

# We will get out of it being more sceptical towards vaccines. The effects of a viral politicization



**Erica Ravarelli**

*Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan*

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**Abstract:** This article will make use of the data collected during the last four waves of the ResPOnSE COVID-19 survey to shed light on the evolution of a coexistence, that between scepticism towards vaccines and the tendency to self-declare ideologically close to right-wing parties, that was recorded even before the pandemic outbreak in 2020. The main findings confirm that left-wingers exhibit a lower level of vaccine hesitancy, and point out that this trend persists throughout all phases of the pandemic with a similar evolution in the level of hesitancy between conservatives and progressives. Slightly different, instead, are the cases of the moderates and of the unplaced, who sometimes approach the former and sometimes the latter. Finally, the use of different operationalizations of the concepts allowed to confirm that the left-right dimension plays a key role in influencing the positions of those who have vaccinated.

**key words:** Vaccine hesitancy, Pandemic, Italy, Italian politics, Left, Right, ResPOnSE COVID-19.

## 1 Introduction

The fast spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has (re)brought the issue of **vaccines** and their reliability to the centre of the Italian public debate, drawing the attention of citizens and institutions to the legitimacy of imposing **compulsory vaccination** to the whole population or to certain categories of it. The predictable consequence of this event has been the **politicization** of the debate, with an increase in the salience of the pro-anti-vaccination dimension.

Recent studies have pointed out that there is a correlation between preference for oppositional parties or distrust towards voting, on the one hand, and scepticism towards the COVID-19 vaccine on the other (Schernhammer et al., 2021). In addition, research conducted in the period prior to the pandemic outbreak found that there is a positive association between the percentage of people in a country who declared to have voted for populist parties and simultaneously believed that **vaccines were neither important nor effective** (Kennedy, 2019).

Through the use of data collected during the last

four waves of the **ResPOnSE COVID-19** survey, this article will take advantage of the availability of time-repeated questions to try to shed light on the evolution of a coexistence, that between scepticism towards vaccines and the tendency to self-declare **ideologically close to right-wing parties**, that was recorded even before the pandemic outbreak in 2020.

The variables that may influence the manifestation of more or less sceptical attitudes toward vaccines are numerous, from sociodemographic to contextual (Rubin et al., 2022).

Identifying factors that have a better predictive power than others is beyond the scope of this article, while the main purpose is to shed light on the trend of the **vaccine hesitancy** phenomenon.

While it is plausible that the likelihood of declaring oneself in favour of vaccines is not constant over time for all citizens, it is at the same time likely that, despite such fluctuations, the difference between right- and left-wingers persists over time: in fact, the latter should show a persistently lower level of scepticism than the former.

The analysis will make use of four waves of the Re-sPOnSE COVID-19 survey conducted within a time frame of about one year. The periods considered are from December 21, 2020 to January 2, 2021, March 17 to June 16, 2021, November 10 to December 22, 2021 and lastly October 20 to December 15, 2022. The analysis does not consider the wave that precedes December 2020 because vaccines were not yet available at that time.

## 2 A year of opinions on vaccines

The graph in Figure 1 shows the proportions of respondents who strongly agree or agree with the statements: "vaccines wear out the immune system" and "vaccinating should be mandatory", over the different waves. It seems evident that **fear of vaccine side effects** touches its lowest value in the third wave, i.e., a few months after the start of the vaccination campaign, a period in which the willingness to accept the imposition of **compulsory vaccination** also registers a rather high value. The peak with regard to this second variable, however, is observed during the fourth wave, that is, for those who were surveyed during the period from November 10 to December 22, 2022.

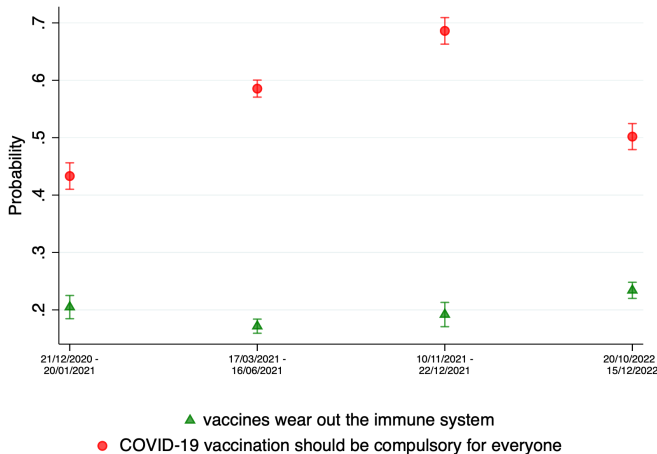


Figure 1: Evolution of the probability of thinking that vaccines wear out the immune system and of being in favour of mandatory vaccination

This is a time frame when the number of infections was increasing again, and it is likely that respondents linked the imposition of mandatory vaccination to

the possibility of limiting the spread of the virus without having to simultaneously impose restrictions on individual freedom.

It is also interesting to note that the fear of vaccine side effects increases slightly during the last wave, while the willingness to accept the imposition of vaccine obligation decreases dramatically. It is possible to interpret these two trends in light of the **radical change in the political** (the inauguration of the Meloni government) **and pandemic** (the consistent drop in infections) landscape in Italy.

## 3 To each ideological alignment its opinion on vaccines

The trend of Italians' opinions on the same issues was then analysed by differentiating respondents according to their **ideological orientation**. This concept was operationalized by referring to the classic question regarding respondents' self-placement on a **left-to-right** scale, where 0=extreme left and 10=extreme right. This variable was recoded by grouping together those who placed themselves on the values 0, 1, 2 and 3 (left), 4, 5, 6 (center) and 7, 8, 9, 10 (right). Those who answered "I don't know" (4.7%) or "I don't place myself" (18.4%) to this question were also included in the analysis.

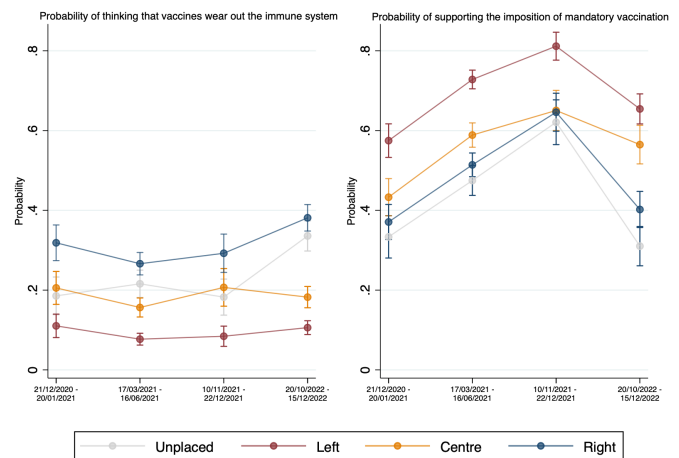


Figure 2: evolution of the probability of thinking that vaccines wear out the immune system and of supporting mandatory vaccination, differentiated by political self-placement

As expected, **left-wing** people are persistently less

likely to perceive **vaccines as dangerous** and simultaneously tend to declare themselves more supportive of the **imposition of mandatory vaccination** than those who identify with other ideological orientations or those who do not take sides.

Particularly striking is the **convergence** between the views of the moderates and progressives when it comes to fear of vaccine side effects in the fifth and final wave (**Oct. 20-Dec. 15, 2022**): while a peak in the level of concern is observed for conservatives and for unplaced respondents, a decrease is observed among those who declare themselves to be centrists, which causes them to move closer to those who declare themselves to be leftists.

This same convergence between centrists and leftists also occurs over the same period in terms of willingness to accept the imposition of compulsory vaccination, while the unplaced and the conservatives **move significantly away** from the other two categories.

Finally, it is interesting to point out that the willingness to accept the imposition of compulsory vaccination in the graph on the right follows **the same trend** for all respondents, with a steadily increasing trend up to the fourth wave and a significant decline at the fifth.

The same cannot be said when looking at the graph on the left, which shows that, especially for the unplaced, fear of the side effects of vaccines is rather **fluctuating**. It is possible to hypothesize that this is due to the **heterogeneity** of this category of respondents; however, it is worth mentioning the spread of **dissenting opinions** among politicians, journalists and doctors, which may have contributed to such fluctuations.

#### 4 Vaccination: an imposition or a free choice?

To conclude the analysis, we consider two different operationalizations of the same concepts. Specifically, in this last section, the level of **scepticism towards vaccines** was measured by considering the question: "Do you feel that your decision to vaccinate was a free choice or was it imposed on you?"

To this question, which was asked exclusively in the

**fifth wave**, respondents who said they had vaccinated themselves (by getting a number of doses ranging from one to four) could answer on a scale from zero (free decision) to ten (imposed decision).

To measure the concept related to respondents' ideological orientation, instead, use was made of the variable referring to the **party voted** on September 25, 2022, recalling that branch of the literature which points out that, in some cases, party positioning on the left-right axis does not entirely coincide with the political self-placement of voters who choose to vote for that party (Tuorto, 2021).

The graph in Figure 3 shows that, as far as **Democratic Party voters** are concerned, the decision to vaccinate was freely made, while on a diametrically opposite position we find the **voters of Italexit**, a party openly hostile to the imposition of compulsory vaccination and to any form of restriction aimed at limiting the spread of the pandemic.

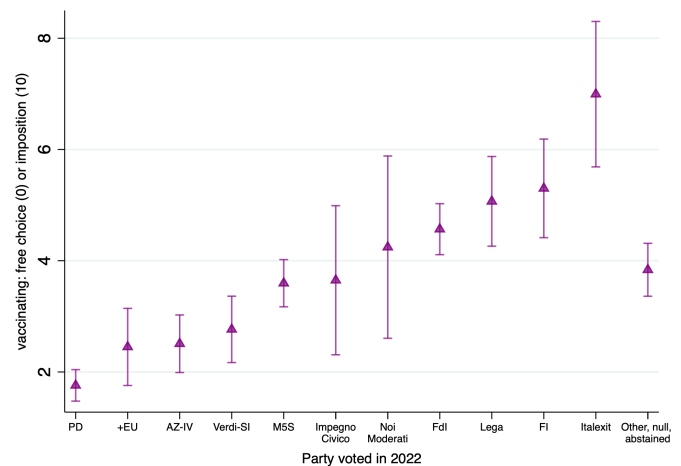


Figure 3: Vaccinating was a free-imposed choice (mean value) by party voted in 2022

Interestingly, the **free-imposed vaccination dimension** turns out to be almost perfectly overlapping with the classic left-right dimension, with some minor exceptions: the **voters of Action-Italy Alive**, in particular, seem to align themselves with the voters of the centre-left coalition rather than placing themselves in the middle between those who claim to have vaccinated by choice and those who claim to have been forced to do so (which is the case, on the other

hand, for the **voters of the Five Stars Movement** and those who voted **null ballot** or **abstained**).

This result confirms the one previously highlighted: on the issue of vaccines, during the last survey, voters from the centre approach those on the left, moving significantly away from those on the right.

Finally, it is worth specifying that the **wide confidence interval** recorded for the data regarding voters of Civic Commitment, Us Moderates, and Italexit is related to the relatively low number of voters of these parties in the sample of respondents (Civic Commitment=58, Us Moderates=84, Italexit=189).

## 5 Conclusions

To summarize, the data collected during the various phases of the pandemic in Italy seem to highlight the importance of the contingent **political and pandemic context**, as well as individual ideological alignment, in influencing the hesitation Italians have shown over time on the issue of vaccines.

In addition to confirming that **left-wingers are less sceptical** towards vaccines than those who identify with other ideological orientations or those who do not take sides on the left-right axis, the results of this brief analysis show that this phenomenon persists over time, displaying a **similar evolution** in the level of scepticism between conservatives and progressives.

Slightly different, however, is the case of the moderates, who sometimes approach the former and sometimes the latter. The unplaced also seem to be more exposed to the plurality of dissenting opinions expressed by virologists and politicians during the various phases of the pandemic.

Finally, a **different operationalization** of the two concepts analysed allowed to confirm that the left-right dimension also plays a key role in influencing the positions of those who have vaccinated, with left-wing party voters stating that they did so **by choice** and right-wing party voters stating instead that they vaccinated because they were **forced to** by the regulations in place.

It is therefore possible to conclude that while the likelihood of showing scepticism towards vaccines may

fluctuate over time, the difference between the vaccination hesitancy of left- and right-wing individuals tends to **stay constant**.

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