects of terrorist attacks on public trust in the police suggest that the outbreak of such critical events increases citizens' trust in law enforcement agencies (Dinesen and Jæger 2013; Nilsen et al. 2019). Nevertheless, it could be argued that public support for the police in the long term depends on dedicated, efficient, and fair police work, as factors such as diligence, efficiency, and procedural fairness promote trust in the police and facilitate crisis management. On the contrary, the increase in feelings of fear, carelessness, anxiety, and unease among citizens, as well as the psychological distress associated with actual or potential victimization, are detrimental factors for the police-community relationship (Nilsen et al. 2019).

As mentioned above, the available studies suggest that citizens' trust in the police has also increased following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Czech Republic, Tabery and Pilnacek (2021), using data from the 'Our Society' project (with a total of 1,005 respondents in May 2020), showed that Czech citizens considered the police to be as crucial as health workers and scientists in the proper management of this crisis. In Serbia, by analysing 325 responses to an online survey conducted between March and April 2020, Janković and Cvetković (2020) pointed out that public trust in the police increased slightly 1 month after the pandemic compared to prepandemic data, apparently due to the appropriate behaviour of officers involved in crisis management measures. A dual-method (online and postal) survey conducted in Slovenia from April to May 2020 found that trust in the police was also high among Slovenians in the first months of the health emergency (Hafner-Fink and Uhan 2021). The results of Perry and Jonathan-Zamir (2020), obtained by analysing 1,575 responses to an online survey in April 2020, show an increase in Israelis' trust in the police during the national lockdown in the country, as well as an increased tendency to cooperate with the authorities. An increase in public trust in the police was also observed in Uganda, a nondemocratic country: Here, responses to a survey conducted between July and September 2020 were compared with responses to the same questionnaire from June to July 2018, totalling 2,587 respondents (Blair et al. 2022). In New Zealand, Sibley and colleagues (2020) used data from a national longitudinal study (the 'New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study') and compared 1,003 responses recorded between March and April 2020 with an equal number of responses collected from October to December 2019. These authors pointed out that New Zealanders surveyed after the COVID-19 outbreak reported higher levels of trust in the police than those surveyed before the outbreak. Analysing a total of 527 responses to a survey conducted in South Korea in November 2021, Nam and colleagues (2024) described how trust in the South Korean police was particularly enhanced by individual factors such as concern for one's well-being, underlying medical conditions, and perceptions of the effectiveness of police work. Finally, Aitkenhead and colleagues (2022) conducted an opinion survey in July and August 2021 and surveyed a total of 3,693 people from the UK. The results show that British public support for the police was high during the pandemic and that British citizens tended to believe that the authorities were working efficiently and lawfully despite the difficulties.

Even if all these studies go in the same direction, the lack of data from before the crisis (Hafner-Fink and Uhan 2021; Tabery and

Pilnacek 2021; Aitkenhead et al. 2022; Nam et al. 2024) and a sufficiently long period of time to describe the entire pandemic (Janković and Cvetković 2020; Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2020; Sibley et al. 2020; Blair et al. 2022) prevent the impact of the pandemic on police-community relations from being fully captured over the course of the emergency (Laufs and Waseem 2020). Given the potential negative impact of managing such a difficult event, this limits our knowledge of long-term trends in trust in the police in emergency situations. Furthermore, providing evidence-based suggestions for the design and implementation of effective crisis management strategies for the future and assessing the actual appropriateness of the strategies used by the police during the recent pandemic is far from straightforward (e.g. Maskály et al. 2021a, 2021b; Ivkovic et al. 2023, 2024). We used a unique longitudinal dataset in this study to attempt to overcome such limitations.

## GOALS AND HYPOTHESES

In this article, we aimed to analyse the trend of trust in the police due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy with a seven-wave longitudinal study covering the period between May 2019 (i.e. about 1 year before the outbreak of the pandemic) and October 2022 (i.e. at the end of the crisis), that is, over 40 months in total. Based on the existing literature, we have developed some alternative hypotheses. If public opinion views the police as a crucial actor in the fight against the pandemic, trust in the police should follow the classic pattern of rally effects (e.g. Johansson et al. 2021). In this case, a sudden increase in trust in the police following the outbreak of the pandemic would be expected (H1a), followed by a gradual return to the precrisis levels (H2a) or even a gradual decline to a level lower than the initial (H2b). On the contrary, if public opinion does not see the police as a crucial actor in the fight against the pandemic, public trust in the police should not increase at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, but remain stable (H1b) or even decrease continuously due to exceptional police activities in the following phases of the pandemic (H2c).

We have supplemented this analysis with two complementary analyses, both of which were conducted using an exploratory approach. On the one hand, we compared the trend of trust in the police with the trend of trust in two other relevant *super partes* institutions (the judiciary system and the President of the Italian Republic). On the other hand, we added to the model some variables that, according to the literature, are predictive of trust in the police (gender, age, socioeconomic status, and satisfaction with democracy) to test whether these factors are also predictive of how trust in the police change over time.

## METHOD

We used the COCO (Consequences of COVID-19) dataset to test our hypotheses. The COCO project is a longitudinal study consisting of one wave before the pandemic (June 2019,  $T_1$ ,  $n = 1,504$ ) and six waves during the outbreak (April 2020,  $T_2$ ,  $n = 1,199$ ; October 2020,  $T_3$ ,  $n = 1,156$ ; April 2021,  $T_4$ ,  $n = 1,148$ ; October 2021,  $T_5$ ,  $n = 1,151$ ; April 2022,  $T_6$ ,  $n = 1,150$ ; and October 2022,  $T_7$ ,  $n = 1,150$ ). In each wave, a quota sample of the adult Italian general population, stratified by gender, age, and geographical location, was surveyed by email. In  $T_4$  and in the following waves, 118, 236, 192, and 211



new participants were included in the samples, respectively, in addition to those already contacted in  $T_1$ . The data were collected by Bilendi ([www.bilendi.it](http://www.bilendi.it)), a high-quality multinational professional research institute, using its pre-existing panels of the Italian adult population. The study was approved by the Bio-Ethics Committee of the University of BLINDED FOR REVIEW (protocol 181488). The ICC/ESOMAR code of conduct was followed during data collection (<https://esomar.org/code-and-guidelines/icc-esomar-code>).

### Measures

In all waves, we measured participants' trust in the police using an item from the European Social Survey (ESS, see <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>), in which participants were asked to indicate their trust in the police on a scale of 1–10. This item has already been used in the study on the changes in public opinion triggered by the terrorist attack on the island of Utøya (Nilsen et al. 2019). We also used two items assessing trust in other *super partes* national institutions (the President of the Republic and the judiciary) to investigate whether or not the trajectory of trust in the police follows a particular pattern.

In the first wave, subjective socioeconomic status was assessed using an ESS item in which participants were asked to indicate whether their current income (or their household's income if they did not live alone) made it very difficult (1), difficult (2), comfortable (3), or easy (4) for them to live on their current income. In the same wave, respondents' satisfaction with democracy was assessed with another ESS item asking them whether they were satisfied with Italian democracy in recent years (response options were *Not at all*, *A little*, *Quite a bit*, and *Very much*). Finally, we also used respondents' gender (1 = men, 2 = women) and age, which were also measured in the first wave. The dataset may be requested at [https://www.dippsicologia.unito.it/do/progetti.pl/Show?\\_id=9fxo](https://www.dippsicologia.unito.it/do/progetti.pl/Show?_id=9fxo)

### Analytical strategy

We used latent growth curve models to examine the trajectories of change in trust in the police (and, for comparison, in the President of the Republic and the judiciary) over time. These models allowed us to estimate the initial level of trust and its evolution over time, modelled as latent factors. The latent intercept reflects the average level of trust at the time of the initial assessment, while the latent slope reflects the extent of change over time. Since seven time points were available, we were able to estimate quadratic and cubic slopes in addition to the linear slope. We used Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimates using all available data and performed all analyses using Mplus version 8 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2017). To find the best-fitting model, we examined four nested models: no change (i.e. intercept only), linear change, quadratic change, and cubic change. The best-fitting model was determined by combining two pieces of information. First, we examined the  $\chi^2$  difference between the nested models. If it is not significant, it means that the addition of a growth function does not improve the model and the more parsimonious model should be preferred, while a significant difference means that the model fit is significantly increased by the addition of a growth function. In this case, we favoured the less parsimonious model only if the additional growth function was significant. The same analytical strategy was followed for trust in the President of the Republic and the judiciary. We then added time-invariant predictors to test whether baseline levels and trajectories of trust in the police are influenced by people's attitudes towards democracy, their socioeconomic status, and their age and gender.

## RESULTS

We used latent growth curve models to examine the long-term trend of trust in the police (and, for comparison, trust in the President of the Republic and the judiciary). Table 1 shows the

**Table 1.** Comparison of latent growth models for trust in the police, in the President of the Republic, and in the judiciary.

Model	$\chi^2(df)$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	$\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df)$
<b>Trust in the police (<math>n = 2,225</math>)</b>					
1 Intercept only	308.384(26)***	0.070	0.946	0.956	
2 Linear	133.060(23)***	0.046	0.979	0.981	175.324(3), $P < .001$
3 Quadratic	118.002(19)***	0.048	0.981	0.979	15.058(4), $P = .005$
4 Cubic	83.700(14)***	0.047	0.987	0.980	34.302(5), $P < .001$
<b>Trust in the President of the Republic (<math>n = 2,226</math>)</b>					
1 Intercept only	306.989(26)***	0.070	0.954	0.962	
2 Linear	150.992(23)***	0.050	0.979	0.981	155.997(3), $P < .001$
3 Quadratic	107.919(19)***	0.046	0.985	0.984	43.073(4), $P < .001$
4 Cubic	83.955(14)***	0.047	0.988	0.983	23.964(5), $P < .001$
<b>Trust in the judiciary (<math>n = 2,223</math>)</b>					
1 Intercept only	220.419(26)***	0.058	0.961	0.969	
2 Linear	86.716(23)***	0.035	0.987	0.988	133.703(3), $P < .001$
3 Quadratic	49.262(19)***	0.027	0.994	0.993	37.454(4), $P < .001$
4 Cubic	38.460(14)***	0.028	0.995	0.993	10.802(5), $P = .055$

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .  $\Delta\chi^2$  compares each model with the previous one.

results of the comparisons between the four nested models considered (no change, linear change, quadratic change, and cubic change). Concerning trust in the police, we identified the model with a cubic change as the best-fitting model based on the  $\Delta\chi^2$ . Our choice was supported by the fact that the cubic growth function was indeed significant (coeff. = 0.067,  $P < .001$ ). Regarding trust in the President of the Republic, the  $\Delta\chi^2$  comparisons suggest that the model with a cubic change was the best-fitting model to retain. However, the cubic growth function did not reach full statistical significance (coeff. = 0.030,  $P = .053$ ). For this reason, we preferred the quadratic change model (the coefficient for quadratic growth was 0.037,  $P = .010$ ). Finally, regarding trust in the judiciary, we identified the quadratic change model as the best-fitting model based on  $\Delta\chi^2$ . The quadratic growth function was significant (coeff. = 0.043,  $P = .001$ ). The parameters of the preferred models are shown in Table 2.

Fig. 1 shows the estimated change in trust in the police, the President, and the judiciary, based on the above models. Consistent with H1b, trust in the police did not change between June 2019 and April 2020. Furthermore, partly in line with H2c, it started to decline in October 2020 and continued thereafter. However, an unexpected slight increase can be observed in the last wave (October 2022). Trust in the President of

the Republic changed differently: The decline began with the outbreak of the pandemic but followed a U-shaped curve and returned to the initial level in October 2022. Trust in the judiciary decreased over time, more so in the first months of the pandemic than in the last period considered. Finally, it should be mentioned that initial trust in the police was higher than initial trust in the other two institutions. Overall, these results show that citizens' trust in the police has followed a specific trajectory that differs from that of the other *super partes* institutions.

In a second step, we added time-invariant predictors to the latent growth model for trust in the police. The model had excellent fit:  $\chi^2(30) = 110.542$ ,  $P < .001$ , CFI = 0.984, TLI = 0.974, RMSEA = 0.042. As shown in Table 3, age, gender, satisfaction with democracy, and socioeconomic status showed significant associations with the latent intercept, but not with the latent change functions. Specifically, women had lower levels of trust in the police than men at the first interview, while older individuals, those with higher levels of satisfaction with democracy, and those with higher socioeconomic status had higher initial levels of trust than their counterparts. The lack of significant effects on the latent change functions suggests that the observed pattern of change is not dependent on these factors.

Table 2. Parameters for the latent change models.

Trust in	Police			President of the Republic			Judiciary		
	Coeff.	SE	P	Coeff.	SE	P	Coeff.	SE	P
Intercept	6.608	0.050	<.001	5.948	0.062	<.001	5.520	0.055	<.001
Linear	0.259	0.099	.009	-0.123	0.053	.021	-0.291	0.049	<.001
Quadratic	-0.340	0.072	<.001	0.037	0.014	.010	0.043	0.013	.001
Cubic	0.067	0.014	<.001	-	-	-	-	-	-

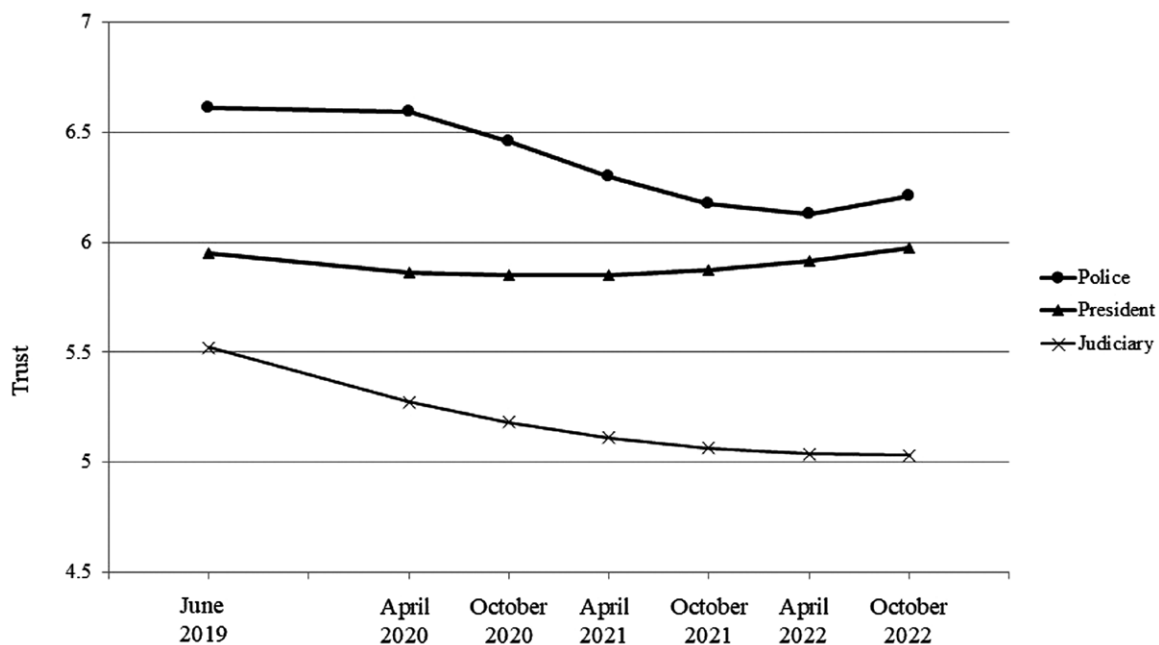


Figure 1. Estimated changes in trust in the police, the President of the Republic, and the judiciary.

**Table 3.** Latent change model for trust in the police with time-invariant predictors.

DV IV	Intercept			Linear change			Quadratic change			Cubic change		
	Coeff.	SE	P	Coeff.	SE	P	Coeff.	SE	P	Coeff.	SE	P
Gender (woman)	-0.284	0.106	.007	0.368	0.191	.054	-0.181	0.141	.201	0.025	0.027	.363
Age	0.016	0.003	<.001	-0.001	0.007	.841	0.002	0.005	.640	0.000	0.001	.800
Socioeconomic status	0.293	0.082	<.001	0.099	0.149	.505	-0.149	0.110	.177	0.035	0.021	.103
Satisfaction with democracy	0.395	0.076	<.001	0.079	0.137	.562	0.033	0.101	.742	-0.010	0.019	.595

## DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged police forces in many ways (e.g. Maskály et al. 2021a; Ivkovic et al. 2024). The recent public health emergency required officers to make constant and strenuous efforts to maintain public order as well as clear, stable communication with the civilian population and keep protests and conspiracy theories at bay (e.g. Laufs and Waseem 2020; Aitkenhead et al. 2022). These circumstances inevitably forced police officers to adapt to different roles to adapt to the needs and obligations of citizens. Unsurprisingly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered abrupt operational changes in policing, that affected both the quality of the police–citizens relations and the well-being of police officers (e.g. Maskály et al. 2021a; Lum et al. 2022; Ivkovic et al. 2024). The harsh working conditions dictated by the state of emergency led to stress and work overload among police officers, further complicating the enforcement of security measures (e.g. Maskály et al. 2021b; Ivkovic et al. 2024). In such an unstable scenario, friction and abuse of power can often occur (e.g. Laufs and Waseem 2020). The pandemic also led to a steady change in crime rates and patterns (Bar-Tzvi 2020; Laufs and Waseem 2020; Perry and Jonathan-Zamir 2020; Aitkenhead et al. 2022; Lum et al. 2022). Such changes inevitably impact the needs and requests for assistance of the civilian population, leaving police departments with no choice but to adapt and utilize all available resources as effectively as possible (e.g. Maskály et al. 2021a, 2021b; Ivkovic et al. 2023, 2024).

Using latent growth curve models, we analysed how Italian citizens' trust in the police changed between June 2019 (i.e. before the COVID-19 pandemic) and October 2022 (when the most dramatic phases of the pandemic were over). In the 3.5 years between the first and the seventh wave, trust in the police changed following a cubic trend: it was stable between June 2019 and April 2020, then decreased between April 2020 and April 2022, and finally increased again between April 2022 and October 2022, without reaching pre-pandemic levels. Since in 'normal times' trust in the police is an essentially stable variable (Jackson et al. 2013; Kääriäinen et al. 2016; Nägel and Lutter 2021), these changes are in themselves a relevant finding that can be seen as another tile in the large mosaic of changes in public opinion that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered (e.g. Amat et al. 2020; Cavazza et al. 2022).

Interestingly, these changes differed in part from those shown by the other *super partes* institutions we considered, the President of the Republic and the judiciary, which showed quadratic trends. Against this background, our results extend those recently obtained by Colloca et al. (2024), which show that, when trust is considered, *super partes* institutions should not be considered altogether, as they plausibly have different social-psychological

meanings. Following Skogan (2006), we speculate that the main difference between the police and the other *super partes* institutions is their more frequent contact with citizens, which can be both positive and problematic and conflictual, especially in times of emergency. A direct test of this idea could be interesting.

According to Colloca et al. (2024), a three-stage process characterized the changes in trust in political institutions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first stage, citizens increased their trust primarily in response to anxiety and the need to find sources of compensatory control (Kritzinger et al. 2021). In the second phase, a kind of rebound effect led public opinion to negatively evaluate the way institutions managed the emergency, which was a consequence of plausibly inflated expectations of their performance (Roccatò et al. 2021). In the third phase, when the situation normalized, trust in the institutions returned to the 'physiological' pre-crisis level (Colaresi 2007). From a qualitative perspective, the changes in trust in the police that we observed do not differ significantly from this pattern, although there are two distinctive features.

First, trust in the police was not yet back to pre-pandemic levels after 31 months of the pandemic. The positive trend between April and October 2022 suggests that this recovery was on its way. However, this is a speculation as the dataset we analysed did not contain any further waves. Second, in the first weeks and months of the pandemic, citizens immediately understood the seriousness of the situation, strengthened their trust in political institutions, and complied *en bloc* with the restrictions imposed by the government (Colloca et al. 2024). However, during the first phase of the pandemic, trust in the police remained stable. Colloca et al. (2024) showed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not trigger an indiscriminate increase in institutional trust in the medium term. On the contrary, Italian citizens reacted to the emergency in a rather strategic way, only increasing trust in the institutions directly in charge of managing the outbreak. The lack of increase in trust in the police in the first months of the pandemic could indirectly indicate that public opinion, at least in Italy, does not count the police among the institutions tasked with fighting the pandemic. However, the study by Dinesen and Jaeger (2013) has shown that in Spain, trust in the police actually increased in the first days following the terrorist attacks in Madrid and that this increase lasted only a few days. The first data collection during the pandemic times was carried out when the Italians were in lockdown for 3 weeks. Moreover, there were 6 months between the first (April 2020) and the second (October 2020) wave of the pandemic. Thus, it could be argued that the time span of our dataset was suboptimal. In the unfortunate event of a new health emergency, new research performed by monitoring daily changes in public opinion since the very beginning of the crisis could help to expand our knowledge



of changes in trust in the police. In this case, researchers could draw on the rolling cross-section approach (e.g. Lutz et al. 2013), which consists of interviewing a sample over a relatively long time interval and randomly selecting participants to be interviewed on a given day. Since the resulting daily samples are statistically equivalent, researchers can examine live changes in public opinion by resorting to multilevel analyses and using the numbers of health emergencies (e.g. the number of deaths, illnesses, hospitalizations, etc.) as level 2 variables (Cena and Roccato 2023).

As always, there were some limitations to this study, mainly due to the use of secondary analyses. First, the variables in the dataset did not allow us to predict the changes in trust in the police that we found. The most promising missing variables were probably the frequency and the evaluation of actual contacts with the police that participants had during the pandemic (Skogan 2006), on the one hand, and the structural characteristics (mainly related to incivility and informal control) of participants' neighbourhoods (Van Craen 2013; Boateng 2018), on the other. A replication of this study that takes these variables into account could be interesting. Second, the quota sample we were able to use was not fully representative of the Italian adult population. While quota sampling is practical, it can lead to biases compared to random sampling methods. This limitation also applies to the vast majority of public opinion studies that use quota sampling. Nevertheless, some caution is required when interpreting our results. Third, our results refer only to Italian public opinion. Previous findings have shown that trust in emergency situations changes consistently and does not show relevant differences between countries (e.g. Bol et al. 2021). However, Italy was a somewhat peculiar context as far as the COVID-19 pandemic was concerned. Italy, indeed, was the first European country to be dramatically affected by COVID-19. At the beginning of the pandemic, Italy was the country with the most active outbreak in the world (Di Ciaula et al. 2020) and had the second-highest number of deaths in Europe (Dowd et al. 2020). The social, economic, and psychological impact of the pandemic and lockdown from 9 March to 3 May 2020, was as dramatic as that of extreme natural disasters (Bonaccorsi et al. 2020). Our data did not allow us to investigate what happened in terms of trust in the police in countries that were less affected by the virus. If data were available, a cross-national replication of this study could be interesting.

However, these limitations should not overshadow the strengths of this study. Indeed, we were able to conduct one of the few long-term longitudinal studies looking at changes in trust in the police as a result of a dramatic emergency. The ability to compare the trend of trust in the police with the trend of trust in other *super partes* institutions was another asset of our study, as it allowed us to place this change in public opinion in the context of other changes in relation to similar, but not identical, institutions. Overall, then, we believe that our findings make an important contribution to the study of changes in trust in the police in emergency situations.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, based on our findings, we emphasize the need to invest in contingency planning and preventative measures based on the awareness that public trust is an important resource for

the police, but, as we have shown in this study, it cannot be taken for granted.

## REFERENCES

- Aitkenhead, E. et al. (2022). 'Policing the Pandemic', <https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/report-policing-the-pandemic>, accessed 1 Aug. 2024.
- Amat, F. et al. (2020). 'Pandemics Meet Democracy: Experimental Evidence From the COVID-19 Crisis in Spain', SocArxiv: <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/dkusw/>, accessed 1 Dec. 2020.
- Banjak-Corle, C., and Wallace, L. N. (2021). 'Disaster Experiences and Terrorism News Exposure: Effects on Perceptions of Police and Trust in Local Government in the United States', *Police Practice and Research*, 22: 542–56.
- Bar-Tzvi, S. (2020). 'Israeli Police Functions Under the Coronavirus Crises', Paper presented at the Police and Democracy under COVID-19 meeting, Tel-Aviv.
- Blair, R. A. et al. (2022). 'Public Trust, Policing, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence From an Electoral Authoritarian Regime', *Social Science and Medicine*, 305: 115045.
- Boateng, F. D. (2018). 'Institutional Trust and Performance: A Study of the Police in Ghana', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 51: 164–82.
- Bol, D. et al. (2021). 'The Effect of COVID-19 Lockdown on Political Support: Some Good News for Democracy?', *European Journal of Political Research*, 62: 497–505.
- Bonaccorsi, G. et al. (2020). 'Economic and Social Consequences of Human Mobility Restrictions Under COVID-19', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117: 15530–5.
- Cao, L., Lai, Y. L., and Zhao, R. (2012). 'Shades of Blue: Confidence in the Police in the World', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 40: 40–49.
- Cavazza, N. et al. (2022). 'How and Why Is the COVID-19 Crisis Impacting Trust in Institutions? A Two-wave Longitudinal Study', *Psicologia Sociale - Social Psychology Theory and Research*, 17: 341–58.
- Cena, L., and Roccato, M. (2023). 'Desires of Technocracy in Pandemic Times: A Multilevel Study', *Social Science Quarterly*, 104: 195–201.
- Chatagnier, J. T. (2012). 'The Effect of Trust in Government on Rallies "Round the Flag"', *Journal of Peace Research*, 49: 631–45.
- Colaresi, M. (2007). 'The Benefit of the Doubt: Testing an Information Theory of the Rally Effect', *International Organization*, 61: 99–143.
- Colloca, P., Roccato, M., and Russo, S. (2024). 'Rally "Round the Flag" Effects Are Not for All: Trajectories of Institutional Trust Among Populist and Non-Populist Voters', *Social Science Research*, 119: 102986.
- Di Ciaula, A., Palmieri, V. O., and Portincasa, P. (2020). 'COVID-19, Internists and Resilience: The North-South Italy Outbreak', *European Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 50: Article e13299.
- Dinesen, P. T., and Jaeger, M. M. (2013). 'The Effect of Terror on Institutional Trust: New Evidence From the 3/11 Madrid Terrorist Attack', *Political Psychology*, 34: 917–26.
- Dowd, J. B. et al. (2020). 'Demographic Science Aids in Understanding the Spread and Fatality Rates of COVID-19', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117: 9696–8.
- Erhardt, J. et al. (2021). 'The Emotional Foundations of Political Support: How Fear and Anger Affect Trust in the Government in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 27: 339–52.
- Gaines, B. J. (2002). 'Where's the Rally? Approval and Trust of the President, Cabinet, Congress, and Government Since September 11', *Political Science and Politics*, 35: 531–6.
- Hafner-Fink, M., and Uhan, S. (2021). 'Life and Attitudes of Slovenians During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Problem of Trust', *International Journal of Sociology*, 51: 76–85.
- Han, Z., Sun, I. Y., and Hu, R. (2017). 'Social Trust, Neighborhood Cohesion, and Public Trust in the Police in China', *Policing: An International Journal*, 40: 380–94.

- Hetherington, M. J., and Nelson, M. (2003). 'Anatomy of a Rally Effect: George W. Bush and the War on Terrorism', *Political Science and Politics*, 36: 37–44.
- Hu, X. et al. (2020). 'Understanding Public Attitudes Towards the Police: Co-Variates of Satisfaction, Trust, and Confidence', *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 62: 26–49.
- Ivkovic, S. K. et al. (2024). 'Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Make the Police Work More Difficult?', in Ivkovich, S. et al. (eds) *Policing During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, pp. 410–31, New York: Routledge.
- Ivković, S. K. et al. (eds) (2022a). *Exploring Contemporary Police Challenges: A Global Perspective*. New York: Routledge.
- Ivković, S. K., Maskály, J., and Neyroud, P. (2022b). 'A Global Study of Police Administrators' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Organizational Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *International Criminology*, 2: 32–43.
- Jackson, J. et al. (2013). *Just Authority? Trust in the Police in England and Wales*. New York: Routledge.
- Jang, H., Joo, H. J., and Zhao, J. S. (2010). 'Determinants of Public Confidence in Police: An International Perspective', *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38: 57–68.
- Janković, B., and Cvetković, V. M. (2020). 'Public Perception of Police Behaviors in the Disaster COVID-19 – The Case of Serbia', *Policing*, 43: 979–92.
- Johansson, B., Hopmann, D. N., and Shehata, A. (2021). 'When the Rally-around-the-Flag Effect Disappears, or When the COVID-19 Pandemic Becomes "Normalized"', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31: 321–34.
- Kääriäinen, J., Isotalus, P., and Thomassen, G. (2016). 'Does Public Criticism Erode Trust in the Police? The Case of Jari Aarnio in the Finnish News Media and Its Effects on the Public's Attitudes Towards the Police', *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 17: 70–85.
- Kahan, D. M. (2003). 'The Logic of Reciprocity: Trust, Collective Action, and Law', *Michigan Law Review*, 102: 71–103.
- Kritzing, S. et al. (2021). "'Rally Round the Flag": The COVID-19 Crisis and Trust in the National Government', *West European Politics*, 44: 1205–31.
- Landau, M. J., Kay, A. C., and Whitson, J. A. (2015). 'Compensatory Control and the Appeal of a Structured World', *Psychological Bulletin*, 141: 694–722.
- Laufs, J., and Waseem, Z. (2020). 'Policing in Pandemics: A Systematic Review and Best Practices for Police Response to COVID-19', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 51: 101812.
- Lazarus, J. V. et al. (2020). 'COVID-SCORE: A Global Survey to Assess Public Perceptions of Government Responses to COVID-19 (COVID-SCORE-10)', *PLoS One*, 15: e0240011.
- Lee, J. R. (1977). 'Rallying Around the Flag: Foreign Policy Events and Presidential Popularity', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 7: 252–6.
- Lum, C., Maupin, C., and Stoltz, M. (2022). 'The Supply and Demand Shifts in Policing at the Start of the Pandemic: A National Multi-Wave Survey of the Impacts of COVID-19 on American Law Enforcement', *Police Quarterly*, 26: 495–519.
- Lutz, G., De Rocchi, T., and Pekari, N. (2013). 'The Swiss 2011 Rolling Cross-Section Study: Design, Field Work and Data Quality'. FORS Working Papers, 4/2013.
- Maskály, J., Ivković, S. K., and Neyroud, P. (2021a). 'A Comparative Study of Police Organizational Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Responding to Public Health Crisis or Something Else?', *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 15: 2372–88.
- Maskály, J., Ivković, S. K., and Neyroud, P. (2021b). 'Policing the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploratory Study of the Types of Organizational Changes and Police Activities Across the Globe', *International Criminal Justice Review*, 31: 266–85.
- Mueller, J. E. (1970). 'Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson', *The American Political Science Review*, 64: 18–34.
- Nägel, C., and Lutter, M. (2021). 'The 2017 French Riots and Trust in the Police: A Quasi-Experimental Approach', *European Journal of Criminology*, 20: 270–91.
- Nam, Y. et al. (2024). 'Exploring Trust in the Police in South Korea During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Does Fear of the COVID-19 Matter?', *Criminal Justice Review*, 49: 135–55.
- Nilsen, L. G. et al. (2019). 'Trust After Terror: Institutional Trust Among Young Terror Survivors and Their Parents After the 22nd of July Terrorist Attack on Utøya Island, Norway', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10: 2819.
- Parker, S. L. (1995). 'Towards an Understanding of "Rally" Effects: Public Opinion in the Persian Gulf War', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59: 526–46.
- Perrin, A. J., and Smolek, S. J. (2009). 'Who Trusts? Race, Gender, and the September 11 Rally Effect Among Young Adults', *Social Science Research*, 38: 134–45.
- Perry, G., and Jonathan-Zamir, T. (2020). 'Expectations, Effectiveness, Trust, and Cooperation: Public Attitudes Towards the Israel Police During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Policing*, 14: 1073–91.
- Perry, S., and Jonathan-Zamir, T. (2014). 'Lessons From Empirical Research on Policing in Israel: Policing Terrorism and Police-Community Relationships', *Police Practice and Research*, 15: 173–87.
- Porat, R. et al. (2019). 'Motivated Emotion and the Rally Around the Flag Effect: Liberals Are Motivated to Feel Collective Angst (Like Conservatives) When Faced With Existential Threat', *Cognition and Emotion*, 33: 480–91.
- Roccatto, M. et al. (2021). 'Coping With the COVID-19 Pandemic Through Institutional Trust: Rally Effects, Compensatory Control and Emotions', *Social Science Quarterly*, 102: 2360–7.
- Skogan, W. G. (2006). 'Asymmetry in the Impact of Encounters with Police', *Policing and Society*, 16: 99–126.
- Sun, I., Hu, R., and Wu, Y. (2012). 'Social Capital, Political Participation, and Trust in the Police in Urban China', *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 45: 87–105.
- Tabery, P., and Pilnacek, M. (2021). 'The Network Structure of Trust in the COVID-19 Pandemic', *European Societies*, 23: S689–S703.
- Tyler, T. R., and Fagan, J. (2008). 'Legitimacy and Cooperation: Why Do People Help the Police Fight Crime in Their Communities', *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law*, 6: 231–75.
- Van Craen, M. (2013). 'Explaining Majority and Minority Trust in the Police', *Justice Quarterly*, 30: 1042–67.
- Wu, Y., and Sun, I. (2009). 'Citizen Trust in Police: The Case of China', *Police Quarterly*, 12: 170–91.