

Feather-Handed Fascists

Surveillance as a Signal of Bureaucratic Alignment

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APSA 2025 - Fascism: Before, During, and After

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Motivation

Trump Moves Forward With Changes to Federal Hiring, Firing

Democrats and public employee unions are trying to stop changes to longstanding protections for civil servants



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TRUMP TAPS KASH PATEL FOR FBI DIRECTOR, AN ALLY WHO WOULD AID IN HIS EFFORT TO UPEND LAW ENFORCEMENT



Research Question

Broadly:

Does appointing loyalists facilitate (controversial) policy implementation?

Specifically:

Do loyalist security bureaucrats surveil more than their careerist counterparts?

Overview

- We digitize the **biographies of prefects** (provincial government representatives) in Italy and focus on the Fascist regime (1922-1939) and on PNF membership and merge them with **political police records**.
- TWFE and Staggered DiD indicate that **loyalist prefects surveiled less** than others (-15% political police records).
- We do not find evidence to explain this based on:
 - competence,
 - embeddedness,
 - or preferential deployment,
- but we do for:
 - deterrence,
 - **signaling incentives**.

Literature

- The loyalty-competence trade-off plagues personnel decisions (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Zakharov 2016) and affects performance. Especially:
 - in authoritarian policing (Dragu and Przeworski 2019; Svolik 2012);
 - and during regime transitions:
 - decolonisation (Ketchley and Wenig 2023),
 - democratisation (Nalepa 2022),
 - autocratization (Heldring 2023; Aaskoven and Nyrup 2021).

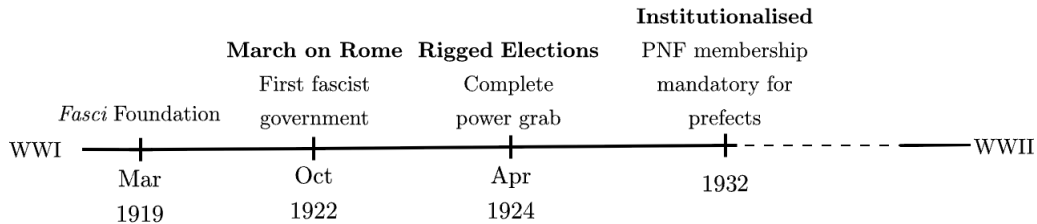
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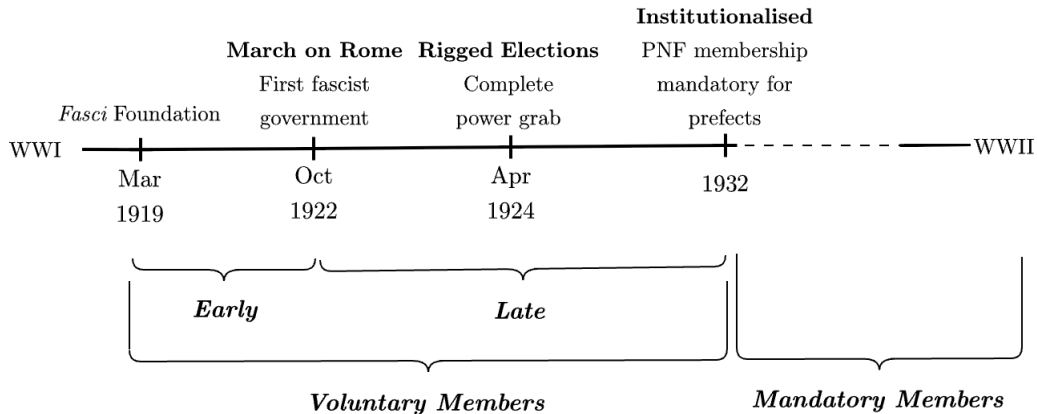
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 - autocratization (Heldring 2023; Aaskoven and Nyrup 2021).
- Autocrats spend rents to control misaligned agents (Tyson 2018) and screen them in purges based on performance (Montagnes and Wolton 2019).
- Signaling loyalty is valuable for underlings:
 - sycophancy (Baturu, Khokhlov, and Tolstrup 2024), personality cults (Crabtree, Kern, and Siegel 2020),
 - while credible loyalists engage in:
 - less repression + less focus on likely opponents (**Luo and Zakharov 2025**),
 - smaller purges (**Qian and Bai 2024**).

History



History



Data

- OCR'd prefect biographies from Cifelli (1999), cross-checking appointments from Missori (1989)
→ 414 prefects, 90 provinces.

d'EUFEMIA nob. ing. Angelo¹

Nato a Napoli il 16 aprile 1888. Laureato in Ingegneria Civile. Ingegnere. Dirigente dei Sindacati Fascisti (Firenze). Nominato prefetto di 2^a classe il 16 settembre 1927² e prefetto di 1^a classe il 14 settembre 1934.

Grand'Ufficiale dell'Ordine della Corona d'Italia. Commendatore dell'Ordine Mauriziano.

iscritto al P.N.F. dal marzo 1921.

Antemarcia. Brevetto Marcia su Roma. Squadrista. Sciarpa Littorio. Seniore della M.V.S.N. dall'agosto 1938.

Prefetto di Vercelli (settembre 1927 - aprile 1932), Savona (aprile 1932 - luglio 1935), Aosta (luglio 1935 - agosto 1939). A disposizione e incaricato di esercitare le funzioni ispettive (agosto 1939 - febbraio 1940) e dall'agosto 1939 Regio Commissario presso l'Ospedale di S. Maria Nuova in Firenze. Prefetto di Messina (febbraio 1940 - aprile 1943). A disposizione (aprile 1943 - febbraio 1944) con l'incarico di Direttore Generale per i Servizi di Guerra (aprile 1943 - gennaio 1944) e dal gennaio 1944 di Commissario per l'Amministrazione straordinaria dell'Istituto S. Michele di Roma.

Collocato a riposo per ragioni di servizio dal Governo fascista nel febbraio 1944.

Incaricato della Direzione dell'Ufficio Staccato in Roma dei Servizi di Guerra dal 20 febbraio 1944 (R.S.I.)³.

Figure 1: Angelo d'Eufemia's bio

Data

- OCR'd prefect biographies from Cifelli (1999), cross-checking appointments from Missori (1989)
→ 414 prefects, 90 provinces.
- Individual-level political-police records from the Political Police Archive (see Panza et al. (2023); Dipoppa & Pezone, WP)
→ 51 000 individuals



Figure 2: Antonio Gramsci's police file

Empirical Strategy

Treatment: a fascist prefect is assigned to the province.

TWFE Panel OLS:

$$\text{records}_{p,t} = \beta_1 \text{loyalty}_{p,t} + \alpha_p + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{p,t}$$

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Staggered DiD à la de Chaisemartin and D'Haultfœuille (2024):

- accounts for staggered treatment adoption,
- treatment exit.

Parallel trends violated if loaylists are assigned to locations where opposition is anticipated to weaken.

TWFE Panel OLS - Results

Table 1: Early Fascists Police Less Relative To Career Administrators

	Number of Police Records Opened			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Voluntary Member	-5.622** (2.480)		-5.468** (2.687)	
Early Member		-6.845** (2.641)		-6.284** (2.860)
Late Member		2.194 (6.387)		-0.087 (6.560)
Restricted Sample			✓	✓
Dependent variable mean	31.057	31.057	31.766	31.766
Observations	1,794	1,794	1,412	1,412
Adjusted R ²	0.613	0.614	0.619	0.619
F-test	6.033	5.825	6.348	6.120
Province fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

Standard errors are clustered at the province level.

, **, and * correspond to 10, 5, and 1% levels of significance, respectively.*

The sample is restricted to prefects with explicit categorization.

Staggered DiD - Results

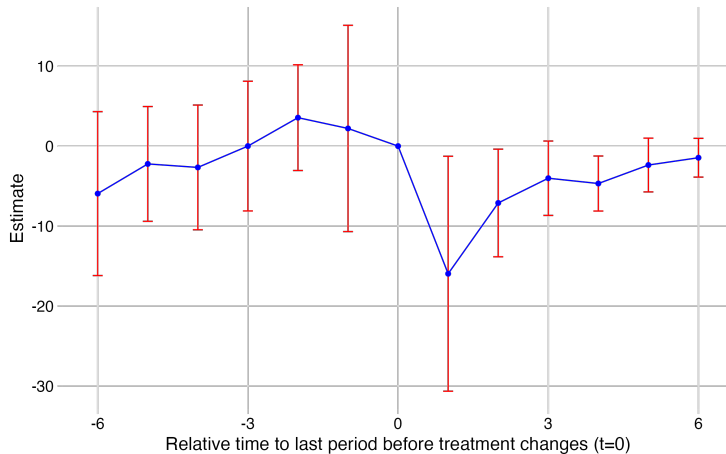


Figure 3: Effect of Receiving any Voluntary PNF Member as Prefect.

Staggered DiD - Results



Figure 4: Effect of Receiving an Early PNF Member as Prefect.

Mechanism(s)

It does not seem that helpful to appoint loyalists. Why?

Not because of:

- ① Competence
- ② Preferential deployment,
- ③ Embeddedness,

but because of:

- ① Deterrence: early joiners develop a harsh reputation,
- ② **Incentives**: early joiners face weaker incentives.

Mechanism: Preferential Deployment

We assume prefects prefer to be deployed in provinces which are:

- closer to home
 - we calculate distance from birthplace,
- more prestigious
 - we calculate the likelihood prefects in the province became MPs (in the Liberal Era).

Mechanism: Preferential Deployment

Table 2: Loyalists Are Not Deployed to Better Places

Dependent Variables: Model:	(1)	Birthplace Distance		(4)	Prestige Score	
		(2)	(3)		(5)	(6)
<i>Variables</i>						
Voluntary Member	-17.950 (22.068)	-14.006 (23.416)			0.005 (0.006)	
Early Member			-16.620 (24.546)	-12.933 (25.834)		0.001 (0.006)
Late Member			-26.324 (38.702)	-20.802 (37.602)		0.032*** (0.007)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>						
Province	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Mandate number		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>						
Dependent variable mean	433.264	433.264	433.264	433.264	0.158	0.158
Observations	788	788	788	788	800	800
Adjusted R ²	0.049	0.047	0.047	0.046	0.111	0.111
F-test	18.037	1.634	9.020	1.509	1.565	0.791

Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1

Mechanism: Signaling Incentives

- It might be harder to punish insiders:
 - They have connections,
 - they set an example.

If this is the case, their survival in office should be **less driven** by their performance.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{last_mandate}_{p,t} = & \beta_1 \text{records}_{p,t} + \beta_2 \text{loyalty}_{p,t} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{records}_{p,t} \times \text{loyalty}_{p,t} + \alpha_p + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{p,t} \end{aligned}$$

expecting:

- $\beta_1 < 0$: surveillance makes it less likely to exit,
- $\beta_3 > 0$: but less so for early members.

Mechanism: Signaling Incentives

Table 3: Early Members Gain More Job Security from Surveillance

	Last Mandate					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	OLS	OLS	Logit	OLS	OLS	Logit
Records Opened	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.009*** (0.003)	-0.001** (0.000)	-0.001*** (0.000)	-0.007*** (0.002)
Early Member				0.088 (0.069)	0.092 (0.070)	0.508 (0.382)
Early Member × Records Opened				-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.029** (0.011)
Dependent variable mean	0.401	0.401	0.391	0.401	0.401	0.391
Observations	780	780	767	780	780	767
Adjusted R ²	0.025	0.027		0.031	0.033	
F-test	14.167	1.344		5.067	1.220	
Province fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mandate number fixed effects		Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes

Standard errors are clustered at the prefect level.

*, **, and *** correspond to 10, 5, and 1% levels of significance, respectively.

Mechanism: Signaling Incentives

How do we reconcile *less effort* with *higher returns*?

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How do we reconcile *less effort* with *higher returns*?

- **Signaling:**

- prefects need to clear a loyalty threshold to stay in office,
- surveillance (effort) is a costly signal of loyalty,
- early members have higher loyalty priors,

→ they need less surveillance to maintain office.

Mechanism: Signaling Incentives

How do we reconcile *less effort* with *higher returns*?

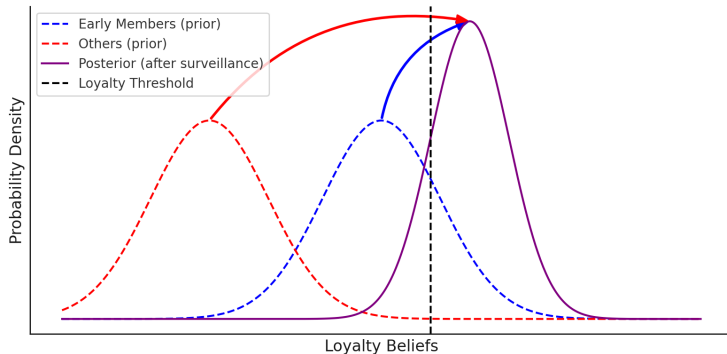


Figure 5: Less surveillance for the same job security

Takeaways

The case of fascist Italy suggests that:

- appointing loyalists does not necessarily lead to more forceful implementation of controversial policies
- as PNF prefects surveiled the opposition less than their counterparts.
- This seems to be due to signaling incentives (costly signal & higher priors of loyalty).

→ interesting trade-off between *loyalty and leverage*.

Thank you!

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Mechanism: Competence

Table 4: Early Fascists Police Less Controlling for Competence Proxies

	Number of Police Records Opened			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Early Member	-7.291** (2.791)	-6.355** (2.665)	-6.865** (2.638)	-6.154** (2.930)
Late Member	2.006 (6.457)	1.783 (6.391)	2.515 (6.475)	2.152 (6.455)
Has a Degree	-2.120 (3.452)			-1.963 (3.466)
Years of Experience		-0.538 (0.605)		-1.288 (1.341)
Current Mandate Number			0.583 (0.769)	2.020 (2.100)
Dependent variable mean	31.057	31.057	31.057	31.057
Observations	1,794	1,794	1,794	1,794
Adjusted R ²	0.613	0.614	0.614	0.616
F-test	5.619	5.637	5.625	5.317
Province fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

*, **, and *** correspond to 10, 5, and 1% levels of significance, respectively.
Standard errors are clustered at the province level.

Mechanism: Embeddedness

Table 5: More Local Prefects Do Not Police Less

Dependent Variable: Model:	(1)	(2)	Records Opened		(5)	(6)
			(3)	(4)		
<i>Variables</i>						
Birthplace Distance	0.003 (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)	0.004 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)	0.004 (0.006)	0.005 (0.006)
Birthplace Distance × Voluntary Member			-0.012 (0.009)	-0.012 (0.009)		
Birthplace Distance × Early Member					-0.013 (0.009)	-0.012 (0.009)
<i>Fixed-effects</i>						
Province	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
mandate_number		Yes		Yes		Yes
<i>Fit statistics</i>						
Dependent variable mean	30.201	30.201	30.201	30.201	30.201	30.201
Observations	751	751	751	751	751	751
Adjusted R ²	0.485	0.486	0.484	0.486	0.483	0.485
F-test	105.705	9.144	35.344	7.861	26.522	7.340

Clustered (Province) standard-errors in parentheses

Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1

Mechanism: Deterrence

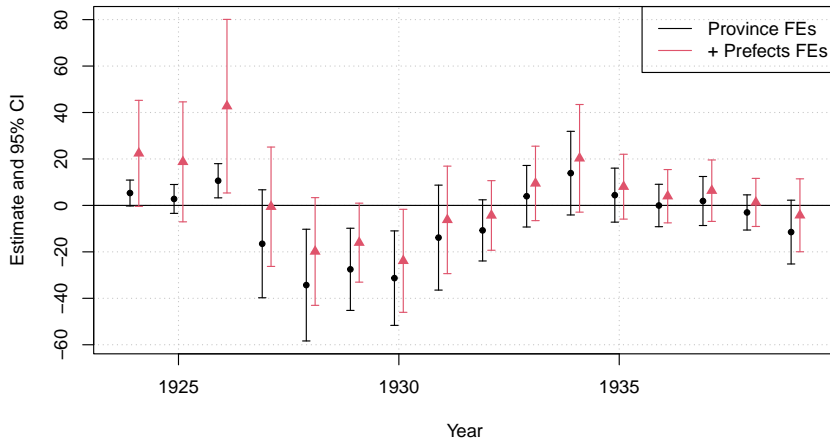
That streets are peaceful does not mean there is no violence.

(in Przeworski, 2015, p. 249)

- If early joiners had a harsh reputation,
 - the opposition might go underground once they are appointed,
- and they might surveil less because insurgent activity is reduced.

If this is the case, they must have built that reputation by **opening more records initially** and much less later.

Mechanism: Deterrence



Mechanism: Signaling Incentives: Testable Implications

- Luo and Zakharov (2025) predict loyalty-signaling through the targeting of most likely (ethnic) opponents,
- because ethnicity is observable by the dictator.

We classify working-class individuals through low-skilled jobs and check mediation:

Mechanism: Signaling Incentives: Testable Implications

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- because ethnicity is observable by the dictator.

We classify working-class individuals through low-skilled jobs and check mediation:

Table 6: Early PNF effect is entirely mediated by low-skill targets.

Effect	Estimate	95% CI
ACME (indirect)	-7.24	[-11.26 ; -3.73]
ADE (direct)	0.27	[-1.14 ; 1.76]
Total effect	-6.97	[-10.85 ; -3.56]

Notes: Two-equation OLS with province and year fixed effects. ACME = average causal mediation effect; ADE = average direct effect.

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